

‘Woman full and overflowing with grace’

The Virgin Mary and the contemporary Church

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A premature epitaph

IN THE EPILOGUE TO MARINA WARNER’S BOOK, *Alone of all her sex*, she writes of Mary that ‘the reality her myth describes is over; the moral code she affirms has been exhausted’.¹ Warner’s book was written in 1976, at a time when even in the Catholic Church it seemed as if her words might be true. After Vatican II, Mary dwindled into insignificance as post-conciliar Catholics let go of the apron strings and learned to live without mother in the modern world.

But Warner’s epitaph was premature, and today it is impossible to know quite how to explain Mary’s appeal. This is particularly true when assessing the relationship between feminism and the marian tradition during the last decade. While initially there was a tendency among feminists to dismiss Mary on the grounds that her virginal motherhood was an impossible ideal which led to the denigration of all other women, Christian women are beginning to reconsider her. Apart from anything else, to regard her as irrelevant when she has been significant for so many women throughout Christian history flies in the face of the feminist commitment to value women’s experience as a privileged locus of revelation, capable of correcting the almost exclusively androcentric bias of theology. To quote Ivone Gebara,

When women’s experience is expressed in a church whose tradition is machistic, the other side of human experience returns to theological discourse: the side of the person who gives birth, nurses, nourishes, of the person who for centuries has remained silent with regard to anything having to do with theology.²

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As the person who is supremely valued for giving birth to, nursing and nourishing Christ, Mary cannot be excluded from this transformation of theological discourse, but she poses a complex challenge to women theologians.

Rehabilitating Mary – a daunting task

In appropriating to themselves the exclusive right of interpretation with regard to Mary, men have denied women any influence in shaping that part of the theological tradition which is most relevant to women's lives, and the task of reclamation and rehabilitation is daunting. Nor is there any sign that men are willing to relinquish their control, however many papal platitudes and apologies might have been offered to women over the past few years, accompanied by the exhortation to model ourselves on Mary as 'the highest expression of the "feminine genius"'.³ For example, in 1997 when the International Mariological Congress appointed a team of twenty theologians to investigate the legitimacy of the marian titles 'mediator', 'co-redeemer' and 'advocate', the team was made up entirely of men. The report in the *Tablet* notes:

In addition to their theological background, the greatest geographical difference among them was sought, so that their final agreed decision would be especially significant. In order to enrich this study group, a number of non-Catholic theologians who were present at the congress were added to it.⁴

There is no reference to the fact that women might also have enriched the group. Until women become active participants in the theological community of interpretation, there is always the risk that Mary will be more of a masculine flight of fancy than a theological symbol of redemption for all human beings.

Mary and ecumenism

René Laurentin suggests that the marian tradition has followed a wave-like pattern with peaks and troughs throughout Christian history.⁵ The recent upsurge in Mary's popularity indicates that the last thirty years are no exception to this pattern, but the picture has become more complex than when the wave last peaked in the early twentieth century, when Mary was unambiguously on the side of popes and peasants marginalized by the onward march of modernity. At that time there was a gulf between the vacuous sentimentality of

much marian devotion, and the arcane and largely irrelevant writings of mariologists which were remarkable more for their profusion than for their profundity. The Vatican II document on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, attempted to heal this division by reintegrating marian theology and devotion in a way that would be faithful to tradition but also sensitive to the perceptions and beliefs of non-Catholic Christians. While emphasizing Mary's unique and active role in our salvation, *Lumen gentium* is careful to stress that this in no way detracts from or adds to Christ's mediation.⁶

To some extent, this ecumenical sensitivity is bearing fruit. With Mary's place in Catholic theology and devotion more clearly delineated and explained, many non-Catholics were sufficiently reassured to begin to ask if too much had been sacrificed in denying Mary any place in their faith. The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary has in recent years provided a creative environment in which Christians have been able to explore and develop their shared understanding of Mary's role in the story of salvation. Mary has perhaps been the most acrimonious point of conflict between Christians since the Reformation, and it is important not to underestimate the potential of this ecumenical movement to create bonds and heal divisions.

Feminist and liberationist perspectives

At the same time, feminist and liberation theologians have begun to look at Mary through new eyes, asking how she might be reinterpreted in a way which makes her relevant for those who struggle against sexism, poverty and injustice. While some feminists continue to see Mary as an impossible symbol for women, others are exploring ways in which she might be reclaimed so as to make her an authentic expression of women's faith and personhood.

