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The Marian Paradox: Marian Practices as a Road to a New Mariology?¹

Maaike de Haardt

Abstract
Disregarding trends of secularization, the Virgin Mary still plays an important role in religious devotions all over the world, even in the West. This does not diminish the controversies, debates and theo-political struggles that surround Mary and a Marian theology, as will be shown in this article. Western feminist theologies mostly choose, in general accordance with the Second Vatican Council, for a liberating, biblical, human Mary contra a more cosmological Mary, object of devotional piety. This contribution gives a critical sketch of the background of these developments in Mariology and argues for a closer look at Marian devotional practices in order to find some inspiring elements for rethinking divine presence, Mary and perhaps a new Mariology. Can feminists find inspiration in this approach without forfeiting critical power and without denying the paradoxical and dangerous dimensions of Mary?

Keywords
divine presence, female divine imagination, God-language, Marian devotional practices, Mariology

Introduction

It is commonly said that Mary has inspired more people than any woman ever has (Pelikan, 1996: 2). As far as feminists are concerned, such a remark arouses a certain amount of suspicion and gives a certain urgency to the question of the meaning of Mary. Mary: inspiring for whom and to what end?

Mary may be an inspiring example or an object of devotion for many, but she is also the source of debate, controversy, evangelizing, admiration and vilification. All of this

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applies to both the question of the theological and dogmatic significance of Mary in Christianity and the controversy over the devotional practices, especially the apparitions of Mary. It also concerns—in particular for women—the oppressive, liberating, nationalistic and political elements connected with Mary. At the same time Mary is considered ‘the’ example of a multi-religious figure by scholars, theologians and anthropologists, and she could play a role in inter-religious meetings (Smith and Haddad, 1989). Competing and diverse interpretations struggle for attention, power and influence while there are hardly any historical or scriptural data available. Mary is a polyvalent figure: she is not just full of grace, she is above all full of meaning. So can a feminist-theological reflection on the phenomenon of Mary still bring something new?

In this contribution I shall discuss a number of important theological and ecclesiastical developments and debates concerning the figure of Mary during the last 50 years. I shall focus primarily on my own Western European context. After paying attention to the results of the debates and developments, feminist and otherwise, I shall turn to Mary in popular religiosity and try to distil from these, equally problematic, practices of belief, a number of elements that could mark the outline of a contemporary Marian theology and spirituality that is also relevant for Western feminism.2 Can unexpected aspects of religion be gained through the context of these devotional practices, without forfeiting critical power?

As I already pointed out, the scriptural data on Mary are few, which affect what theologians, feminist or not, say about Mary: it is partly a matter of filling in the ‘gaps’ in the biblical text. Furthermore, the basis of theological interpretations is especially formed by the dogmas, which time and again give rise to all sorts of devotional, artistic and literary representations. The influence of other, mostly older and in any case different religious traditions, on the meanings assigned to Mary, should therefore not be underestimated. Two examples can illustrate this:

Historians of religion state that the worship of the Virgin Goddess, for example in ancient Rome, is one of the roots of the dogma of the Virgin Birth proclaimed in 325 CE. Attention is thereby drawn to different traditions of the Great Goddess or the Mother Goddess from Roman-Hellenistic culture, but also to the Isis cult from which the Marian title ‘Queen of Heaven’ is supposed to be derived. Apparently this type of devotion was smoothly incorporated and transferred to the figure of Mary in early Christianity. Or maybe one should say that the existing veneration of the Goddess continued under a different name and was incorporated in the Christian doctrine that was being developed (Benko, 1993; Levine, 2005) The dogma of the Council of Ephesus (431 CE), declaring Mary to be Theotokos, which means, literally, God-bearer, but is usually known as Mother of God, was, in that respect, considered to bolster older religious traditions. There is indeed a remarkable resemblance between the representations of Isis with her son and the Theotokos ones. Paradoxically, the dogma itself is in fact a christological dogma and was proclaimed to settle the dispute over the union in Christ of the two

natures. The question remains whether Mariology has ever escaped this paradox, as does the question: if and for whom would this be of use or necessary?

