

New directions in Mariology within theology: Mary, Mother of God, Theotokos, type of the Church, illuminator of the fullness of Christian faith and theology

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Abstract

In the extraordinary historical event of the incarnation of God's Word, Mary plays a unique role for humanity in its relationship with God and, this role affects every aspect of Christian faith and theology. To fully express this role, a new phase of Marian research that builds upon the Church's tradition is proposed. The emphasis of this new phase would be to explore the role, meaning and the full implications and potential of Mary within the central tenets of Christian faith and theology with the purpose of deepening the Church's comprehension of Christianity itself and not simply of Mary.

Keywords

Mary, Church, Spirit, Trinity, tradition, grace, person

Introduction

The Church today continues to strive to comprehend what Mary means for the fullness of Christian faith and theology. It equally strives to comprehend God's self-Revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit: what it means for God and what it means for humanity. In that ongoing struggle to deepen the Church's comprehension of God's self-revelation, Mary has played an essential role, even if this has

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generally been implicit rather than explicit. God self-revealed as Father, Son and Spirit through Mary, yes. Christianity rests on Mary's response to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the second person of the Trinity took flesh from Mary so that Jesus is both fully, and truly, human and divine. Theology requires Mariology, and Mariology acts as an illuminator to the fullness of Christianity. To address the questions of theology today, Mary must be at the table, so to speak. But this too means that Mariology must continue to deepen its own self-understanding and work to disallow the silo-ization of theology, and Mariology, such that each aspect is not developed as a specialized field only vaguely connected to the other areas. Mariology, in fact, is the point of integration of Christian faith and theology, just as she, in her response to God, was at the commencement of that reality. A new, sixth, phase of thought and reflection on Mariology, which builds upon and refines the previous five phases, is now required to support continued deepening of the Church's comprehension of the God of Jesus Christ.

Five phases of Mariological thought and reflection

Before exploring the proposed sixth phase let us first look at the five prior phases and how each shapes the issues that present themselves now. The Mariological journey, as it can be called, is the Church's search for the theological substance of Mary's role in Christian faith and theology and what that means for Christianity in general. This is something very different to exploring the popular form of piety and devotion at a given time or how that popular piety and devotion is reacted to, as well as, reacted against. Rather, it is the attempt by the Church to locate Mary, fully and only human, in relations to and within the great doctrines of the Church: the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, soteriology and eschatology.

The first phase in the Church's thought on Mary is the Gospel view of Mary and the Church as one figure that is seen in Luke's infancy narratives and John's Gospel reference to the mother of Jesus as 'woman'.¹ Typology is critical to this endeavour where Mary, like Jesus, is seen to be a type prefigured in Scripture, and herself as prefiguring the Church; the new covenant as fulfilment of the Old is an essential element of this interpretation. The second phase is the fathers' development of Christology and ecclesiology where Mary played an important elucidating and clarifying role and, through which Mary is declared Theotokos and described as type of the Church.² The church fathers took over 400 years to express in a coherent, consistent and logical manner the meaning of the apostolic witness and the rule of faith, the one God of the Father, Son and Spirit, and the Son as fully human and fully divine. At that critical formative time of developing Christian self-understanding the comprehension of Mary's role was not to the forefront of theological considerations, even if Mary's presence was critical as exemplified by Paul's insistence to one community that Jesus was 'born of woman' (Gal. 4.4). In the first two phases the women, and the men, who prefigure Mary in the

Old Testament can be identified as a distinct and important element of Christianity's understanding of Mary. Mary, like Jesus, is prepared for through a genealogy of faith both of Israelites and gentiles. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus contains five women and is completed in Mary. The movement of salvation history, from creation and the fall – humanity's alienation from God and itself – God's call to Abraham, the father in faith, reaching its apex in Mary's response to God's call to her, means that a consideration of Mary is a consideration of those in faith who prefigure her, and, as just noted, a consideration of that which she prefigured: the Church, the body of Christ.