Catholic women such as Catharina Halkes⁷ and Sally Cunneen⁸ have written about their quest to rediscover Mary after feeling alienated as young women from the Mary they had grown up with. Cunneen, describing the culmination of her scholarly pilgrimage to discover anew what Mary might mean for women today, writes, 'She is a genuine model to me now as she was not when I was young. As pregnant mother and as witness at the cross, she testifies to the joy, the pain, and the promise of all human life.'⁹

Liberation theologians see in the gospel stories of Mary's life and particularly in the Magnificat a powerful testimony to her solidarity with the poor. As the woman who exults in God her

saviour because 'he has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly' (Lk 1:52), Mary affirms the belief that the incarnation declares God's preference for those who have been defeated and marginalized in the conquests of history. When non-Western Christians read the Scriptures with minds liberated from the defining norms of the Western Church, a fresh vision emerges from the distorting accretions of the marian tradition. The Korean theologian, Chung Hyun Kyung, describes how Mary has gone from being 'a *familiar alien* for Asian women'¹⁰ to being a life-affirming symbol of new birth and redemption born out of women's suffering and pain.

So I think it is fair to say that whereas mariology in the pre-conciliar Church tended to circle interminably around a small area of interest, recent marian theology is developing a vitality and a dynamism which means that it is still very much in progress, and it is impossible to predict where it will lead. Nevertheless, writing at the time of the Council, Laurentin referred to the 'war-psychology' which transformed 'the history of Marian doctrine into a series of victorious combats in which the champions of Mary had crushed their enemies'.¹¹ If green shoots are beginning to appear in post-conciliar feminist and liberation theologies which exploit the 'dangerous memories'¹² and subversive potential of the marian tradition, a powerful backlash has been launched under the theological tutelage of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

'Mary is not a feminist' – the neo-orthodox backlash

'Mary is not a feminist',¹³ declares Balthasar, and his battle cry has been taken up by those who see feminism as an assault on the foundations of the Catholic faith. Andrew Brown claims that 'The Catholic Church . . . is writhing in knots around feminism like a worm impaled on a hook'.¹⁴

In his determination to defend the essential masculinity of the sacramental priesthood and the feminine receptivity of the marian Church, Balthasar has created a totalizing theological system out of the sexual pathologies and social ideologies of nineteenth-century European culture. His theology imposes binding rules on women with regard to gender and identity, perpetuating cultural stereotypes which identify men with divinity, generativity, activity and authority, and women with humanity, receptivity, passivity and obedience. For example, he writes that 'the marian element holds sway in the Church in a hidden manner, just as a woman does in a household',

adding that attention to the person of Mary is not wrong if it is in the context of her spirit of 'service, of inconspicuousness'.¹⁵ Elsewhere, he says of Mary that 'her mission, in the feminine and creaturely mode, is to let things happen; as such it is perfectly congruent with the masculine and divine mission of the Son'.¹⁶

Balthasar criticizes *Lumen gentium* for taking a minimalist approach 'which sees Mary's relationship to the faithful and particularly their relationship to Mary primarily, if not exclusively, in moral terms'.¹⁷ While his marian theology cannot be accused of minimalism, it is deeply moralizing in the way it identifies Mary with a particular and limited understanding of the ideal woman, and then uses this to prescribe real women's behaviour and identities.

In the polarization of Catholicism since Vatican II, Mary is a fiercely contested symbol. The nature of this contest is clear if one compares Barbara Corrado Pope's assessment of the post-conciliar Church with that of Balthasar. Pope writes of a church in which theologians are primarily concerned to address 'the problems of nuclear war, sexual politics, racism, economic exploitation, and the Third World'. She continues,

Some liberation and feminist theologians have attempted to redefine Mary's role in the church. But most of these progressive Catholics are at present more committed to redefining living women's roles than to rehabilitating a symbol weighed down by a heritage of defensive conservatism and male projection.¹⁸

Balthasar looks at the same picture, but his interpretative framework is dramatically different. He sees a church which has 'put off its mystical characteristics' and become 'a Church of permanent conversations, synods, commissions, academics, parties, pressure groups, functions, structures and restructurings, sociological experiments'. He goes on to ask, 'May not the reason for the domination of such typically male and abstract notions be because of the abandonment of the deep femininity of the marian character of the Church?'¹⁹

The foregoing makes clear that I am not sympathetic to Balthasar's marian theology, but I think he is to some extent correct in his assessment of the Church after Vatican II. In a reappraisal of the goals and achievements of liberation theology, Gebara writes,

In practice this image of God as liberator excludes women as much as does the image of God as 'the Other', insofar as women continue to be the *pietas* of war games, accepting on their knees the murdered bodies of husbands, lovers, brothers, sisters, children, parents.²⁰