The second example also concerns the absorption of earlier religious tradition in the figure of Mary, that is, the veneration of *Nostra Senora de Guadalupe*. According to the tradition, Mary appeared in 1531 to an Indian farmer, exactly on the spot where the shrine of the Goddess Tonantzin once stood before it was destroyed by missionaries. Some see in this appearance the return, albeit in disguise, of Tonantzin (Elizondo, 1997: 126; Pelikan, 1996).

The importance of the two examples, to which many could be added, is the suggestion or the conviction that both in Marian *doctrine* and *devotion* traces can be found of traditions of a female divine; traces which are also shown in iconography. And even though both examples, especially the latter, are sometimes seen as a ‘religious disguise found necessary in societies regulated by an authoritarian Roman Catholic Church’ (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007: 75), I am convinced that this situation is more complex and therefore, in a way, more promising.

**Developments, Debates and Models**

In recent years there appears to be a growing Western religious interest in Mary. Ecclesiastical utterances concerning Mary have increased since the pontificate of the Polish pope, John Paul II, and more emphasis is placed on the mother-child relation (Logister, 1995: 175-77). More theological studies of Mary have appeared, written both by (feminist) women and men (Beattie, 2002; Gebara and Bingemer, 1988; Johnson, 2003; Logister, 1995; Spretnak, 2004; Tavard, 1996), and Protestants seem to be more favourably disposed towards Mary than ever before (Tavard, 1996: 103-52). On a devotional level it is remarkable that pilgrimages to well-known Marian pilgrimage sites have increased since the 1960s, and not just the faithful embark on such a journey (Post, 1998; Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans, 2009). The same applies to the reported number of Marian apparitions. Moreover, there is the worldwide, ecclesiastically contested, movement ‘Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici’, with over 7 million adherents. The movement advocates the proclamation of a fifth Marian dogma: ‘Mary Coredemptrix, Mediatrix of all Graces and Advocate’ (http://www.voxpopuli.org). Among theologians, men and women, there is considerable scepticism about these popular, often conservative movements (see for e.g. Logister and Johnson). From a multi-religious perspective, changes are also apparent: more and more Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims travel to such Marian sanctuaries as Fatima (sic) and Lourdes. Furthermore, Mary has her own place in Islam (Smith and Haddad, 1989) and plays her own role in popular devotion in the Middle East (Jansen and Kühl, 2008). How should this be interpreted and what does it mean for a feminist theological liberationist interpretation of Mary?

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3 In the Netherlands there are at least 159 sites of Marian apparitions that are not officially confirmed by the Church (see the databank of the Meertensinstituut, http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/bol/lijst_cultusobjecten.php?plaats=&cultusobject1=Maria&cultusobject2=&gemeente=&provincie=&bisdom=&feestdatum=&periode_van_verering=&act=zoek, consulted 11 June 2007). See also: http://www.marypages.com/indexnl.html
The nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century were characterized by an intensification of both Mariology and Marian devotion. This period has even been called ‘the golden age of Mary’ (Pelikan, 1996: 14). After centuries of intensive and heated theological discussions, as much as two Marian dogmas were proclaimed in this period: in 1854 the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and in 1950 the dogma of Mary’s Assumption. These dogmas were not just surrounded by internal Roman Catholic and external Ecumenical disputes, but also accompanied by 11 Marian apparitions, officially acknowledged by Rome, and, for that matter, all took place in Western Europe, in particular France, between 1830 (Paris) and 1954 (Syracuse). The well-known apparitions in Lourdes (1858), of which it is said that the Holy Virgin made herself known with the words ‘I am the immaculate conception’, and Fatima (1917), rank among the apparitions of this period. Apart from these officially acknowledged sites, there was and is a worldwide and enormous devotion to Mary and veneration of Mary. Up and until the Second Vatican Council, Mary’s significant position was also visible in the regular liturgy and in this regard the Council itself marked a breach.