The third phase is seen clearly in St Bernard of Clairvaux's writings on Mary, which considered Mary as a stand-alone person distinct from the Church, facilitating the development of Marian piety,³ culminating in the dogmas of the immaculate conception (1854) and bodily assumption (1950). This development of a stand-alone Marian piety reflected in the Hail Mary (eleventh century) and *Salve Regina* (twelfth century) occurred as Christianity became the settled and established religion of Europe; perhaps the assuredness of the Church in the Middle Ages allowed for the emphasis to pass to Mary. This phase, however, also saw a divergence in emphasis in the Western Church following the Reformation where in the Lutheran tradition Mary's role significantly diminished. This divergence arises, Karl Rahner argued, from the fact that Protestantism knows a theology of the cross, but not of glory, which would encompass and underline Mary.⁴ The Enlightenment era constitutes the fourth phase. The dominant role played by the historical-critical method within biblical interpretation, and theology in general, during this period created a hostile environment for thought on Mary. The separation of the Mary, as with the Jesus, of history and faith reflects the dominance of the positivistic science and mathematical formalism of the Enlightenment era. The connections or relationships of Scripture are discarded and, instead, each aspect is atomized and then reconstructed again into a version acceptable to the Enlightenment worldview. In its strictly scientific manifestation, such a worldview cannot even consider a beyond or before the material world, a transcendence, and never seeks to search for the truth of a thing, its 'in-itself',⁵ content instead with models and process maps as an explanation of the material world. As this worldview became the 'reasonable' worldview, faith and the idea of God breaking into and acting in history became to be viewed as 'pre-critical', naïve, particularly negatively impacting on Mary – Jesus, in this scenario, can remain a wise man, but Mary no longer makes sense to the narrative.

The fifth phase, the modern period, consists of three aspects. The first relates to Vatican II's Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964).⁶ John XXIII's desire for a refined, scriptural Mariology to renew Catholic Mariology is the basis of chapter eight of *Lumen Gentium*. Important rediscoveries of patristic thought on Mary and her role in the development of Christology and ecclesiology occurred in the second half of the twentieth century⁷ and are reflected in *Lumen Gentium*'s description of Mary as type of the Church: Mary is indivisibly linked with the Church and each is understood through the other. This rediscovery rebalanced

thought on Mary so that she is not a stand-alone figure floating high above us but stands with the Church. The second aspect is the ecumenical dialogue and movements in relation to Mary over the last 50 years reflecting the desire to seek common ground on Mary among the Christian denominations. The proceedings of the conferences of the Ecumenical Society for the Blessed Virgin Mary, founded in 1967, provide an invaluable source of ecumenical research and dialogue on Mary.⁸ The third aspect is feminist theology, which is ambiguous towards Mary, seeing her as a negative for the concrete situation of women in Christian society. And although a comparison with other non-monotheistic cultures such as China and Japan indicate that the negative experience of women in society is not dependent on the Judeo-Christian tradition, feminist theology's initial findings and arguments should be critique and refined so that the valuable insights can be included in the next phase of Marian thought.

Certainly, the preceding high-level overview is Catholic-centric, but nonetheless it encompasses the Marian themes influencing all denominations, as well as issues of ecumenical concern, and thereby can provide a shared basis of understanding and act as a foundation for the proposed sixth phase of Marian thought. What these five phases of thought tell us is that important aspects of Mariology remain detached discrete elements, to a certain extent unconnected from each other. A defensiveness against Mary, whose misguided aim is to protect Jesus or to guard against a Marian Arianism, remains a significant problem, as does the dominance of the historical-critical view of Mary, which further compounds the atomization of Mary and Mariology. Equally, but more pressingly, Mariology is not a priority for theology today, with its very specific concerns, even though Mary provides the template for each Christian to follow in her positive response to God's call and in her life, holding all these things in her heart and pondering them (Luke 2.19). From this admittedly cursory overview, two specific, but fundamental, gaps in Mariology in theology present themselves: first, a lack of integration and synthesis of Mariology within and in relation to itself – a lack of inner connectivity; second, that lack of inner connectivity reflects the lack of connectivity and integration of Mariology within theology.

Mary: Theokotos and type of the Church

To attempt a response to the issues outlined above, the emphasis of the proposed sixth phase of thought should be on the *synthesis and integration* of the Trinitarian and Christological realities of Mary as Mother of God, Theotokos, and Mary as type of the Church within Mariology *and* within the entirety of theology. The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to articulate the meaning of God's self-revelation in Scripture – to express the meaning of the one God witnessed to in the New Testament: Father, Son and Spirit. Christology attempts to comprehend Jesus of Nazareth the Christ, fully human and fully divine, for God and humanity. Mariology is, in large measure, an attempt to understand the incarnation, its meaning and implications for Jesus, Mary and the Church. Mariology is therefore

