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Mary the Paradox

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Mary the Paradox

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HOWARD P. KAINZ

† HOW DOES Mary the mother of Jesus fit into the perspective of Christianity? Many and varied answers have been given to this question, ranging from St. Louis de Montfort's recommendation of "holy slavery" to Mary, through the post-Vatican II de-emphasis of standard "devotions" to Mary, to apprehension on the part of many — Catholics as well as Protestants — that any stress on veneration of Mary will detract from the worship due Jesus Christ.

I shall not undertake here to explore exhaustively the complex problem of Mary's "place" — something the theologians are still debating. I shall simply try to focus on one aspect of the picture of Mary that has come down to us in Scripture and tradition; namely, her portrayal as a woman in whom are united characteristics that are, or have been, considered opposed to or even contradictory of each other. Such a picture surely is a kind of paradox in the Christian tradition. In attempting to resolve it I am not so much concerned with tracing the "historical Mary" (if indeed such a thing be possible) as with analyzing the common conceptions of this historical person in a way that, I hope, will prove illuminating.



1. *Mary as Religious*/*"Secular."* There is a tradition that Mary took some or all of the three vows that are a condition of membership in many Roman Catholic religious orders; the vows, that is, of celibacy (or virginity), poverty and obedience. But unlike many "religious," Mary was apparently not distinguishable by any external factors — clothing, abode, kind of community life or daily regimen — from women who led an everyday "secular" existence.

Up to about five years ago, the dichotomy between religious and secular (or lay) life was highly pronounced and formalized, and an effective synthesis of these two "opposite" life styles was hardly conceivable. But today such a synthesis is becoming at least a possibility, if not an ideal, in many of the religious orders. Eventually it may cease to be a "paradox."

2. . . . *as Virgin/Mother.* Virginity and motherhood are usually two mutually exclusive options, with Mary held to be the exception to this rule of mutual exclusivity. But in order to explore the full

implications of Mary's "virginal motherhood," we must take note of two facts: (a) that Mary's virginity was not incompatible with her espousal to the Holy Spirit; and (b) that her claim to being the mother of Jesus resides primarily not in her having given birth to him physically but in her giving birth to him spiritually in her own person (cf. Jesus' words, "Who is my mother? . . . He who hears the word of God and keeps it." — Luke 8:19). Thus, virginity means a love relationship with the Divine, and motherhood means actualizing the divine potential which one already possesses in a seminal way. In this sense, virginity and motherhood are not mutually exclusive — neither for Mary nor for anyone else. It is unfortunate that so much emphasis has traditionally been placed on Mary's physical virginity and on her physical motherhood of the Messiah — as if virginity consisted in an intact hymen and motherhood in forming and delivering a new human body rather than in fostering, educating, and giving moral example to the human person that emerges from the womb.

3. . . . *as Ascetic*/*"Ordinary."* Though we may admire some of the great saints for their ascetic exploits — their fastings, their self-denial, their sacrificial labors — we often find them lacking in one essential quality: naturalness. It seems to us that they are given over to an unnatural straining after the supernatural, after "perfection." Sometimes their "acts of mortification" affront our sensibilities — for instance, when we read that a certain saint made it a rule to drink the water in which the ulcers of the sick had been washed. In other words, for such saints — and for many Christians — being ascetic means adopting extraordinary and extreme habits and ways of living, while being ordinary means avoiding self-sacrifice and falling in with the general customs.

Now, we conceive of Mary's life as "ascetic," as a life of frugality, hardship and suffering. But we do not think of her "asceticism" as practiced for its own sake or in order to triumph over the sensuous body or win some heavenly reward. It fits in with her environment and with human nature. It appears as a background to the life of a woman who blends into the setting of her neighborhood, chats with friends, takes part in communal celebrations, wears ordinary clothes — is "ordinary" in every way.

4. . . . *as Industrious*/*"Liberated."* Tradition has it that Mary belonged to the poor working class.

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However, if we look to her (or even to her Son) as exemplifying a "work ethic," we shall be hard-pressed for concrete data. Mary's work is not mentioned specifically at all in the Gospels. The only thing we hear about her activities is that they were of a kind which might be labeled "unproductive" — praying, visiting friends, roaming around with a radical religious group. And we wonder how a member of the poor working class could do these things regularly without begging or receiving doles. But Mary, it seems, manages to avoid becoming trapped by work and productivity, and consequently is able to give proper attention to the spiritual and social dimensions of life (which others in her class might consider outside their competence). Is hers an *imitable* example, a style of life open to all the working poor? If not, it hardly needs be said that our society should make it so.

5. . . . as *Obedient*/*"Subversive."* "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord" — thus Mary describes her "role" to the angel Gabriel. Mary's humility and submissiveness seem to have been passed on to her Son, who recommends submission not only to civil authorities ("Caesar") but also to ecclesiastical authorities (those who hold the "chair of Moses").

Yet Mary's submissiveness is coupled with un-



St. Peter's, Rome.

'Pietà' by Michelangelo.

usual independence. Thus — so the Gospels tell us — she wanted at first to remain unmarried, even though this wish ran contrary to all custom in Judea. Again, her submissiveness is coupled with an impatient zeal for what we might call "social justice." Thus in the "Magnificat" she praises God for putting down the proud and powerful and despoiling the rich, and thanks him for raising up the humble and giving an abundance of good things to the poor. Of course, some may choose to interpret these passages as referring to an "afterlife" where everyone will receive his or her just due. But it seems to me that Mary is obviously giving thanks to the Lord because, in spite of her weakness and insignificance, he has granted her recognition *in this life*. And since the transference of recognition and power from those who possess it to those who don't always involves an overthrow of the status quo — whether in the ecclesiastical or the secular sphere — we might say that to advocate such a transference is "subversive."



As I said above, in this brief article I have been concerned mainly with Mary as commonly pictured by Christians, not with investigating the question of her historicity. But let me point to a final paradox; namely, that Mary's importance seems to hinge on the fact that she is both a symbol and a historical reality. In a way she corresponds to those universal



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

12th century French Madonna and Child.

symbols that are found in many non-Christian religions and in the myths of many cultures: the symbol of the Virgin Mother, the symbol of the mortal who is made divine, the symbol of the queen who mediates with the divinity on behalf of men, and so forth. (Carl Jung speaks of these symbols in a number of his writings, particularly in his *The Archetypes of the Unconscious*.) It is noteworthy, however, that outside the Christian tradition there has been no serious and sustained effort to connect

so many of these mythic symbols with a single historical woman. In Christianity, the symbols take on flesh.

Why is it that the Scriptures tell us so little about Mary? No doubt because a factual account of her life and work would obscure her value as a symbol. It seems indeed that her primary "work" in the Scriptures is to exist as a symbol, a model, a prototype, of some of the major "mysteries" of the Christian religion.

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