Mariology in connection with Marian devotion has always led to heated discussions, partly due to political and ecclesiastical power and mechanisms of domination (Eade and Sallnow, 1991). The gradual disappearance or the transformation, through the centuries, of the image of the imperial Mother Virgin, Theotokos—with child—into the lonely and obedient handmaiden—without child—that took pride of place since halfway through the nineteenth century and was reinforced in the twentieth century, is a sign of change (Boss, 2000). Sarah Jane Boss detects here a line from the dogma of the Virgin Birth, the Mother Virgin, to the Immaculate Conception, which emphasizes morality, sexuality and corporeality: ‘Physical motherhood has given way to moral purity and humility and authority has been replaced by submissiveness’ (Boss, 2000: 147).

Scholars see the Marian intensification prior to Vatican II as a kind of ‘spiritual weapon’ or ‘contra-revolutionary mysticism’ of the Roman Catholic Church in her struggle against modern science and philosophy, against rationalism, secularism and the development of the modern liberal state (Eade and Sallnow, 1991; Tavard, 1996). Not for nothing the Church turned to France where she was challenged the most. In this regard Mary was and is an important part of the profiling of Roman Catholic identity, and not just in the nineteenth century. In May 2007 an Episcopal conference was held in Brazil, in what is considered the largest Marian place of pilgrimage: Aparecida. Before the conference, Cardinal Bertone spoke of Mary as the ‘star of evangelisation’ (http://walter covens.skynetblogs.be/post/3756671/maria-ster-van-de-nieuwe-evangelisatie). Does that mean that Mary becomes again an important part of a renewed Roman Catholic identity in a continent where so many people are joining evangelical and Pentecostal movements?

Not only (church) political dimensions play a role. Scholars in religious studies, psychology, anthropology and sociology draw attention to the increasing Marian devotions in times of economic, political and/or social-psychological uncertainties or suffering, and it is important to recognize these dimensions (Hermkens, Jansen and Notelmans, 4

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4 These apparitions were the first to be officially acknowledged since the apparition of Guadalupe.
However, it remains to be seen whether these theories offer sufficient insight into the complexity of Marian meanings and leave sufficient space for religious meanings.²

Theological Turns

The Second Vatican Council brought a theological change in the meaning and place of Mary, which can be summarized as: ‘from a cosmic Mary to a biblical Mary’. It can, however, also be characterized as strengthening the theological subordination of Mary to Jesus and Christology.⁶ It is, to be sure, not a diminishing of the relevance of the dogmas, but the choice for a more historicizing, biblical and therefore a more ecumenical direction. Mary’s ‘functionality’ in relation to her son is thus strengthened. This has liturgical consequences: many such daily Marian devotions as hymns, prayers or the rosary, are banned from the ordinary liturgy. Since then the subordinating functionality resounds in the re-naming of the classical Marian feasts: Candlemas (2 February, with reference to the pre-Christian festival of spring equinox) became ‘The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple’; ‘the Annunciation (of the Blessed Virgin Mary)’, 25 March, is now called ‘The Annunciation of the Lord’. The emphasis, and with it Mary’s place, then shifts to Mary as the first and exemplary believer, and in line with this, to Mary as a type of faith and motherly love, and as Mother of the Church (Logister, 1995: 173).