inextricably linked not just to ecclesiology but to the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology, and through Christ to soteriology and eschatology. The reality of Mary as Theotokos and as type of the Church is the point where renewed theological reflection on Mary *in* Christianity should proceed. The attempts of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary to strive for a confluence and convergence of thought on Mary is what I think should be pursued through this new phase of thought. In this endeavour, theology should in particular draw and build upon the concrete output of ecumenical research and dialogue on Mary and Mariology, as seen in the joint statements on Mary by the different churches and traditions in recent decades such as the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission’s (ARCIC) statement on Mary, ‘Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ’. The end point desired is the truth of Mary in the truth of Christian faith in which theological thought remains anchored in tradition while, guided by the Holy Spirit, continually develops and is refined to deepen the Church’s comprehension of God’s self-revelation.

Three themes suggest themselves as a basis for the proposed exploration of a synthesis and integration of Mary within Mariology and within theology: Mary, Mother of God, Theotokos, as a Trinitarian reality; Mary, type of the Church, as a Christological reality; Mary in faith and devotion. The first theme, Mary, Mother of God, Theotokos, as a Trinitarian reality, allows for further consideration of the fullness of Mary’s relationship with the Triune God. Falling within this theme, three areas are ripe for consideration. Firstly, four of the titles applied to Mary – Virgin, Mother, Daughter, Bride – appear paradoxical and contradictory descriptions of the Theotokos. But what is revealed through the application of these titles to Mary and the relationships they underlie? Do they express Mary’s relationship to and with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Secondly, God’s self-revelation as Father, Son and Spirit occurred at the point of the Son becoming fully human all the while remaining fully divine. This entry into history is not *an act of God* but an act of God’s *seeking a human response*: What do the three stages of the Word becoming flesh – the Annunciation, Mary’s Yes in response to God’s call to her and the resulting incarnation through the Holy Spirit by the power of the Most High (Luke 1.35) – express about the Triune God’s relationship with humanity and each human being? Thirdly, is pre-Vatican II Catholic Mariology, with its high piety, so to speak, a Trinitarian Mariology? Are its roots in the declaration of Mary as Theotokos, Mother of God, and the theology of glory, whose implications have yet to be refined through an appropriate critique? Furthermore, is this a source of the Catholic Church’s dogmas of Mary’s immaculate conception and bodily assumption?

The second theme, Mary, type of the Church, as a Christological reality, speaks to the interlinking of the Church and Mary through Christ: the incarnation of the Son through Mary and the Church as the body of Christ. This theme illustrates a relationship not just of Mary and Christ, nor of the Church and Christ, but of the relationship among Christ, Mary and the Church as one unit not three separate units where the divine and the human connect in a special way. This second theme

is really a subsection of the first, Mary as a Trinitarian reality. And at a closer look we also perceive the Spirit as an active actor at each significant moment; so consideration of Mary as type of the Church cannot be limited to the Christological aspect of Mary as type of the Church – the body of Christ – but includes also a consideration of Mary ‘full of grace’. The relationship and interconnection between Mary, and with her Christ and the Church, and the Holy Spirit, particularly at the incarnation, the descent of the Holy Spirit and in the ongoing life of the Church is central to the next phase of development of Mariology in theology. Critical to such consideration would be an exploration of Mary as a manifestation of Christian anthropology, where the issue of nature, grace and freedom is critical, and of the notion of person in humanity.⁹

The third theme, Mary in faith and devotion: Mary is the mother of faith just as Abraham is father of the faith, so we should ask: What does Mary’s faith reveal about faith? Consideration of faith through Mary should include a consideration of *Lumen Fidei* (2013), which refers to faith knowledge arising from truth and love. Finally, considering the output of the above themes and questions, a consideration of appropriate Marian spirituality, devotion and liturgical celebration is timely. Due to the dislocation resulting from the Marian controversies of Vatican II *Mariae Cultus* (1974) was required to clarify appropriate devotion to Mary in contrast to the worship given to Jesus Christ. Theology particularly in light of ecumenical dialogue should once again take up the task of clarifying for the present day the relevance and importance of traditional expressions of Marian piety as well as new initiatives in Marian piety. A good example of such new initiatives is Mary Ford Grabowsky’s, *The Way of Mary*,¹⁰ which is a 14-step meditation on Mary’s life.

