

MOTHER IN MONOTHEISM: A CYCLE OF MARIAN CHAPLETS

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chaplet: a wreath for the head, usually a garland of flowers or leaves, also of gold, precious stones...a string of beads or necklace used for counting prayers, or the prayers themselves...a kind of circular gridiron

The catholic church of childhood never failed to arouse my curiosity. Our Lady of the Lake cathedral, fronted by a solitary marble statue of Mary, afforded a majestic if cryptic presence abreast of A Avenue, one which departed in a most welcome way from the pale, marginal mother of my new testament and from the bare, dead crosses ringing my Lutheran iconographical horizons. Eventually I became an Italian resident and journeyed extensively in Greece, captivated by other Marian images and sacred landscapes, shrines and feast days, and by the devotions, processions, and pilgrimages made in her name. Aside from my hometown statue and a number of books, reams of paper-thin character sketches and infrequent illustrations "revealing" the goddesses of antiquity, this was my first encounter with a collectively celebrated sacred female. My initial level of Marian engagement took place in the field, so to speak, where I witnessed the lively and heartfelt rites of devotees in urban quarters and villages, seemingly drawn from lavish and amiable streamings of human desires. Every urban quarter or village boasted a great Madonna lodged in a church or museum; I developed quite a nose for these miracle-working pockets of female sacred imagery. Inquiry as to the origin and role in the human settlement of any of these potent dominae, whether her home be a town like Siena, eternal Rome, or a nation like Poland, usually made a beeline for the popular history of the place. Moreover, I felt these treasured icons *floating* on the outskirts of biblical and apocryphal texts, the primary sources of legitimate Marian piety, within which an extremely limited number of versicles precisely delineate moments of the Marian life cycle. Inscriptions of annunciation, visitation, nativity, dormition, and assumption, for example, have served as literal points of departure for

abundant genres of Marian imagery. Yet the great Madonnas gazing *into* the unknown, into one's own eyes, in my travels the most widespread Marian visions of all and far more numerous than pictures of christic death, this genre finds no secure footing in classical Christian monotheistic discourse. Ecclesiastical writings, especially those of the Roman ecclesia, have made an elaborate home for Mother Mary, and thus a variety of papal, monastic, and priestly deployments of Marianism caught my attention as well, but sadly, their efforts invariably offended or horrified me. Poor Mary was made to humiliate ordinary women for their endeavors to enjoy non-marital sexuality and non-procreative marital life, for instance, and a Greek priest even confided to me that the monks on Mt. Athos had recently killed a German girl who dared to trespass on Mary's sacred peninsula, land of the very most exquisite and miraculous Marian *icons*, but off limits to all female creatures for the past thousand years. The fact that Christian officialdom routinely entrusted the *political* destiny of the global community unto Marian rulership failed to console me. All in all, in due time a tidy antinomy constellated the balance of my Marian impressions, in which the true beliefs of the people and the open wordlessness of common Marian space contraposed fishy magisterial discourses and their promulgators.

Nevertheless, I sensed all the while that this primitive formulation was not only sociologically untenable, since I had not inquired as to the actual thoughts of individual devotees, which may well have conformed to those of the religious leaders, but an intellectually inadequate judgment as well. The riddle of Marian cosmology is far richer and problematical than the set of polarities suggested by my travels due to a largely invisible backdrop constructed by two historical contexts, the religious form of monotheism and the social form of patriarchy. Mary appears powerfully and irrepressibly in Christianity, amid its pre-reformation, post-reformation catholic, and eastern orthodox orchestrations; moreover, among the historic trinity of major monotheistic systems, which include Judaism and Islam, no other sacred female or ascribed feminine essence has assumed anything remotely comparable to her centrality within orthodox discourse, religious art and literature, and

collective devotional life. Therefore, she deserves to be analyzed as the female and mother permitted within monotheistic religion. Furthermore, and far more inscrutably, each and every Marian aspect has come to life within a patriarchal social context, which I will briefly define as a cultural adaptation to the sexually differentiated processes of human reproduction in which the female as biological mother is constrained to the immediate grounds and consequences of her part in reproduction, that is, to sexual, domestic, procreative, and care taking services, and largely confined in these unremunerated or indirectly remunerated labors to households in which the male head, should he be present, is invested with legal, political, and economic authority.ⁱ Each and every Marian discussion implicitly takes a stand on this matter, in my opinion, and it is expressed in assumptions and value judgments about femininity and maternity, that is, about the religious vocabulary of value and power corresponding to female and maternal body. These assumptions and values may speak for the author's thoughtful acquaintance with the heuristic category of patriarchy and an intimate awareness of patriarchal social coordinates as sources of affliction. Usually, however, Marian texts do nothing of the kind, revealing a singular disregard for the lives of actual females and mothers and the many analyses of force over these lives.