This change in perspective offered, at least theoretically, a relativizing of the exclusive exemplary function that Mary held for women. Until then, and even more so in the

5 Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans make an explicit and strong distinction between ‘lived religion’ or religion as practiced on the one hand and, on the other hand, ecclesiastical structures or teaching. See, Hermkens A-K, Jansen W, and Notermans C (eds) (2009) Moved by Mary: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage in the Modern World. Farnham, UK/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 3. Their book focuses solely on the first. This seems to me a false distinction, suggesting the non-relatedness of religious practices and teaching/theology as if ‘religious teaching, symbols, concepts’ are in no way part of the actual religious practices and experiences. In a way this ‘dualistic’ approach reinforces ‘traditional distinctions’ thereby neglecting the contested nature of this kind of definitional boundaries. This is not to deny that in actual practices and experiences people ‘appropriate’ official or formal teachings/theology, symbols and concepts in their own way, giving new or different meaning and interpretations and thus, at least partly, can ‘escape’ pre-given or prescribed meaning. On the creativity and resistance of appropriation see among others, de Certeau M, trans. Tomasik TJ (1984) The Practice of Everyday Life Vol. 1. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press; and de Haardt M (2002b) A way of being in the world: traces of transcendence in everyday life. In: de Haardt, Korte A-M (eds) Common Bodies. Everyday Practices, Religion and Gender. Münster: Lit Verlag, 11-27.

6 In this respect I consider the recent issue of the progressive Catholic Journal, Concilium 2008 (4), that is dedicated to Mary a kind of ‘missed opportunity’ since the editors explicitly place themselves within this tradition of the Second Vatican Council. The only contribution that questioned this reduction, albeit cautiously, and that therefore addresses the importance of the ‘more’ that comes to the fore in Marian Piety precisely with regards to the importance of the current lack of the feminine in God-language and images of the divine is the contribution of Susan Ross. See, Ross S (2008) Mary: human, feminine, divine? In: Irrazabal D, Ross S, and Wacker M-T (eds) The Many Faces of Mary. Concilium 2008: 31-32.
nineteenth century, Mary was the prime and obvious model of the ideal wife and mother. As such, an example Mary was of much greater importance for women than Jesus was for men. In the Catholic tradition, images of and ideas about Mary are always closely connected with images and ideas about women. Many Western Catholic women, not only reject traditional images of women but also traditional images of Mary, and appropriate another, stronger Mary. All of this could not prevent the reduction that was set in motion by the Second Vatican Council, and Mary disappeared into the background in doctrine and devotion, at least in Western Europe (Beattie, 2002; Spretnak, 2004). According to Logister, Marian theology seems a ghetto, and theologians who concern themselves with Mary are considered to be ‘strange’ (Logister, 1995: 8).

Catharina Halkes, Dutch scholar and feminist theological foremother, wrote about these developments, arguing that, from a strict Christological perspective, this was an accurate and consequent purge. Meanwhile she wondered whether it was beneficial that Mary was no longer mentioned, and if there was not something lost in this process (Halkes, 1981: 82). Is this a longing for dimensions of Mary, which have been preserved in popular religiosity, varying from simple prayers to apparitions and pilgrimages? Can we find here a possible explanation for the present-day attraction of Marian devotions, even in a secularized Western culture?

In that same period women, and feminist theologians, took to protesting against the traditional and influential images of the Virgin Mother and the roles and images imposed on women through Mary. Important features of these images were: self-sacrifice, obedience, humility and servitude, chastity and especially self-effacement. Motherhood, physical or spiritual, was a woman’s calling. This image of the Mother who was a virgin, whereby virginity was above all seen as a moral qualification, was for many women not only inimitable, but it had also become unacceptable. Women saw Mariology as a powerful weapon in the hands of the clergy, to control women and to minimize their influence in the Church and public life. Consequently, many Western women had and have an ambiguous relationship to the Holy Virgin.

Women wrote critical texts in which a ‘more liberationist’ Mary appeared, which can be characterized as ‘from an obedient and passive Mary towards a strong and independent woman’. Male theologians as well, especially from a liberation-theological context, reflected upon the specific relationship of the female, women, Mary and God. This led to studies in which Mary was seen as the female or motherly face of God (for example, Boff, 1989; Schillebeeckx 1993; Borgman, 2003: 187). Feminist theologians, however, looked at these attempts with due suspicion. These men introduced a type of femininity, which was ideal for men but hardly supported the changes in the concrete lives of women. Nor did this Mariology affect the dominant male image of God with its motherly image of God. Despite these innovative impulses, women were still not deemed capable of representing the divine (Johnson, 2003: 24, 86).

