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## **Marian Praxis: From Marian Apparitions to Sacramentals**

### ***Introduction***

First of all, I would like to say that I am honoured to have been invited to present a paper on a Marian topic at this seminar. It has though been necessary to rise to the challenge so to speak, as it is arranged in a primarily theological context and I am no theologian, but a historian of religions with a primary expertise in the religions of India. My perspective will thus be a little different compared with the ordinary mariological discourse which is focused on outlining a well-founded description of Mary, her qualities, functions and proper place in the Christian economy of salvation. Such a discourse is based on evaluations of revelation as it is present in the bible, tradition and interventions of church authorities. The goal of the dogmatic discussion is to establish a normative characterization of Mary: an authoritative answer to the question: who is Mary? As coming from the field of religious studies, my task is somewhat different. The question is instead: how are we to understand the role of Mary in Catholic religious life? This paper is, therefore, not geared to argue whether certain devotions are misplaced, overly sentimental, too folksy or based on false presuppositions. I leave these issues to the theologians and church authorities. My purpose is simply to make a case for the thesis that in order to understand the Catholic conception of Mary, one has to direct one's eyes to the actual Marian praxis and, for example, not instinctively shy away from aspects of it as outrageously out of tune with one's own sensibilities. This applies in the same measure to Catholics as Protestants, especially those of an intellectual bent who have tried to come to some form of agreement with the demands of modernity. So, please put on your seatbelts for this will be an argument that suspends the demands of theologically correct discourse, though not in principle being in conflict with them.

### ***Mary as a Goddess***

Let us start with entertaining the thought that the Virgin Mary in a Catholic context is functionally equivalent to a goddess. This is an argument which is being made from different quarters with no little *schadefreude*. For example, it is a favourite theme among some of my fellow historian of religions, exposing the rise of Mary within early Christianity as the re-emergence of a pagan goddess (or a synthesis of several goddesses) within the patriarchal

structure of Christianity (e.g. Borgeaud 2004 [1996], cf. Benko 1993). The same argument has also been launched from other Christian denominations that do not have quite such an exulted view of the mother of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The point being made in this paper is though not basically theological in this sense, as already stated a moment ago. So, let us leave the question whether this is a theologically well-founded statement and instead use it as a heuristic tool for achieving greater understanding of Catholic Marian praxis.

By functionally equivalent, I mean that Mary fulfils many if not all the functions attributed to goddesses in different cultures. We could start to unravel aspects of the mother goddess, the symbol of fertility, the virgin, the apocalyptic warrior and Queen of heaven, but I would like to address the goddess theme on a more fundamental level. The question is then: what constitutes a god or a goddess in the eyes of a scholar working within the field of religious studies? We thus have to probe the god(dess) concept and not merely take it for granted in its western common sense version.

I would like to start with one of the latest of the theoretical developments within religious studies, the cognitive study of religion, which it would take too long here to introduce in any substantial sense, but suffice to say that it is a paradigm taking its inspiration from the increasingly detailed knowledge that we are gaining of the human brain and the mechanisms governing our cognitive abilities.<sup>2</sup> Stewart Guthrie, for example, in his book *Faces in the Clouds* makes a case for anthropomorphism as the basic feature of religion, that is, the projection of human qualities on what is not human. Anthropomorphism is a species of the more general tendency of animism which attributes life to what is lifeless. Without necessarily taking to heart the frank materialism espoused in the book, one could see it as an insistence on the centrality of gods and goddesses for religious life. This stance is a reaction to a former way of understanding religion mainly in terms of ultimate concerns and similar non anthropomorphic concepts. A god is, according to Guthrie, constituted by the attribution of human agency to something not properly human. Other cognitivists as, for example, Pascal Boyer (1994, 2001) have a related though somewhat different approach and propose that gods are in many aspects like humans, but nevertheless with some minor, but important, violations of intuitive ontology. For example, gods can live for very long and even be immortal, they can sometimes fly in the air or walk through solid objects; with other words,

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<sup>1</sup> A topic alive and well on the Internet see e.g. <[www.angelfire.com/la2/prophet1/maryolotry02.html](http://www.angelfire.com/la2/prophet1/maryolotry02.html)> 2010-03-01. The same argument is also made by modern goddess worshippers e.g. <[www.lunaea.com/goddess/love/mary.html](http://www.lunaea.com/goddess/love/mary.html)> 2010-03-01.