As I consulted books and articles prior to writing this paper, I discovered that most sources converse on behalf of monotheistic orthodoxy, the common people, or feminists on the recoil against orthodox constructions of Mary. I began with a brief survey of the abundant corpus of Mariological writs composed by Christian fathers over the past eighteen hundred years, collected and commented upon by Hilda Graef and Giovanni Miegge; I found sketches, embellishments, and cosmic adornments of Mary's theological body and identity, a fabulous galaxy of attributes and acts, a perfect and reified divine item. My own appreciation of this creature can only be highly qualified, since orthodox discussions are based upon assumptions, and values ignorant, neglectful, or dismissive of any historical evidence, personal testimony, or heuristic category which elucidates male hegemony within patriarchal order and monotheistic systematics. That is, since monotheistic discourse is the sacred

inscription of patriarchal order, elucidation of sexual domination undercuts the moral basis of male hegemony in invisible and visible realms, and reduces the odds on the cultural survival of these mutually reinforcing cosmologies. It should come as no surprise, then, that orthodox mariological doctrine almost universally trains the devotee to the code of inalienable disparities between the sacred female and mother, and all living females and mothers. These people have inherited the nature and social niche of another scriptural female, and must therefore bear up unrebliously under Eve's twin punishments: a torturous role in human reproductive process, and sexual domination by the male reproductive partner.ⁱⁱ Needless to say, the sacred female and mother, the one allowed into the monotheistic ranks, has suffered a number of bizarre physiological fates beneath her gilded robes.

A growing number of sources discuss the phenomenology of Marian popular piety, or the sociology of mother worship in Italian, French, Spanish, Polish, Russian, Greek, American, and other national communities, most notably the anthology edited by James Preston. These texts provide an intriguing wealth of detail about other peoples' ritual moments and movements, occasionally couched in engaging conceptual schemes, but awareness of social context never extends too far into the empirical cultural realities of females and mothers, and I have never come across a treatment which integrates the fact of male societal dominance to my own satisfaction. Speculation tends to turn toward explanations of the very existence of Marian phenomena, such as biopsychological infantilism, collective psyches and their compensations, an entire civilization of weak fathers, poverty, and of course, the menacing Christian faith, adopted in lieu of a pantheon of murdered goddesses due to a canny dangling of the "marionette." It is interesting that when religious scholars scrutinize the event of profound attention awarded to a divine male or father, they may well elaborate the meaning of the figure in religious terms, but do not evidence an overriding concern to explain the very existence of the deity. This curious impulse, basically reserved for the divine female and mother in monotheism, seems to be an index of the profound alienation from the very idea of ultimate female being, a prejudice

restricted to monotheistic patriarchal cultures. At any rate, articles on the sociology of mother worship also abound with more subtle forms of misogyny. James Preston, for example, opines that only simplistic or facile minds could ever judge that exclusively male deity symbolism contributes to female exclusion from social authority (1982:338). Other male writers give me the impression of thinkers who are working out a thickly conflicted relation to human female and maternal presence, a job of honor, but a task unmet by the indirect tone and densely veiled intent of their thoughts. Adopting the style of sociological literature does not require that one confront one's own religious experience, and the unexamined motivations one has for approaching any given topic. I had every intention of generating a discourse for my own religious perceptions, but academic studies of Marian worship proved to be almost as unhelpful as orthodox mariological doctrine.