The overall Marian reduction led to a revaluation of (the historical) Mary of Nazareth and to the question of her meaning for present-day (Western?) women and men. Despite the actual lack of historical data, authors like Elizabeth Johnson (2003) and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1995), tried to unmask part of what they call the ‘dogmatic mystification’ of Mary. Their intention is to relativize the theological importance of Mary’s motherhood, in particular in those dimensions that have had an extremely ambiguous, alienating,
oppressive and frustrating effect on concrete women. Besides and in connection with this, they omit—in their emphasis on the meaning of the historical Mary—the cosmological images and dimensions in which Mary is depicted as a Queen with divine dimensions.

Johnson in particular, shifts the emphasis completely to Mary the ‘ordinary’ woman from Nazareth, to the strength of her faith, to Mary as the mother of a special son, who is poor, lives in a concrete social and religious context and in occupied territory. Mary is the mother of a large family, and stands in the grace of God. In her life the ‘liberating’ character of this experience, this standing in the grace of God, becomes visible. The ‘dangerous memory’ which this Mary is, this suffering and poor mother, still can be and is today central to Johnson. Only thus can Mary be both an inspiring and a dangerous example and the companion of concrete women and men and only thus will she ‘really be our sister’. This historical, liberating emphasis can also be found in non-Western feminist Mariology. My impression is, however, that these authors, because of the strong presence of devotion in their contexts, and albeit in varying degrees, hold on to the cosmological elements in Mary with all of the ambiguous associations (compare Vuola, 2002). In all these political, feminist and liberation-theological approaches the Magnificat has a central place: ‘He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly’ (Lk. 1.52).

**Devotion Versus Theology?**

The theological, historicizing and biblical Marian ‘sobriety’ or reduction has relatively few connections with Marian devotions. Devotions usually take place on the fringes of the Church, and draw, for example at many places of pilgrimage, people from everywhere and all walks of life (Post, 2005: 201-22). The official Church and theology, partly including feminist theology, have taken a very complex and rather dismissive attitude in regard to ‘popular devotions’. If the importance of devotions was acknowledged at all, then it would be in liberation theology. There, however, popular devotions are mostly seen as a negative and alienation creating, sexual denying, political instrument (Althaus-Reid, 2001). These elements do play a role and need to be brought to attention. At the same time, I am convinced that theological reflection should not only be concerned with theological utterances, judgments and discussions, but just as much with research on the theological relevance of ‘religious practices’ and ‘lived faith’. From this perspective, research into Marian popular devotions may gain an understanding of religious meanings of Mary that could be complementary and corrective in regard to both (feminist) theology and Mariology. In concrete devotional praxis, forms of appropriation and signification take place that transcend the frameworks and images of doctrine and theology (de Haardt, 2002a, 2002b). Other dimensions and images emerge, wherein mostly unnamed dimensions of the divine can be brought up for discussion. Schüssler Fiorenza refers to the importance of this, but does not develop ideas concerning content. Just as there is relatively little recent Mariology, there is also little theological research into the meaning of Marian (popular) devotions (with the exception of Mæckelbergh, 1991; Vuola, 2006). Here, too, it appears that only a few consider this to be serious theology. My efforts in the following paragraphs to try and distil a number of religious and theological meanings from Western Marian devotions are therefore merely first steps.
Elements for a Marian Theology and Spirituality