<sup>2</sup> For overviews see Pyysiäinen, Ilkka 2002; Slone 2006.

they have supernatural abilities. But, Boyer argues, they cannot be too super, that is, above the laws and regularities of the natural world, or at least our intuitive expectations of how the natural world should function. The conception of a god, in order to stay within what is cognitively optimal, must retain a large amount of basic human qualities. Otherwise, the god or goddess becomes incomprehensible and of little practical importance. This is actually what happens in religions that indulge in philosophical speculation and construct a notion of God that is totally transcendent. What most importantly is then lost is human agency limited as it is by place and time. We cannot relate to something that is so beyond ourselves that no concept that we would like to use is fitting. All that remains is then perhaps respectful silence. What most likely happens according to the cognitive scientist, in a tradition that upholds such a transcendent conception of its god or ultimate principle, is that for ordinary religious life this abstract concept is substituted in practice with a more anthropomorphic conception of the deity, although the faithful will perhaps produce the theologically correct answer, when being asked by a priest or a sociologist.

One example of such a tension between theology and religious practice is that when one through prayers to a god makes a concrete request, this involves of course the notion that the god has to be made aware of your petition in order to answer it. If you seriously maintain the notion of an omniscient god, this action of yours would be quite unnecessary. And if you, for example, go on a pilgrimage to a certain place in order to present this request to your god, your action stands in a tension with the notion of an omnipresent god.

The cognitive argument is thus that for us to have meaningful interactions with a god, it has to retain some basic features of human agency. A totally transcendent God becomes a *deus otiosus*, an absent or retired god. What is called folk religiosity is based on cognitive innate principles for handling human relationships, with the difference that the gods are viewed as having some interesting violations of intuitive expectations, for example, not obeying the law of gravity or not being subjected to the fate of human mortality.

At this point, I think that the cognitive explanation becomes weak. Because why should we as humans find such a notion of a supernatural being so interesting that we create a fully fledged religion; why does not the conception merely remain a fiction fit for fairy tales, but not a candidate for serious social action? This is actually called the Mickey Mouse problem; obviously Mickey Mouse violates innate expectations of intuitive ontology, but there is no Church of Mickey that I know of. It could, therefore, be profitable to take a look at the older school of phenomenology of religion and try to combine its vision of a dualism between the

sacred and the profane, with the cognitive thesis of innate ontological expectations, or restraints, that structure our religious thinking and action.<sup>3</sup>

The phenomenology of religion instead of focusing on basic brain mechanisms analyses religious life as being directed toward a transcendent principle called the holy, but more specifically toward the holy as it is manifested in the ordinary world of human action as the sacred. These incursions of a higher plane of being into our humdrum world are called hierophanies, manifestations of the holy, which are categorised under different modalities as power, kratophany, or fullness of being, ontophany, or as anthropomorphic, teophany. So, although, the religious person as it seems, for example, worships a stone, he or she is actually treating it as a symbol pointing to the overflowing potentiality of the holy. This has to be understood in a more substantial sense than mere reference, in the sense that as the symbol partakes of the holy, it is also able to communicate the power of the holy. And, I think it is this last aspect that we need to complement our earlier cognitive characterization of the god or the goddess. They thus must not only have some form of superhuman agency, but they also have to be able to communicate extraordinary power. With other words, they must be able to make a difference to human life, answering our petitions in a forceful way.

A goddess is thus according to a phenomenological perspective an anthropomorphic manifestation of the holy, a teophany, in the sense that she has human agency and can make a powerful difference to human life.

When we take this perspective based on a combination of cognitive and phenomenological principles, and turn our gaze to Catholic Marian praxis, it is obvious that Mary fulfils these criteria. Would we only characterize her in the cognitive sense as a human being whose nature violates some natural intuitive expectations that we innately have of human beings, then I think no Marian devotion would be able to function. It is vital that she is able to communicate power. And in the same vein, the Catholic idea of the intercession of the saints makes them all into gods with the apotheosis of Mary and her son Jesus constituting the climax. Both are pictured as very closely connected to the Holy Spirit which is another name for power in this context, while the transcendent godhead is most fittingly in the background. Such a perspective would see the difference between Jesus and Mary as one only of degree and not of sorts, a strategy on the part of religious life that opens up the way of *theosis* for every Christian. Once again, I must emphasize that I do not here indulge in theology, but merely tries to paint a picture that could be useful in understanding Christian praxis, and in this

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<sup>3</sup> For such an attempt to wed phenomenology of religion to the cognitive studies of religion see Cox 2010.

context it is of course of prime interest that the mainline Christian conception of Jesus did not opt for an annihilation of the human nature into the divine, but settled for a formula of both human and divine which is quite appropriate for the flourishing of Christological devotion.

### ***Revelation: Private Revelations***

We can now take one further step to the actual praxis, that is, the interaction with Mary. This takes very concrete forms modelled on ordinary human agency, but it is also related to the wider conception of the manifestations of the holy which infuse natural objects with divine potency. The breakthrough in the profane sphere of the sacred constitutes sacred places that mediate between the fullness of being and those partly lacking being. This balances the somewhat perplexing notion for the cognitive perspective of prayer to an omniscient god or goddess, the holy is not evenly distributed in the world, but manifests itself in particular locations and at particular times and it is necessary to come close to these sites and moments in order to benefit from the power that emanates from these wellsprings of sacredness.