During the past decade the feminist reaction against Mary has been a spirited and revelatory one, and by this point, general disgust has circulated broadly. Mary Daly, Marina Warner, and Rosemary Ruether all wrote important books over ten years ago which were creative points of departure for that time, and a host of articles by others have followed. Although I took an inestimable comfort in finding something woman-identified among the hundreds of entries in my Marian computer search, the gist of work to date sets Mary at a distance, then proceeds to mourn her, proclaim her death, pronounce her an anachronism, or to identify one thing about her that is acceptable and to agree that she is still a critical figure of feminist religious inquiry. Yet untold numbers of females and mothers in history, of which I am one, have found something compelling in this divine personage, even though her orthodox construction may be a pathetic epiphenomenon of a Christian systematic theology irremediably modeled according to the rhythms and alienations of male libidinal economy, an economy at once heterosexual and homosexual, and tormented by the facts of female participation in human reproductive process. That is, the orthodox inscription itself provides the opportunity for an extended theological encounter with the aforementioned gestalt of (Christian) monotheism, including its allocation of female and mother divinity; the disruptive

fact of profound devotion to female and mother deity in monotheism has not been adequately explored; and female participation in the Marian figure, as an ongoing historical phenomenon, could be a fruitful focus of inquiry.

My own approach to the mother in monotheism is structured broadly, because her existence leads to the question of what the historical epoch characterized by monotheistic allegiances managed to do with the female and the mother, in its sacred and secular orders. I cannot provide a totality of responses, or any final answers to this leading question. My goal is to begin the labor of responding, keeping in mind that most of the historical points of friction and resonance between actual females and mothers and the most widely revered sacred female and mother of any monotheistic system are still to be investigated and shared in offerings of disciplined imagination, religious creativity on the cosmic offensive. For if we harbor desire and hope for a compact between the forms and figures of religious orthodoxy, and earthly females and mothers, a covenant finally true to the contours of our lives and imaginations, we ourselves must dare to undertake the risk and responsibility for verbal and visual evolutions of orthodox divine female and maternal identity.

Journeys often brought me to a darkened cathedral, cavernous in its disuse, such as this one in Assisi: Santa Maria degli Angeli, the first center of the Franciscan order, where Francis died and where Clare was consecrated. I would come upon her corner, in this case the freestanding oratory of the annunciation founded in 352 by Jerusalem hermits, and tread beside the heart of the place, blazing with candles and lights, flowers and jewels, attended by rows of male and female faithful. In these open and wordless Marian spaces, it seems that sacred images free their viewers to think and feel for themselves in peace. As 'Margaret Miles has written, "the image is valued because of its power to move, to focus the senses and the mind, and to offer a mnemonic aid that gathers the worshipper's strongest and most fundamental ideas, emotions, and memories in an enriched present." (1985:9) I often asked myself what Christian worshippers, especially females and mothers, have seen in their beloved and innumerable Marian images, and what I was seeing as well; that is, which

fundamentals of being were moved, focused, and gathered so beautifully by the various themes, be they scriptural, apocryphal, or renegade, of the Marian cycle.

In this series of chaplets, submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree program in systematic theology, I will be materializing a range of perceptions pinioned to these questions. From the outset, systematic voids abound, truly fabulous vacancies of discernment. Sororal responses to visual and verbal forms of Marian piety, forms almost entirely created and paid for by males, are largely matters of speculation. Accessible thoughts of literate females, those writing out of Christian faith commitments, cannot hold my attention unless they demonstrate allegiances to earthly females and mothers at least as profound as those pledged to received religious tradition, and these texts surface only in the course of intensive historical research. Feminist writings of my acquaintance, other than those of Julia Kristeva and Margaret Miles, fall short of uncoiling unexpectedly into an unfathomed and unfinished physical and metaphysical spectrum of Marian time. With respect to the backboards of monotheism and patriarchy, I can marshal neither a theological vocabulary with which to categorize and discuss religious totalities in female and maternal terms, other than one which has countenanced and enforced sexual domination of earthly females and mothers, nor a received canon of historical texts attuned to the heuristic category of patriarchy.

My plan is to begin each chaplet with a favorite Marian image as a method of provoking movement, focus and synthesis, and as a small tribute to the devotion of the unlettered, the vast majority in monotheistic history. The text will integrate facets of scriptural, apocryphal, and mariological understanding with meditations on sororal responses to the many faces of Mary, especially my own received messages as a female in patriarchy, as a teacher of women's studies and religion in a monotheistic culture, and as a daughter and potential mother.ⁱⁱⁱ This series of chaplets is a modest effort to follow through with this vast program, but my thoughts will rise and fall through these densities of inquiry and appreciation, and in the future I will make good on the promise of the topic.

By means of an experimental structure, I invite readers to honor their own received messages, and thus to converse in keeping with the ineffable vigor of Marian religious event, the exact energy of its religious meaning, rather than to tender explanations larded with quotes from sacred texts or theorems from social psychology. Unfortunately, this great disservice to deity is perfectly served by the traditional format of discursive writing, in which a thesis or controlling idea must explain something by uniting a mass of facts and other peoples' opinions so arranged as to answer a question. In view of my own theological tasks, I have deliberately avoided this style.