Divine Presence

Present-day Marian popular devotions are much less, or possibly even hardly, focused on Mary as ‘dangerous memory’, ‘first of the believers’, or on Mary as ‘image of the Church’. In popular devotions we recognize in particular the ‘traditional’ images, the ‘holy pictures’. Images of the Mother of God, the Virgin, the image of the suffering mother, the Mother of Mercy, Mother of Perpetual Help, and the image of the divine/cosmic mother; they are all there and often simultaneously. Apparently there is cohesiveness without any theological problems. In that sense, in these images of Mary—however disguised they may be—a presence of the divine in female form comes up. In the meaning of these devotions glimpses can be caught of the importance and the power of these female divine dimensions. Acknowledging this is not a plea for the Goddess, and certainly not for a Goddess alongside a God. From my frame of reference, it is, moreover, of minor importance whether or not traces of the Goddess are indeed ‘really’ present in these devotions. Mine is a plea for reinforcement of the reflection on and representation of the ‘divine’ in female forms, alongside existing male images of the ‘divine’; a plea which also enhances the claim that women are capable of representing the divine: just as the divine is represented in non-anthropomorphic images. It is precisely by acknowledging the multitude of representations of the divine, also of the divine in Mary, that we indicate that the divine is ultimately unknowable. Religion is, after all, about human images that are, in the end, insufficient. The overwhelming Marian devotions seem to be less troubled by the integration of this insight than Churches or theologians are.

In popular devotions people turn to Mary, despite (church) political conflicts, repression, alienation or even false consciousness. They turn to Mary for support, comfort, help, or in order to experience something of her ‘presence’. However undefined it may be, people pray and go to Mary, confident that it will be worth their while: witness millions of people worldwide in their dealings with and images of Mary. The image of Mary with the protective cloak beautifully expresses the experience of power and mercy. This type of experience is mentioned by people who turn to Mary during pilgrimages, when

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7 Compare in this regard the sophisticated and gender sensitive comparative approach of Francis X. Clooney’s textual analyses of Hindu goddesses hymns and Marian hymns. See, Clooney FX (2005) Divine Mother, Blessed Virgin Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press. Although Clooney questions the dominance and exclusivity of male god-languages and images in Christianity he also continually emphasizes that Mary is not God. According to Clooney’s analyses: ‘Rather, it is in Mary—as her individual body and soul, in her identity as a particular woman who becomes a mother for God—that God’s action is manifest in a way that is true of no other’ (2005: 228). Clooney demonstrates a high sensitivity to the paradoxical dimensions of Mary: ‘she is not divine; yet neither is she simply a typical or even extraordinary Christian believer or typical woman, at least as she is remembered and honored in Christian traditions of theology and piety’ (2005: 227). But by sticking to dogmatic intentions of Vatican II and by attaching a theological ‘realism’ to the hymns he, in the end, frustrates his own—in my view sympathetic and creative contribution—to a more gender diverse and sensitive god-language.

Maybe the unconditional aspect of this love, comfort, support and protection is most characteristic of these devotions: any one can turn to Mary, no matter who you are or what you do or believe or whether you believe. Even people for whom visiting a place of pilgrimage is, for example, a Sunday-afternoon outing—which is often the case in Western Europe—feel ‘touched’, no matter how vague that may be. Thus, in the figure of Mary a very specific dimension of the divine, of divine presence, comes to the fore: divine presence as unconditional, and precisely on that basis it is a relationship that offers trust and empowerment.

Robert Orsi points out that, despite the ambiguities in Marian devotions, Mary is felt to be present by the believers—one way or the other and in the multiplicity of meanings assigned to her. Encounters with an image or figure of Mary, are thus encounters with presence, and in that sense they are characterized by the entire range of emotions and behaviour which can be triggered when people are together in a certain place. According to Orsi it is precisely this presence in/through the images which makes that iconoclasts, religious or political, want to cut off the power of this presence in ‘things’, or to limit the access to this power of/in the presence of individuals or groups (Orsi, 2005: 51). To be sure, religious and political institutions can manipulate through devotions, but they are never capable of completely controlling their power. For people react to the image of Mary, they turn to her out of desire, need, love, fear, desperation or anger. In their experiences of this divine presence, this presence is qualified as: compassion, mercy, protection, support, comfort and unconditional love. Consequently, in this relational presence a critical, social and ecclesiastical power is hidden. Feminist liberation theology also emphasizes this power but without referring to these devotions. For me this presence manifests a complaint against a Western culture that is predominantly characterized—epistemologically and otherwise—by ‘absence’. Feminist theologians have pointed this out before, but, again, mostly without referring to concrete devotional practices as a sign of this protest.