When dealing with Mary this brings us inevitably to the theme of Marian apparitions. But once again the theological question is not the same as that which lies before us. The theological discussion is centred around enquiries of the type whether a particular instance of a Marian apparition is genuine or not, whether the messages are in line with orthodox theology, or whether the devotional practices do not exceed the limits guarding sound practice from Marian maximalism (e.g. Miravalle 2007).

My task is instead to try to outline how Marian apparitions function for the faithful and I think the combined cognitive-phenomenological perspective could be of help for that purpose. First, it is, however, necessary to place these apparitions in a larger perspective of sacredness, something which directs our gaze to premodern times. In a second step, we can try to understand the Marian apparitions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the context of modernity and secularization, but then with the added characterization of a premodern mentality.

If we take a closer look on church history and more particularly the lives of the saints, we find that apparitions, that is, the visions of Mary or some other heavenly being are not that extraordinary and fit quite nicely into a landscape of miracles, relics and other densities of sacredness.

It could at this point be helpful to distinguish between communication with the divine and the transfer of power. The revelations of St Birgitta from Sweden were in the form of discourses aimed at establishing a channel of communication between the Holy and the profane world.

On the other hand, the miraculous healing abilities of a certain relic, for example a piece of the holy cross was treated as an instance of an intense sacredness which is prone to diffuse its plenitude of being to those who come into contact with it. The premodern world is thus geographically, chronologically and socially punctuated by sacredness. There are holy places, holy houses, holy times of the day and the year, holy persons and holy objects: All radiating transformative energy.

One basic principle observed in order to benefit from this kind of holiness is proximity both as regards place and time. To touch or see is therefore of the essence, something which we, for example, can see in the Hindu concept of *darshan*, referring to the act of being seen by the symbol of the deity, for example, a statue. We can also see the same basic way of reasoning in the narrative in the gospel of Luke (Luke 8:43–46, cf. Matthew 9:18–22) where in the crowd around of Jesus someone touches his mantle and is thereby healed without as it seems that Jesus knew who it was, which of course comes into conflict with a notion of divine omniscience and the following question: “Who touched me?” and the statement “Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me” are from such a theological perspective rhetorical or merely pedagogical instruments.<sup>4</sup>

However, connected to the notion of power transfer, there is also the notion already alluded to namely that an absorption of holiness is also an approximation to the divine, a divinisation. Contact and transmission of power is at the same time an act of change of nature or a perfection of it.

When we move forward in time, the effects of modernity start to make an impact. Certain trends of thought and action challenge the dynamism of the sacred both in its aspect of power and that of communication. Secularization, though a slippery notion, entails in most versions a radical flattening of the topography of sacredness making what was once a landscape filled with gateways to the transcendent into a levelled plane inhabited by immanent objects whose power reside in themselves or in our ascription of value to them. When the holy is deemed not to be able to penetrate the barrier separating the human and supernatural world, the landscape and the animal kingdom becomes uniformly profane, and the same applies to the rhythms of time, the structure of human society and individual persons. In a first stage, a transcendent godhead can be retained, but it has lost its ability both to mediate power and that of actively communicate with humans. God has then become a retired god and all the minor gods such as

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<sup>4</sup> To this we must add examples of healing at a distance in the gospels though they are few.

angels and saints who do not even have the favour of a supreme transcendent nature merely go out of existence or turn into sentimental figures of the expanding world of fiction.

It is in this profane world that the modern Marian apparitions take place and they constitute a forceful assertion of the dynamism of the holy. We could for example take the place of Lourdes which at its inception had to face the opposition from secular authorities. It became though quickly a place of pilgrimage and miraculous healings were in focus from the start with the holy water as the main carrier of sacredness. While the person of Bernadette, the visionary, was removed from that position physically and socially by her going into a convent located far from the sacred place of the apparitions.

Modern Marian apparitions thus have a function of arguing for a topography of sacredness, but they also carry an element of communication, though it is not so pronounced in Lourdes, while in those apparitions of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century we find an explosion of locutions transmitted in the form of revelatory texts; a phenomenon which has been taken to a new level by the medium of Internet.

### ***Sacramentals: The diffusion of Grace***

Beside the challenge to the modern secular world view that Marian apparitions constitute, they also pose a problem for church authorities, because the Church's self description is the supplier of divine power in the world: the Church as a sacrament. An apparition to a layman opens up a gate to the transcendent that is outside of the immediate control of the ecclesial structure. A flow of power is independently constituted. Several opportunities are then available. One is the denial that this is genuine. Another one is to domesticate it, to make it part of the ritual life of the Church and at the same time cut out exaggerations and eccentricities. Another is merely to keep a distance and try to cool it down. This is of course not a unique set of courses of action available for relating to Marian apparitions, but is very much at hand in all handling of the manifestations of the holy. One could, for example, consider the case of Padre Pio.