Should my decision to inquire as to the nature of that which has been seen, aiming to understand what may have been going on and may continue to take place, particularly in my own consciousness and conscience, while allowing the images to speak for the past and the present, be considered academically suspect or intellectually selfish, our cultural predicament may be misread in the process. For such a methodological tack is actually supremely responsible to the historical and theological moment. I intend to modestly correct the silence and imbalance of the Marian past, providing a sororal response to her realm in solidarity with earthly females and mothers, and to aspire to a politically astute cosmology of value and power for the female and maternal body, that is, a theological vocabulary cognizant of monotheism and patriarchy with which to categorize and discuss religious totalities in female and maternal terms, so as to move into a futurity of enhanced human integrality.

For I have come of age beneath a cloud of fresh and immature faces on the scenes of patriarchal civilization, a host of futures almost entirely matters of vulnerable potential. Woman-identified verbal and visual discourses on females, female deity, the female role in reproductive process as it is constructed biologically and socially, the male and female experience of being mothered, the historically neglected subjectivity of the mother, and mother deity have become fundamentals of my own being, the basis for my own relation to female and maternal presence and my own religious activity. My culture has taught me that sexual, social, and religious relations and realities are, at least for the moment, mutually

reciprocal and evolutionary, and that the divine person and parent of my own body is living in the wings. I hope that the following efforts might partake a bit of the spirit of the annunciation, one of giving a word of a being yet to be.

Our Lady's nativity originates her social being, and thus her entry into patriarchy, compressed in the household within which she will sleep. Birth also initiates her autonomous lifespan within monotheism, condensed in the abstract community into which she will die. A multitude of ways to work from the Maestro's image is to present themselves as a result, small auspicious portals of Marian inquiry.

Chances are that you have never heard the story of her nativity. In the beginning, and through prayer, an unchilded Ann conceived within her breast while an angel announced the miracle. Ann then declared that regardless of its sex, the child to come would be dedicated to and live always in the service of God. Seven months later, discovering that she had borne a daughter, the mother exclaimed that her own soul on that day had been glorified, and then chanted that God had banished the scorn of her enemies and at last granted her a fruit of justice. Unfortunately for earthly females and mothers, this charming story never found its way into the biblical canon, a fate shared by the bulk of verses which laid down the solid body of inspiration for the immense heritage of Marian painting, sculpture, mosaic, stained glass, woodcut, fresco, prayer, poem, doctrine, and song. Scriptural authors, redactors and translators featured Mary most infrequently, and mainly as a participant in the birth and death of her son, or as a mother and wife portrayed in the midst of a troubled rapport with her male offspring or with her husband.^{iv} The mother in monotheism, as an autonomous and numinous divine personage, makes her stand in apocryphal literature and in the fertile imaginations of her devotees and their artistic and literary handiworks.

These introductory matters of fact are points of resonance between earthly females and mothers and their sacred representative. Women have been generally excluded from the eurocentric and near eastern historical canon as a function of the male monopoly on symbolic

knowledge, yet female and maternal metaphysical power perseveres in spite of its peripheral inclusion within orthodox monotheistic discourse.^v

At the same time, privileged females and mothers of the recent eurocentric and near eastern past are disconnecting from the Marian spiritual pattern. Not only the birth of a son, but also the birth and cultural creativity of a daughter can be reflected upon as phenomena of historical and theological centrality and as enactments of direct, even sovereign power; moreover, these reflections may rise from the perspective of the daughter or the mother, as the case may be. While the female may choose or have the option of assuming a critical position in historical and theological revolution by living as a mother and wife, as Mary did, her contribution turns upon a self-identified envisioning of these human ties, rather than upon a close identification with male offspring or a maternal rapport with all male kin.

Margaret Miles judges that religions offer visual and verbal symbols which "must primarily formulate the personal meaning of biological necessity for human beings and secondarily must present an intelligible social structure that organizes all public and private relationships." (1985:82) This series of chaplets will continue to demonstrate that the Marian cycle has offered a number of opportunities along these lines, but I do not wish to restrict this inquiry to my own use of the Marian cycle. For example, one might well ask how the religious image portraying the nativity of Mary could have helped the male and female members of the society in which it was originally created and viewed to manage the needs which Miles has designated.