Physicality, Matter and Sacramentality

Can this presence, here explicitly called ‘divine’, which is represented in and through Mary, be characterized still further? Two elements spring to mind: the meaning of physicality and materiality of Creation and the principle of sacramentality, which is represented in Mary in its very own way.

Whether it concerns the pregnant Mary or the suffering mother, to the extent that Mary represents the divine a strong physical component emerges. Life, also in its religious or spiritual dimensions, is physical, embodied: giving birth and nursing, feeding and caring, suffering and dying. And the divine is not situated outside everyday life, which probably nowhere becomes more explicitly clear than in the Marian images and devotions. Mary lived through it all. Artists are the ones who portray this in impressive and moving ways. In popular devotions this is immediately recognized and experienced
as support and comfort, even when it concerns blatant kitsch. In popular devotions and in a liberation-theological approach it is precisely this concrete Mary, who sustains women and men all over the world in their suffering, powerlessness, anger and resistance. In that sense, a stark demystifying and strictly biblical, and thus sober, Mariology has too little eye for the ambiguity in the image of the suffering mother or other mother-images. Mary is more than the historical mother who lost her special son. May be it is in this highly physical image of the Mater Dolorosa that the ambiguity and the strength of the meaning of Mary shows itself in a very special way: Mary is just like us and at the same time much more. Elina Vuola comes to the same kind of conclusions based on her research in Latin America (Vuola, 2006: 49). In my opinion, the power of these Marian images can only be this strong and universal—throughout all times and cultures—when the support and the involvement of the divine itself is expressed and/or experienced in the image; when in the image something of that which transcends or permeates the life of this concrete woman from Nazareth resonates. Why is this presence theologically acknowledged in the historical man and not in the historical woman from Nazareth? It is the power of remembrance, but in the qualified meaning ‘just-like-us and much more’, that resonates in these devotional experiences of Marian presence.

Not only physicality, but also, in a much broader sense, the importance of matter, and with it the sacramentality of Creation, shows itself in Marian devotions and iconography. This can, for example, be inferred from the many titles and the extensive symbolism assigned to Mary: Star of the Sea, Queen of Heaven, Mystical Rose, Seat of Wisdom. Epithets that refer to the cosmic dimensions of Mary are—to use specific Christian terms—the matrix of incarnation and redemption. But Marian titles and symbolism also resonate with references to the divine which can be known in and through the world and of which, in principle, the entire creation can be a witness. We know the Marys of the forest, Our Lady of the Rivers, of the blackberries, etcetera. In Mary, in the many symbols and names connected with her, the sacramentality of creation is succinctly confirmed and celebrated. Not for nothing did countless devotional Marian places originate at such pre-Christian holy places as sources, clearings in forests or crossroads. Both the meaning of the body and the materiality of ‘divine presence’, and the age-old principle of sacramentality, give important insights into the meaning of the divine. And again, these are important dimensions as well as signs in the Western culture in which both the ‘God’s Word’ and the ‘absence of the divine’ are particularly dominant.