Mary: Illuminator of the fullness of Christian faith and theology

Much of the Church’s effort to comprehend Mary in recent times has been to cut back the excess growth and to return, firstly, to a scriptural Mary, and, secondly, to Mary as understood in tradition. The driver has been ecumenical concern for sound theology to underpin the Church’s piety and faith. The branch has now been pruned and is ready to bear new fruit. Importantly, the sixth phase of Marian thought should look not primarily at Mary, but rather at Mary in relation to the whole of Christianity. The meaning for God’s work of salvation of Mary should be the primary concern of Marian reflection so that Mariology slots into, so to speak, the core of theology and thereby illuminates every aspect, and in that way illuminates the fullness, of Christian faith and theology. The outline suggested above for phase six of the Church’s thought on Mary provides ideas on the direction it should take. The outline is far from exhaustive and is offered in the hope of clarifying responses which will refine and develop this outline.

The difficult task ahead is to articulate and express a response to the issues identified. This may necessitate new terms and grammar to express what has yet to be articulated about Mary in Christian faith and theology. Connecting the grammar of the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology with the grammar of Mariology can be the process to extend, renew and rejuvenate the grammar of each so as to explore the Christian mystery while remaining anchored in the pre-existing articulation of Christian faith and theology. Finding new or appropriating old terms and grammar from within the tradition of the Church to express what is discovered or uncovered through the connections made by the research may be the greatest challenge for the proposed sixth phase.

The aim of the sixth phase is not to produce a theology of Mary: Mary never stands for or in herself but only in relation to her Son, Jesus the Christ, and Jesus the Christ never stands in and for himself but only relation with the Father and Spirit and his bride, the Church. It is the Trinitarian, Christological, ecclesiological, soteriological and eschatological aspects of Mary that the sixth phase is called to synthesis into a coherent whole and integration into theological consideration. The synthesis and integration needed is one that allows Mary to be where and what she truly is in Christian mystery no matter how uncomfortable that makes for a clean delineation of Mary in Christian thought. Living within the tension of a Mary resting in the mysteries of Christian faith, while comprehending what that truly means, is our challenge and our hope.

Notes

1. See both Max Thurian, *Mary, Mother of the Lord, Figure of the Church*, trans. Neville B. Cryer (London: Faith Press, 1963); and Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, trans. J. M. McDermott. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), originally published in German in 1977. Thurian and Ratzinger provide valuable synthesis and interpretation of the pre- and post-Vatican II research on Mariology. In that, both draw significantly on René Laurentin.
2. Hugo Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough (Bethesda: Zaccheus Press, 2004), originally published in German in 1951; and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th edition (London: A. & C. Black, 1977).
3. See, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux, *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. M. B. Said (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1993).
4. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1: *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961 (1954)), pp. 226–7.
5. I discuss this topic in my articles ‘The Church in Dialogue with New Scientific Atheism’, *The Way*, 53, no. 1 (January 2014), pp. 7–22; ‘Renewing Intellectual Discourse by Means of a New Philosophy of Knowledge for Non-Natural Sciences’, *Religion & Education*, 42, no. 1 (2015), pp. 2–16; and ‘The Role of the Judeo-Christian Tradition in the Development and Continuing Evolution of the Western Synthesis’, *Telos*, 168 (Fall 2014), pp. 132–44. ‘The Incalculability of Freedom: A Consideration of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of Enlightenment in relation to Ratzinger’s Notion of Freedom as the Fundamental Structure of the World’, 3rd Ratzinger Symposium, 20 June 2015, Maynooth.

6. *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 8, in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican Council II Constitutions Decrees Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996).
7. Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI stated that Hugo Rahner's, Alois Muller's, Karl Delahaye's, René Laurentin's and Otto Semmelroth's, among others, rediscovery 'of the inter-changeability between Mary and the Church, the personification of the Church in Mary and the universal dimension acquired by Mary in the Church, is one of the most important theological rediscoveries of the twentieth century'; Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Henry Taylor. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), p. 353.
8. See, for example, Alberic Stacpoole (ed.), *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982); William McLoughlin and Jill Pinnock (eds), *Mary for Earth and Heaven: Essays on Mary and Ecumenism* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2007) and *Mary for Time and Eternity: Essays on Mary and Ecumenism* (Leominster: Gracewing 2007).
9. I make an initial exploration of this theme in my book *Innovation within Tradition: Joseph Ratzinger and Reading of the Women of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).
10. Mary Ford Grabowsky, *The Way of Mary: Following Her Footsteps Toward God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007).

Author Biography

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