I suggest that the meaning of nativity of Mary scenes, for those who created as well as those who received and viewed them with care, may be associated with the everyday recurrence of human birth in earthly communities.^{vi} Every image of Mary's nativity with which I am familiar accents a coordinated, businesslike performance of routine tasks: a number of females, each with her job to do, tend to the mother and infant. Each figure reclines, sits, stands, or walks within a well-appointed, even luxurious set of rooms; men and children may linger on the margins of these perfectly organized households.

Depiction of a safe and normal physical birth in the midst of affluence and a flock of solicitous attendants could reflect the best natal experiences of the aristocracy, and compensate for the generous odds on pain and death in childbirth which no pregnant female or other household member could fail to calculate in fear, if not experience in anguish. This image could also compensate for the chaotic conditions, poverty, and disease which attended the probable majority of human births at that time. Customary as this painting appears, within its own cultural context, and for most of its viewers, it may have exerted a gentle, corrective influence upon fearful memories or anticipations, and have done so with a vision of impeccability as exceptional and desirable as a social call from the three magi.

As an aside, the proposal that images of Marian nativity express or envision an ideal birth in human, earthly terms gains support from the fact that that orthodox theological discourse considers Mary's essential quality to be her humanity. Her biblical origins, actions, and status were perfectly ordinary, except for the miraculous conception of her son; her role within the incarnation was one of gifting her son with humanity; her symbolic roles, ultimately, are those as the mother of the earthly church, as the church itself, and as the perfect human participant in her son's life, or supreme earthly Christian. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that viewers of this painting, or of any other Marian image, may not have considered her theologically ascribed qualities to be of paramount importance, or of any significance whatsoever to their meditations.

At any rate, the suggestion could be tested by seeking answers to questions which would place the image within its cultural context. After gaining a sympathetic grasp of demographic and economic evidence and interpretation with reference to major social groups, a running sense of the interplay between productive and reproductive relations, one could investigate the documents available to literate folk of the period which purported to impart a knowledge, whether prescriptive or descriptive, of the nature, body, and social roles of the female and mother. Moreover, medical and legal texts pertaining to the processes of pregnancy and birth, and religious documents, particularly popular devotions and sermons,

that mentioned the birth of Mary or of any other human or earthly creature, would be fascinating and appropriate sources. I would doubtless be attentive to sustained notes and overtones of misogyny, and would neither conceal nor camouflage these attitudes, but carry them into the historical record where they belong. As a corollary, I would inquire about the sexual identities and styles of all authors, and of course, their economic, educational, and familial circumstances, in so far as any of these could be ascertained.

Obviously, this search would surface a veritable motherlode of voices; a complex array of historical details calls for a structure of intelligibility, without which one can neither narrate nor listen to a story. Ideally, the structure is modeled after the details have been surveyed; since gathering evidence is not part of this project, I will merely hint at a tentative structure, one to be tested as data comes to hand. Viewing the Maestro's painting once again, one sees that the labor of various females within the household, an aristocratic one in this case, provides most of the subject matter for the image. Perhaps a knowledge of the terms of female labor and survival within typical households of various social groupings would sink this religious image deeply into its social setting. A later chaplet will be entering the household, so as to better acquaint the reader with the intimate and seemingly unstoppable heart of patriarchal order, its most penetrating and critical pulse.

By following through with this plan, could one conclusively demonstrate that the meaning of nativity of Mary scenes was tied to quotidian episodes of human birth in earthly communities? Probably not, but as Miles reminds us, one must be satisfied with "working hypotheses, suggestions, and the description of a range of probable interpretations rather than 'proof'" (1985,7) when excavating below the charged surfaces of icons, images designed to render, and destined to spur and absorb, the unspeakable forces of human religious imagination.

The Maestro's monument to mother-daughter relations within Christian monotheism prompts a final reflection. In this image, and every other Marian nativity I have seen, the mother reclines at a considerable distance from the daughter, and does not even regard,

much less nourish, cherish, or sustain her; this posture contradicts the jubilant apocryphal story of a mother's exultation. The images may express the standard estrangements of human birth within aristocratic households of the period, such as placing every newborn under the care of a wet nurse for several years. Yet every other apocryphal moment critical to Mary's life, such as her presentation at the temple, dormition, or assumption, has inspired abundant genres of images worked out quite literally, according to the precise specifications of the texts, in soaring suspensions of disbelief. Could this distance between mother and daughter express the unwillingness, so typical of patriarchal culture, to conceive of females as creatures delightedly devoted to their own kind, and as potential mothers of altogether godly daughters?