Relationality and the Desire for Healing/Longing for Wholeness

I referred earlier to the unconditional love, comfort and mercy of Mary. Anyone, in any condition, may come to her. The fact that people do indeed turn to Mary with all kinds of physical and mental needs, reveals, in my opinion, a dimension of spirituality and of human life which Western people often prefer to forget: their innate vulnerability and mortality. Do people not precisely bring their worries and questions regarding their own or someone else’s vulnerability—physical, mental or social and economical—and mortality to Mary? And is not support sought and often, even though temporarily, found here? Hence vulnerability and mortality are not eliminated: most people do not return healed from Lourdes or any other place, but they often feel better (Post et al., 1998;
Notermans, 2008). Does this mean that in these Marian devotions and spirituality the same insight emerges that is present in many religious traditions but is rendered in a specific way in each tradition? That is—again in Christian terms—vulnerability and mortality are an inescapable part of life and do not fall outside God’s grace. In the Christian tradition a concept such as incarnation expresses this insight. At the same time it can be established that in the philosophical, theological and cultural tradition of the West, mechanisms can be discerned by which this fundamental vulnerability and mortality is denied, but often at a price (de Haardt, 2000). Marian devotions unmask this hubris: in religious and in socio-political respects the desire for invulnerability as an illusion is exposed.

That does not alter the fact that the desire for healing and wholeness—a desire that is at least just the same and just as intensely present in Marian devotions—can be sincere and authentic. This desire, therefore, is not a denial of vulnerability and mortality; rather a desire for the elimination and liberation of suffering and pain. Here too it concerns a common desire for which each religious tradition and every culture found their own words, images and forms. Out of pain and suffering and out of the desire to ease that pain people turn to Mary, where the sincerity of this desire is honoured, irrespective of the nature of the suffering. Here lie, I think, in principle many possibilities, especially as far as the social transforming power of religion and of Marian devotions is concerned: an appeal to contribute to the elimination or bearing of suffering.

Thus, a Marian spirituality, both in the movement of people towards Mary and the movement of Marian presence towards people, can be characterized as a movement directed towards healing and wholeness. This has been considered a trait of the religious imagination of women (Bednarowski, 1999), which I, however, wish to broaden to dimensions of the divine represented in and through Mary: focused on healing or with healing qualities.

In conclusion, two questions and a remark: Are these elements of a Marian spirituality and Mariology which I submit here in a quite provisional way, specifically tied to Mary? It seems to me that this is finally and principally not the case. I am however of the opinion that in the past and the present the figure of Mary, more than other persons, concepts, images and practices in the Christian tradition, is apparently capable of representing these dimensions of the divine. And this may also apply to female figures in other religious traditions. We can no longer deny the patriarchalization of the (Christian) culture and the same applies to traces of contradiction that resonate more or less strongly in this culture. I think that it is not coincidental that women in general had a heightened sensibility for such a kind of spirituality and to some extent possibly still have. I also think, though, that in Western European culture, which is gradually becoming less explicitly patriarchal, the religiosity of men is sensitized in that direction as well.

Of course, the question remains whether the type of Marian spirituality and Mariology which I submit here in a quite provisional way, is sufficiently capable of offering ‘something’ to present-day Western women and men, and whether it is sufficiently critical and self-confident. Or are these rather highly symbolic meanings that are unavoidablely attached to Mary to be considered antiquated in this post-modern era, as Elizabeth Johnson argues? In view of the growing interest in and need for all sorts of spirituality I
am not so sure: quite the contrary. Whether or not Mary has something to offer in this regard remains partly an open question. Precisely on the level of devotions and spirituality I see, in principle, many—although risky—possibilities. In the whole range of present-day rituals and devotions Mary ‘scores’ in any case very high. Apparently people find a glimpse of ‘the holy’ near Mary (Erinkveld, 2006), whether during lighting candles or visiting ‘Mary-places’. Feminist theology could, in my opinion, develop more of an eye for this type of sensibility. I do not expect, however, that all of this will lead to a transformation in the official theological and ecclesiastical Mariology. Neither will the ambiguity, the complexity, the struggle and the power, surrounding Mary and Marian devotions, be abolished or forgotten. Critical reflection, discussion and alertness are required, also and especially with regard to the devotional Marian practices. In many respects, Mary remains—if she is a source of inspiration at all—in many ways extremely paradoxical and in that sense dangerous.

References


