

Mary and the Challenges Of the Feminist Movement

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By SIDNEY CALLAHAN

RELIGIOUS DEVOTION to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, has grown and developed during the Christian era, but not without criticism. Recently, feminist-inspired critiques have claimed that Marian devotion is now and always has been counterproductive for women's flourishing—a serious accusation indeed. As a Christian feminist, I contest this indictment and maintain that love and reverence for Mary serve to further the well-being of women and the good of the church.

In my developmental perspective on the evolution of Christianity, Marian devotion serves a twofold function. First, to act as a compensatory witness to those Gospel values and truths that the official church is either ignoring or distorting during a particular era. Second, to confirm the good news and herald what is coming next in the church's pilgrimage.

When, for example, Christ's humanity and God's tender, loving, maternal mercy were obscured by a popular view of God as terrifying or impassive judge, Mary served as a compensatory embodiment of heaven's love and mercy, a metaphor of God's maternal compassion. Or again, when theology slighted the work of the Holy Spirit as mediating grace within the cosmos and the concrete world of human affairs, Mary's role as mediatrix flowered. She became almost symbolically fused with the Holy Spirit, the divine Sophia. When, after further reflection, a more balanced theological understanding of Mary and the Christian message develops, Marian devotions will change their emphases and coloration once again.

Hope springs from the fact that women's rising spirit takes place today within a groundswell of Christian movements dedicated to the plight of the world's poor and oppressed. Feminism is entwined with other emancipatory movements because in so many instances women remain the poorest of the poor, unjustly subjected to gender discrimination, sexual abuse and violence. On the threshold of the second millen-

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nium, Mary, the mother of Christian feminism, appears as an eternal sign of God's urgent desire for justice and peace in the world.

Surely, in the 21st century, the most grievous dangers facing the world will arise from abuses of power in their secular and religious forms. If we wish to struggle against the cruel laws of the jungle or the callous competitiveness of the marketplace, in which only the strongest survive, we do well to support the joining together of feminist and Marian ideals. But how to begin?

Here I can offer only the briefest outline of one way the Marian-feminist reconciliation and recovery project can proceed. I start with a sample of recent feminist indictments of Marian devotion and then offer counterarguments. From that defensive posture I sketch out ways that central feminist concerns converge with traditional Marian themes.

The Indictments.

The most notorious recent attack on traditional Marian devotion has been mounted by Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong in his 1992 book, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*. Bishop Spong is particularly upset by the traditional doctrines concerning Mary's virginity, her immaculate conception and her bodily assumption. He sees these doctrines as devices by which celibate males were able to create an ideal of womanhood that would "universalize guilt among women." With the Marian ideals of womanhood accepted and saluted the world over, "then at one stroke every other woman was and is rendered inadequate, incomplete, incompetent."

Bishop Spong adopts the same message as, and uses resources from, Marina Warner's 1976 book, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Marina Warner gives a more sympathetic tour through the cultural and artistic history of Marian doctrines and devotions. But she also laments the fact that the Virgin Mary "became an effective instrument of asceticism and female subjection." Warner's title phrase, "alone of all her sex," is a line taken from a medieval poem, but she selects it to express her thesis: Mary's exaltation emphasizes her uniqueness and thereby excludes and damages the condition of the majority of women.

Other Christian feminists have agreed in part with Warner. While they may see Christianity as on the whole a liberating force in history, they assess Marian devotion as counterproductive for women. Even Carolyn Osiek in her irenic 1986 book, *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church*, says that Mary provided Catholic women an "impossible ideal to which no woman could attain, with whom all women are invited to feel inadequate." Another problem from her perspective is that Mary's chief qualification for exaltation is maternity. "Even for Mary, biology is destiny."

If such critiques sound familiar, it is because they

echo the criticisms from that part of the secular feminist movement shaped by the anti-religious animus of Simone de Beauvoir, who considered the Judeo-Christian tradition "savagely anti-feminine." Many secular feminists took up her antagonistic stance to Western religions because traditional doctrines were deemed to define women as inferior. Religion seemed to condemn women to live as reproductive objects rather than as self-defining subjects. Beauvoir, for instance, thought that women would remain socially suppressed until they could throw off the biological bondage of their reproductive functions. For her, unmarried, and childless by choice, only the male model of permissive sexual eroticism *sans* reproductive consequences could provide women with true equality and freedom.