The politicization of Mary

While there is much to be welcomed in feminist and liberationist interpretations of Mary, I sometimes fear that we are in the process of exchanging one moralizing regime for another. In the politicization of Mary and the Church, there is the risk of representing Christianity as a left-of-centre political party which is only open to those with the correct political and social credentials. For example, in *Sexism and God-talk*, Rosemary Radford Ruether sketches an outline for 'a Mariology – a doctrine of the church as symbolically female'²¹ which would entail that 'the nonpoor and the privileged can join the church only by joining God in this preferential option for the poor, by identifying themselves with the cause of the oppressed'.²² In an address given on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the UK's Catholic Women's Network in 1994, Ruether outlines a vision of a church which is multicultural, committed to the poor and oppressed, liberated from sexism, democratic, and which acknowledges its fallibility and lives by grace.²³ While these are ideals to which any liberal Catholic might subscribe, Ruether's ecclesiology is modelled on the values of twentieth-century liberalism, which she uses as a vantage point to judge and condemn nearly all of Christian history in a way which threatens to undermine her own commitment to multiculturalism. The very idea of multiculturalism implies an acceptance of historical, cultural and political models which do not necessarily sit comfortably alongside our own ideas of what constitutes the ideal society.

Tissa Balasuriya's book, *Mary and human liberation*, attracted unwarranted attention because of the overreaction of the Vatican to his comments on women's ordination and (I suspect less significantly) original sin and Christology. His book is a good example of the way in which Mary has become a socio-political symbol and his argument is hard to refute on the basis of politics and social justice. However, the problem with such reinterpretations of Mary is that they subjugate her entirely to the demands of prevailing political ideologies, so that they deprive her of her symbolic power to con-

found human logic and shatter our assumptions about God and the world.

No matter how impassioned we are about the causes and justices of our age, I believe that we must also respect the mysterious power of symbols 'to open up levels of reality which otherwise are closed, and to open up levels of the human mind of which we otherwise are not aware'.²⁴ Paul Ricoeur's widely quoted aphorism, 'the symbol gives rise to thought',²⁵ serves as a reminder that our ideas and beliefs must retain a certain humility and indeed vulnerability in relation to the symbols of our faith. We do not simply create theological symbols, we are also created by them.

Marian symbolism and women's stories

Feminist theology has made explicit the extent to which Christian symbols do not float free of cultural constructs. They are always socially inscribed within particular interpretative frameworks, and in the case of marian symbolism, these have been overwhelmingly androcentric. Nevertheless, this should not be taken as licence to co-opt symbols to serve whatever ideology we happen to believe in. Rather, we need to cultivate a greater respect for the complex interaction between symbolic narratives and communities of interpretation. Ricoeur's narrative theory explores the ways in which even our most ordinary experiences are interpreted in relation to intricate symbolic meanings.²⁶ By telling our stories in engagement with the religious and cultural narratives which we inhabit, Ricoeur argues that we form our identities through giving symbolic coherence and significance to the otherwise random experiences that constitute our daily lives.

The problem for women seeking to interpret their lives in symbolic engagement with the marian tradition is that it has been constructed almost exclusively according to masculine projections and desires, in a way which leaves the reality of women's lived experiences unsymbolized and, in some sense, unnarrated in the story of the Catholic faith. As so many have pointed out, women cannot creatively identify with a pure and sinless virgin mother who has far more to do with men's disembodied fantasies than with women's lived realities.

How then might we move towards making Mary a meaningful symbol for both sexes, in a way that expresses the reconciling love of Christ for all human beings and all creation? The challenge is to respect Mary's symbolic potency, while developing an ethical frame-

work in which both sexes can explore their identities in engagement with the symbols of faith, knowing that Mary is expressive and not destructive of humanity's deepest longings, fears and visions.

This brings me to Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer's book, *Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the poor*, which is, I believe, the best reinterpretation of the marian tradition to emerge from post-conciliar theology. It suggests the contours of a marian theology that combines a deep respect for tradition and symbolism with a sensitive appreciation of the need for a new ethical vision of Mary.

Gebara and Bingemer present Mary as one who has transcended her own life to become a person who lives not just in history but also in God,²⁷ in such a way that she acquires universal significance. This allows them to emphasize the historical relevance of Mary of Nazareth as a woman who experienced the struggles, joys and griefs of women's lives, while respecting her symbolic significance as one who reveals the mystery and power of God. They write, 'Mary, collective figure, symbol of the faithful people from whose womb emerges the New Creation, unfolds before human beings all their infinite horizons with their indescribable possibilities'.²⁸ What I find particularly exciting about Gebara and Bingemer's understanding of Mary is that it recaptures the vision of the early Church, and allows us to catch sight of the way in which Catholic beliefs about Mary are rooted in the inspiring and radical faith of the first Christian theologians. By bringing the insights of feminist and liberation theology to bear on the origins of the marian tradition, they suggest how it is possible to develop a rich theology of Mary that is expressive both of ancient truths and of new perceptions.