It is at this point that we pass from a more general consideration of sacredness to sacredness as mediated by a social institution such as the Catholic Church. This is mainly of two dimensions as already touched upon. One is that of power and thus ritual. The other is that of communication, that is, of teaching both textual and oral.

The main vessel of communication of sacred power for the Catholic Church is the sacraments. They are transformative acts, in which the participants according to church teachings partake

of the divine nature, become divinised so to speak. There is a close connection between Christology and the sacraments, which is not open for Mariology. But, I would like to argue that for the actual religious life, the sacraments are at one end of a spectrum of manifestations of the holy, a scale into which also the holy water at Lourdes has its place. In theological parlance, we enter into the more diffuse territory of the sacramentals. They constitute the part of the wider field of sacredness that has been brought within the boundaries of the ritual life of the Catholic Church. One can then argue that the relation between Jesus and the sacraments are paralleled by the relation between Mary and some of the sacramentals. To this, we must add that neither the sacraments nor the sacramentals of course comprise the whole of the sacred topography as this a constantly evolving pattern. It is interesting when reading church documents on the relation between grace and the sacramentals that the question is somewhat ambivalent.<sup>5</sup> At one end the sacramentals are closely connected to the sacraments and at the other end they fade into the category of prayer and good works in general.<sup>6</sup> One could argue that the sacramentals are necessary for the Catholic Church if she wants to uphold a general topography of the sacred which challenge the profane monochrome world outside the church buildings.

When I teach about art and religion in method and theory courses in religious studies, I always have to address a fundamental difficulty that modern western students have in understanding the place of artworks in a religious context. The first question which I use to put to them is “Why is an art historical analysis of a crucifix in a church not adequate for a study of religious life in that church?” I try by this first to lead them on to consider that though the art historian will be able to present the zeitgeist lying behind this particular crucifix made in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, he has thereby said very little about how it is actually used in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We must thus ask questions such as what this crucifix means to those participating in the liturgies. This is the first insight. The next one is more difficult. Namely, the students invariably see the crucifix as a symbol in the modern meaning of carrying discursive meaning. The crucifix, and this applies in the same measure to a statue of Our Lady, is read as a text. But then I try to make them understand that they must observe how the faithful use the crucifix or Marian statue, what do they do with. Do they merely let it hang there or do they talk to it, carry it in processions, kiss it or cover it with special clothes, light

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<sup>5</sup> See for e.g. the article on sacramentals in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* <[www.newadvent.org/cathen/13292d.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13292d.htm)> 2010-03-01.

<sup>6</sup> One sacramental that could be of particular interest to study in this context is of course exorcism. For a colourful description and discussion by a leading practising Catholic exorcist see Amorth 1999 and 2002.



candles in front of it and so forth. That is I try to induce them to take the step from seeing religion as textual interpretation to that of mediating the sacred power. If this is successful, the next time they see an old man coming into a dimly lit church going forth to a statue of our Lady and stretching out one hand touching and looking intently at the statue; they will start to understand what is taking place. And it is in such an enchanted cosmos that traditional Marian piety thrives; one could say it is fundamentally dependent upon it, or as in the case of Marian apparitions the other way around, they actually creates it.

### ***Conclusion***

So, what do I hope to have shown you by my presentation? First that in order to understand the role of Mary within Catholic religious life one cannot merely focus on dogmatic discussion on a high level of abstraction, but one has to turn to the Marian praxis. To do so in a meaningful way is, however, not always easy, as we as moderns are coloured by the restraints of modernity which entails the eradication of the very principles according to which Marian piety has functioned and still functions. What I have tried to do then is to use a segment of modernity itself to achieve this understanding. By using theories from within religious studies, I have outlined some principles according to which religiosity in general function. From the cognitive study, I took the basic principle of human agency and innate ontological expectations. From the phenomenology of religion a general characterization of the manifestations of holy and the transmission of power sought after on the behalf of humans at such junctures of the sacred and the profane.

I would like to conclude with one observation or let us call it a hypothesis. I do not think that the problem that some Christians have in accepting the role of Mary as it emanates from traditional Catholic piety is primarily due to Christological dogmatic concerns, but it is connected with the general landscape of intrusion of the holy as ontophany, that is, manifestations of power. The basic conflict is thus between a view of God as primarily transcendent and distant with us inhabiting a to all consequences profane world. And, on the other hand, a view of the cosmos as constituted by levels of more or less divine nature in which divinification is transmitted at a multitude of points. The premodern world of spheres or heavens through which one can ascend is then standing beside one of a vast profane cosmos with which the divine has a distant relationship. Perhaps it is as C. S. Lewis suggests that we have to see the stars as alive in order to understand what religious life is all about.

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