Modern American feminism arose during a decade or so of intense social upheaval. American society simultaneously experienced the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the sexual revolution and the feminist movement. Unfortunately, parts of the feminist movement, while generally inspired by the human rights movement that advocated the equality and dignity of all persons, also adopted the worst of the period's permissive sexual ideologies and were generally critical of marital, religious and family commitments.

By the 1990's the culture had changed once more, and feminism along with it. Feminism has become multicultural and pluralistic and has moved on to a renewed appreciation of women's lives, history and traditional strengths—in their reproductive, familial and maternal roles. Today, in many feminist visions, the sweeping anti-religious dogmas of the past have been left behind. Forms of religious feminism have developed within every traditional faith—and outside of them as well. Now it can be recognized that the American feminist foremothers in the 19th century, like the contemporary abolitionists, were inspired by Christian doctrines of the equal human dignity of beings created in the image of God. Amid the pluralistic feminist reappraisals going on, a resurgent Christian feminist theology can confidently counter negative appraisals of Marian devotion.

Countering the Critiques.

One common theme in explaining the rise of Marian devotion in the church has been to recognize that, with the spread of Christianity over the known world, newly converted Christians inevitably assimilated or sublimated pre-existing local cults. One of the strongest religious manifestations of the ancient pagan world was the widespread worship of the great mother goddess, appearing in the form of a multitude of female deities. The interpretation given these early historical developments will depend upon one's ideological or theological perspective, but no one doubts that Marian devotion was at the very least kindled by pre-existing pagan myths and goddess worship.

According to most feminists, when God was, or is, or shall be, symbolized with female images, ordinary women in a society will be better off for it.

The relevant point here is that from a modern feminist perspective, worship of the great mother goddess and female pagan deities are not viewed as a means to subordinate women, but rather as symbolic enhancement of female power and a validation of women's experience. According to most feminists, when God was, or is, or shall be, symbolized with female images, ordinary women in a society will be better off for it.

Accordingly, modern women outside the traditional faiths have created neo-pagan goddess cults expressly aimed at vindicating and empowering themselves through feminine symbols and female-oriented rituals. So, too, Christian feminists reconstruct the tradition's female symbols, female-oriented spiritualities, women-centered Scripture readings and ritual celebrations. A similar validation of women's power and importance accompanied the church's devotion and homage to Mary as the mother of God and powerful queen of heaven. These movements spontaneously rose among the people, particularly among women, and cannot be dismissed as a power play of celibate males. As the agnostic historian of the Middle Ages, Henry Adams, put it, writing in the beginning of the 20th century, "All the literature and history of the time" proclaim of Marian devotion, "how this worship elevated the whole sex."

On the one hand, there was the exaltation of Mary's feminine spiritual authority in the divine scheme, which worked as a counter-story to official statements of intrinsic feminine inferiority. On the other hand, there was a constant celebration and reliance upon Mary's embodiment and embeddedness in human affairs as a real woman concerned with domestic details like all other women. She was the great and powerful queen of heaven as well as the approachable Everywoman concerned with the daily needs of ordinary men and women.

Those who exalted Mary in liturgical worship, art and poetry used Scripture symbolically to identify her with Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, the new Eve, the valiant woman, the daughter of Zion, the figure of the faithful church. She received titles of reverence identifying her with all the virtues and all the beauties of nature. Litanies saluted her as Our Lady of Good Counsel, Refuge of Sinners, Seat of Wisdom, Mirror of Justice, Mother of Mercy, Queen of Peace, Mystical Rose, Star

of the Sea. Can these female images of active power have invited women to feel inadequate, incomplete or incompetent? Not likely.

The Marian cult also excelled in elaborating on the goodness of Mary as a real, embodied woman. Not only was her womb called blessed but her breasts and milk were celebrated. Mary is shown pregnant or nursing her infant. Legends grew up of how she healed the ill by nursing them with her milk. Mary always offered concrete physical help, often coming to wipe the sweat from the brow of the dying sick poor. She opened the wombs of infertile women, helped brides without a dowry and attended women in childbirth. All of the phases of Mary's feminine life cycle were identified with and celebrated by women, as well as by men. The older sorrowful mother, in an agony of grief at the crucifixion of her son, was never forgotten. She mourned with humankind in every sorrow, but especially with women who lost children.