The reconciling paradox of the virgin mother

For patristic writers, the wonder of Mary's virginal motherhood was not that it made Mary transcendent, but that it made God immanent. It had nothing to do with a sentimental attachment to everybody's idea of the perfect mum, but was rather an awesome and incomprehensible demonstration of God's power to renew and reconcile all creation through the incarnation. Mary's virginity was part of this wonder, and only with the growth in asceticism after the fourth century did it acquire overtones of sexual morality. Maximus the Confessor writes:

For the same person is both virgin and mother, instituting nature afresh by bringing together what is opposed, since virginity and giving birth are opposed, and no-one would have thought that naturally they could be combined.²⁹

Such references to virginity are not intended as statements about sex but about the incarnation. They are an invitation to recognize that in Christ, God has created something beyond human (male?) intervention akin to the creation of the world, which overcomes every dualism and transforms the whole of nature. To quote Gebara and Bingemer, Mary's virginity 'draws us back to the beginning of the world and to the birth of creation'.³⁰ Her virginity signifies discontinuity and represents the vertical dimension of the incarnation, when God breaks into history with divine creative power which is independent of all human endeavour. Her motherhood symbolizes the horizontal dimension of the incarnation and its continuity with history. It affirms that Jesus was truly one of us, fully participating in our humanity and experiencing all the contingencies and limitations of embodied existence.

What does it say to patriarchy with its paternal genealogies, that God excludes the human father but not the human mother in the incarnation? What does it say to those who insist that the male body is an essential mediating presence between humankind and God in the eucharist, when the first act of consecration took place in an exchange between a woman and God from which the male was explicitly excluded? We urgently need to rescue Mary's virginity from its sexually repressive overtones, but I do not believe that this is the time for us to dismiss its symbolic potential.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to do more than gesture in the direction of certain possibilities which have yet to be explored in these areas of marian theology. Gebara and Bingemer have begun a process, but it is for others to take this up and develop it further if we are to grow in our understanding of Mary's role in the Christian story.

Reclaiming Mary – is it worth the effort?

Some might ask, why bother? Why not simply agree with Warner and let the Madonna rest in peace. I think there are two related answers to this question. Firstly, there can be no doctrine of the incarnation without Mary. From the earliest creeds and beliefs of the Church, Mary's motherhood of Christ has been affirmed whenever

dualistic heresies have threatened the reconciling truth of the Word made flesh. Kallistos Ware writes that *Theotokos* 'is not an optional title of devotion, but the touchstone of true faith in the Incarnation'.³¹ Mary's humanity is as necessary to the incarnation as God's divinity. When we lose sight of God, Mary's son is not divine. When we lose sight of Mary, God's son is not human. Mary embodies Christ in the world, and without her, the flesh becomes words once again and Christianity becomes a religion of the book and not of the body. Was that not the great failure of the Reformation? In rejecting all marian devotion it sacrificed the sacramental life of faith which incarnated Christ in all the cycles, seasons and stages of life, for a more abstract and moralistic understanding of God which paved the way for secularism. So although Mary herself has fallen victim to the moralizing and disembodied tendencies of modern Christianity, her motherhood of Christ is still, I believe, the key to a more holistic and integrated faith which expresses the sanctification of all nature and all human activity in Christ.

But Mary also symbolizes the redemption of the female sex in Christ. This is a theme that runs through patristic writings, in a way that relates to Ruether's much-quoted question, 'Can a male saviour save women?'³² Patristic writers have a complex answer to this question that has far-reaching implications if it is reinterpreted according to contemporary theological insights. Augustine expresses a common patristic belief when he writes:

The Lord, in coming to seek what was lost, willed to show His favor and honor to both sexes, since both were lost. In neither sex therefore ought we to do wrong to the Creator. The Lord's birth has encouraged both to hope for salvation. The honor of the male sex is in the flesh of Christ, the honor of the female sex is in the Mother of Christ.³³

Like other patristic writers, Augustine assumes that the superiority of the male sex means that Christ had to be male, so there are problems attached to his beliefs about the symbolic significance of sexual difference in the incarnation. Nevertheless, this is a fruitful and, to date, neglected area of enquiry for feminist theological scholarship.