Mary's special concern, however, from medieval to modern times, was to champion the poor, the outcast, the oppressed, the ill, the marginalized and morally dubious. Her concern for physical healing of the sick produced great shrines and gave a witness to Christ's healing powers. These were early promissory notes for today's recovery of Christian healing ministries in the church. So too, long before modern liberation theologians voiced the idea of the "preferential option for the poor," Mary heralded this basic Christian insight by her activities.

Marian miracles and appearances favor the downtrodden, the lowly and those in need. The great, defiant Marian prayer—"The Magnificat"—shows Mary as the heir of the Hebrew prophets, a true daughter of Zion calling down God's justice on the rich and routing the proud of heart. Today, once again, in various movements rising up against oppression, Mary is invoked as: woman of the poor, unwed mother, widowed mother, political refugee, seeker of sanctuary, sign of contradiction, mother of the homeless, mother of the nonviolent, mother of the executed criminal, model of risk, trust, courage, patience, perseverance, wellspring of peace.

Henry Adams caught the spirit of the recurring reliance on and resort to Mary, although he confined his

analysis to Marian devotion in medieval Europe and could not know of the surprising Marian developments that were to come after his time. For Adams, Mary is never passive, but instead: "Mary concentrated in herself the whole rebellion of man against fate." This Boston brahmin also asserted that "the people loved Mary because she trampled on conventions: not merely because she could do it, but because she liked to do what shocked every well-regulated authority. Her pity had no limit" (*Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*).

Adams comes to conclusions exactly opposite those of Bishop Spong and Marina Warner. For Adams, the people "idolized her for being strong, physically and in will, so that she feared nothing, and was as helpful to the knight in the melee of battle as to the young mother in childbed." She excels in both masculine assertiveness and in tender feminine concern. I would claim that among other things Mary, like Christ, can be seen as implicitly witnessing to the basic Christian insight that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Doing the will of God, believing and obeying in love, the human person transcends gender identity.

According to Caroline Walker Bynum, a noted historian of religion, while misogyny existed in the culture, "in fact religious women paid surprisingly little attention to their supposed incapacity" (*Gender and Religion*, 1986). Religious women reworked gender imagery and effec-

tively established their own internal sense of equality. Women mystics and devotional writers recovered many ancient Christian themes and spoke of Christ as mother giving birth to the church. God is also seen as maternal, like a nursing mother lovingly feeding the faithful on the Eucharist.

Today Christian feminists are working to uncover and articulate ancient, woman-affirming spiritual roots. When history is examined with newly opened minds, it will appear that different forms of feminism have arisen time and again—and just as often been suppressed. Late 20th-century secular feminism can be envisioned as another round in the struggle.

Modern Secular Feminist Themes.

Obviously, feminists vary because they come to their feminist convictions from different starting points and inevitably retain their ideological allegiances to different worldviews. This leads skeptics to inquire whether there is anything at all that the different forms of feminism hold in common.

Yes, decidedly. There are core feminist affirmations. All feminists, from the most radical separatists to the most orthodox religious, seek to end harmful gender discrimination and unjust oppression of women. All advocate the social changes necessary to bring about gender equality and the well-being and full human

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One holy woman, at least, has never been forgotten, left nameless or banished from leadership in the church.

flourishing of women. In this general emancipatory enterprise all feminists inevitably undertake a critique of the status quo.

Most feminists have emphasized the need to recover a relational view of the self, in contradistinction to individualistic male norms of isolated self-sufficiency. In feminist analyses human beings are acknowledged as concretely embodied and embedded in specific familial and historical contexts that should not be ignored. Women's hidden contribution to society and the making of "self-made" men must be acknowledged. Retrieving history from below, where women and others of lesser power have lived and worked, is an important feminist project. In the same way, most feminists have affirmed embodied human subjectivity as one in which reason and emotion cannot be separated.