Mary is one of the defining symbols of the Christian faith. As mother, she incarnates God in the world and provides the model for the motherhood of the Church. As woman, she symbolizes the good-

ness of the embodied female person before God, and challenges those who claim that only the man bears the image of God in creation and in the sacraments. We need to approach Mary in a way which is attentive to women's voices and respectful of women's experiences, while also nurturing her symbolic potential to communicate the awesome mystery of the incarnation. Above all, in our resistance to the banality and tedium of contemporary culture, we might do well to rediscover the sense of cosmic celebration which St Anselm expresses in his prayer to Mary:

O woman full and overflowing with grace,
 plenty flows from you
 to make all creatures green again.
 O virgin blessed and ever blessed,
 whose blessing is upon all nature,
 not only is the creature blessed by the Creator,
 but the Creator is blessed by the creature too . . .
 O truly, 'the Lord is with you',
 to whom the Lord gave himself,
 that all nature in you might be in him.³⁴

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NOTES

1 Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador Books, 1990), p 338.

2 Ivone Gebara, 'Women doing theology in Latin America' in Elsa Tamez (ed), *Through her eyes – women's theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1989), pp 37–48, at p 41.

3 Pope John Paul II, 'A letter to women' in the *Tablet* (15 July 1995), pp 917–919, at p 919. 4 *Tablet* (6 September 1997), p 1,141.

5 See René Laurentin, *Maria Ecclesia Sacerdotium: essai sur le développement d'une idée religieuse* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1952), p 12.

6 See *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium)*, 21 November 1964, Chapter VIII in Austin Flannery OP (ed), *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post conciliar documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1992), pp 413–423.

- 7 See Edward Schillebeeckx and Catharina Halkes, *Mary: yesterday, today, tomorrow* (London: SCM Press, 1993).
- 8 See Sally Cunneen, *In search of Mary: the woman and the symbol* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).
- 9 *Ibid.*, p 337.
- 10 Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the sun again: introducing Asian women's theology* (London: SCM Press, 1991), p 75.
- 11 René Laurentin, *Mary's place in the Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), p 50.
- 12 The idea of 'dangerous memories' as those which have the power to subvert dominant interpretations of history is found in the work of a number of theologians such as Johann-Baptist Metz and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.
- 13 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for today* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1987), p 55.
- 14 Andrew Brown, 'Hume? A Czech? Or an Undry Martini?' in the *Spectator* (25 April 1998), pp 13–14, at p 14.
- 15 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations* (London: SPCK, 1975), p 71. This is quoted (without reference to Balthasar) in Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation on Mary, *Marialis cultus* (Boston: St Paul Books & Media, 1974), p 5.
- 16 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama – theological dramatic theory*, vol III, *The dramatis personae: the person in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p 352.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p 318.
- 18 Barbara Corrado Pope, 'Immaculate and powerful: the marian revival in the nineteenth century' in Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret R. Miles (eds), *Immaculate and powerful: the female in sacred image and social reality* (UK: Crucible, 1987), pp 173–200, at p 196.
- 19 Balthasar, *Elucidations*, pp 70–71.
- 20 Ivone Gebara, 'The face of transcendence as a challenge to the reading of the Bible in Latin America' in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed), *Searching the Scriptures*, Volume One: *A feminist introduction* (London: SCM Press, 1994), pp 172–186, at p 175.
- 21 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: towards a feminist theology* (London: SCM Press, 1992 [1983]), p 152.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p 157.
- 23 See Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Being a Catholic feminist at the end of the twentieth century' in *Feminist Theology* no 10 (September 1995), pp 9–20.
- 24 Paul Tillich, 'Theology and symbolism' in Ernest Johnson (ed), *Religious symbolism* (Port Washington NY: Kennikat Press Inc., 1969), pp 107–116, at p 109.
- 25 Paul Ricoeur, *The conflict of interpretations: essays in hermeneutics*, ed Don Ihde (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p 299.
- 26 Ricoeur offers a succinct summary of his narrative theory in 'Life in quest of narrative' in David Wood (ed), *On Paul Ricoeur: narrative and interpretation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp 20–33.
- 27 See Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, mother of the poor* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1989), pp 20–31.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p 174.
- 29 Quoted in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p 175.
- 30 Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary*, p 105.
- 31 Kallistos Ware, *Mary Theotokos in the Orthodox tradition* (Wallington: The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, May 1997), p 8.
- 32 See Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, p 116.
- 33 Serm. 190, *In Nat. Dom.* vii. n. 2, quoted in Bertrand Buby SM, *Mary of Galilee*, volume III, *The marian heritage of the early Church* (New York: Alba House, 1997), pp 189–190.
- 34 *The prayers and meditations of Saint Anselm with the Prosligion* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), pp 120–121.