Another central feminist concern has been the analysis of power and the ways social structures can oppress or emancipate persons in either crude or subtle ways. Women have so often been silenced and excluded. Feminists therefore employ a "hermeneutics of suspicion" and will always look to see whose interests are being served when gender definitions and gender arrangements are proposed. It becomes particularly important for women that gender justice and equality operate *within* the family and include childrearing practices.

Feminists hold that oppressors too are wounded by abusive power. Why should violent forms of domineering power be culturally glorified and women's nurturing creative work be discounted?

Finally, all feminists have claimed that women must no longer be thought of as sexual objects or reduced to the status of reproductive breeding properties in the service of either powerful males or the state. Women's sexuality and sexual autonomy must be respected.

Reappraising Present Marian Developments With a Feminist Eye.

Today Mary and Marian doctrines are understood as they refer to and explicate the church's understanding of Christ and the Incarnation. Gender identity is transcended because theologians emphasize Mary's role as "the first disciple," and see her as the type and model for

every faithful Christian believer, whether male or female. The doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are now understood as necessarily interrelated and implicitly derived from Christ's redemption of all humankind. Mary is the first fruit of Christ's saving act, which overcomes sin and death. Mary's "yes" to God made possible the redemption and through Christ every Christian may also say "yes," become pregnant with hope and engender new life.

Christian feminists will go further in a reading of the evolving significance of Mary: Marian devotion has preserved a feminine presence and recognition of feminine power within an officially male-dominated structure. One holy woman, at least, has never been forgotten, left nameless or banished from leadership in the church. Until God could again be invoked as Mother as well as Father by the faithful, Mary has stood witness to the divine Sophia and to the fact that gender is transcended in wisdom and faith. But if Marian devotions preserve the feminine heritage, they also prophetically prefigure new explicit developments of the implicit Gospel message. Seeds that lie dormant flower in the fullness of time.

Today the church is beginning to confront the worldwide feminist movement, and this soon brings to the fore deeper theological questions of embodiment, gender and sexuality. Mary's freedom from sin, her bodily assumption into heaven, give witness to the goodness of the female human body and the truth of the promised resurrection of all bodies. But what are the implications for bodies and the body-mind unity of the human being here and now? Marian shrines have been noted for healing, but healing ministries have not yet become a central concern of the church.

Mary's active concern for the faithful on earth has also testified to the Christian belief in the communion of saints and the continuing solidarity of a human community of the living and the dead. But the Marian cult's implicit witness to the cosmic solidarity and communal nature of humankind has not been developed into a coherent theology. Christianity is in its infancy when it comes to the struggle for equality and justice.

Mary's embeddedness in the natural processes of procreation, her identification with nature imagery and her

elevation as one with a cosmic care for the world can give heart to those seeking to develop Christian ecological awareness. But here again the work of mothering the earth has just begun.

In the same way the implications of Gospel peacemaking and nonviolence have not yet been developed. Modern Catholics in the peace movement turn to Mary as Mother of Peace, wellspring of peace, and are inspired to dream of new forms of peacemaking. A spiritual struggle for peace and the power of intercessory prayer are central in the traditional cult of Mary, but the theological developments of intercessory prayer and of nonviolent witness have not been adequate.

The ancient depictions of the dormition of Mary symbolize the sleep that characterizes theological reflection on the Marian themes. On the other hand, reported Marian appearances all over the world have been increasing. These curious and sometimes comic scenarios of sightings do little for the credibility of the church, but they do testify to the fact that simple people trust that Mary is willing to make an appearance in their backyard and desires to communicate with them personally.

The Convergence of Marian and Feminist Themes.

It takes a slightly more sophisticated reading of the continuing Marian story to discern the ways Marian devotions and doctrines converge with core feminist concerns. Obviously, there is the common cry for justice and a desire for a general emancipation of women and the oppressed. Feminist concerns for peace, nurturing power and new movements of ecological feminism bent on mothering the earth find a deep resonance within Marian devotion.

Surely too, feminist emphases upon the importance of concrete social embeddedness are found in Marian devotion and doctrines. In the Mary cult, the self is always relational; no one, not even God, appears without recognizing the bonds to mother and family.

It is also a truism that Marian devotion has affirmed the human need for emotion, for poetic beauty and for the fusion of affect and reason in human expressions and reflection. Hyperrationalistic scholasticism may have reigned in parts of the church's life but not everywhere—certainly not in Mary's domain. If anything, the temptation of Marian devotion in the 19th century was toward an exaggerated sentimentality. But at least Mary has never been accused of being a champion of abstract, arid rules that produce slavish obedience to the letter of the law.

But what of the accusation that Mary's virginity made sexually active women feel inadequate or guilty because they could not be as pure as Mary? And was Mary, who is exalted in her maternity, conforming to a "biology is destiny" ideology? Of course it is possible that at times Marian symbols were used in a reductionist way. In certain church circles there lingered a gnostic, anti-sexual animus that identified sexuality with sin. Sex and sexual

activity in some severe ascetic traditions were seen as polluting. But other elements of the symbols used in the Mary story seem more powerful.

Marina Warner herself reminds us that virginity in the ancient world of goddesses did not refer so much to sexual purity as to autonomy and free self-determination. Virgins such as Diana of the Ephesians or Pallas Athena were probably manifestations of the great mother goddess who was worshiped along the entire feminine sexual cycle, from virgin to married woman to wise old woman. The virginity of such female pagan deities signaled their complete freedom from subjection to a male or to a mate.

Mary's virginity and the virgin birth can be interpreted as symbols of her autonomy, signaling her direct relationship to God, unmediated through any hierarchically placed male, spouse or no. Virginity for both men and women also symbolized integrity, an undivided mind and wholly focused heart, signed in the untouched body. Significantly, the punishments of Eve were her longing for, and sexual dependency upon, her husband—a corollary of her subjection to him—and her pain in childbirth. Mary, the new Eve, was believed as virgin to be free of this sexual subjugation, as well as from the pain of childbirth.

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While the Holy Family could not be a model of sexual fulfillment and procreative fruitfulness, from a feminist perspective this family demonstrated a liberating model of equal gender relationships. Mary is equal, in no way dominated by her spouse and completely free as a moral agent. Even in a misogynous age, all of Mary's powers and privileges, her strengths and virtues, were seen as independent of her status as a wife. Mary and Joseph—and her name always comes first—exemplify an interdependent, equal relationship of mutual respect in a family. If any spouse is the designated "helpmate" in this marriage, it is Joseph.

Indeed, Christian feminists can go further in analyzing the symbolic narratives. Mary's "fiat" to the angel, accepting the birth of Jesus, was believed to be given in perfect freedom from any anxiety of sin—because of the immaculate conception. In the story of Christian salvation, Mary is not coerced by God (as if by Zeus), nor is she *driven* to reproduce—by her own anxiety, or by social influences, or by her husband's desires, or by biological forces. Mary's personal "fiat" produces a pregnancy and childbirth that can be seen as heralding a new era of human reproduction. A redeemed woman freely consents to cooperate with God and life as a responsible, responsive moral agent. Of all women in the world, Mary is the last one of whom it can be said that "biology is destiny."

The paradoxical symbol of the Virgin-Mother specifically contradicts the idea that a woman must choose between her personal mission as a moral agent of integrity and the privileges and joys of biological maternity. And the single woman who does not reproduce is as validated as the mother who does. Embodiment and reproductive power are affirmed without being absolutized.

I am also sure that in the next round of the feminist struggle for the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church, Mary's life and actions will be cited as the model of women's full equality and emancipation within the church. She who first brought Christ, both body and blood, into the human community can be invoked as the exemplar of women's priestly ministry among the faithful. There have been earlier movements advocating the priesthood of Mary, but they have never been developed. Once the church has grown, however, into a more balanced view of gender and personhood, women will surely be ordained. Gender, as seen in the life of both Mary and Christ, is a dimension of human identity but is not more important than charity and doing God's will. Marian devotion makes this clear by validating female human nature and female bodies while not allowing Mary's gender to limit the ways she serves God. Love of God and neighbor, like wisdom and truth, know no gender.

I predict that when women priests are finally welcomed and ordained in the Roman Catholic Church, Marian images will be used in the official documents of acceptance, and invocations to Mary will be featured in the ordination ceremonies. □



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