The calm, luxurious gloss over nativity of Mary scenes tempers the direct experience of the elemental physical danger recurring every day as humans are born in earthly communities. The following succession of visions faces one with this fact, and with the question of what monotheism has made of human reproductive processes, and how it has defined female and male metaphysical power.

The very identity of the laboring woman at the ritual center of Christendom gives rise to uncertainty. Whether she is Eve, Mary, a specific historical woman, or an image of everymother, her real reproductive body quickens the approach to the mother in monotheism, pressing the point that a politically astute cosmology of value and power for the female and maternal body has yet to evolve within eurocentric and near eastern religious thought.

Legend tells that these marble reliefs memorialize an earthly woman who nearly died giving birth, a favorite niece of Pope Urban VIII. In gratitude for her deliverance he commissioned Bernini's splendid baldacchino of 1633, a soaring bronze canopy astride the dais of the high altar, and ensured that her features would rest therein. Scripture implies that this would be tortured Eve, bearing the brunt of the ugly life sentence handed down from Genesis 3:16. Yet Eve is not only the primordial mother, but also the person considered the human source of sin and death for thirty monotheistic centuries, and surely, she would not be

honored with seven seats girding the papal altar. On the other hand, the root of apostolic succession may be carved at eye level into the basal pedestals of the four columned baldacchino; many pilgrims circling beneath the dome of the Basilica of St. Peter have probably glimpsed an unusual Mary and child.

Mary is the mother most widely revered within monotheism, but the ascetic core of her steely fertility, a skeleton pieced together in orthodox mariology, forbids any identification with the laboring woman, one in genuine travail. One aspect of Mary's complex virginity, heatedly debated throughout the fourth century and finally settled by Ambrose and Augustine, hardened into a universally intact hymen, one totally sealed, even after the trauma of birth. Mediaeval poetry and devotional literature enriched this cosmic vaginal inscription, teaching that the holy child slipped out instantly, soundlessly, like water, like light, and above all, without causing any pain. The fact that Marian maternity has no foundation in the sexuality of female reproductive body has troubled most commentators who hold the interests of females to heart, the idea being that teachings such as these could only make ordinary females and mothers feel inferior, or at least utterly dissimilar to the sacred female and mother. Margaret Miles has suggested that this very disjunction may well have helped women to establish their own selfhoods as spiritual entities set free from overwhelming biological contingencies and household cares; the discontinuity thus could facilitate a corrected response to the actual circumstances of female and maternal lives. (1985:88) I would add that defining maternity as a virginal, thus metaphysical motivity may have satisfied widespread female desires as well as the requirements of Christian asceticism, since only the material condition of virginity in an era of dubious access to birth control technologies could definitely obstruct the moments of conception, gestation, labor, and birth, and thus provide a life cycle option to that of continual compulsory pregnancies and their grounds and consequences, that is, sexual, domestic, and care taking services, remunerated indirectly if at all on the household level. Only a Virgin Mother could carry the subversive message that freedom from this social context was an inspired autonomy, one perennially desired and divinely blessed. Yet perhaps these

speculations inflate the historical agency of orthodox doctrines. Chances are that a certain inarticulate impulse of heart and imaginative eye, especially among those well-versed in the daily ways of household kin and common blood, might have been most influential over time. This urge would result from a contemplative use of imagery, and would not concede any strict separations between the sacred female and mother and her anointed child and the great mass of daughters, mothers, and human newcomers. According to this unverifiable but reasonable supposition, even the tranquil and anguished faces of the laboring woman could be considered gems of the Marian legacy.

Generally speaking, though, the real female reproductive body has long been on a collision course with the trajectory of monotheism, with its understanding of human origin, sexuality, and afterlife. This permanent and flagrant state of incompatibility is beautifully illustrated by the laboring woman, for her body cannot be invested with metaphysical value or collective authority in these traditions. Her reproductive body must be distinguished from her maternal functionality at this point, for monotheism has made much of the latter, stating that redemption of female life, should it be post-virginal, is actually earned through a maternal function well within the frontiers of patriarchal dominance, and that this eventuality alone can consubstantiate the sum of junctions between universal law and the post-virginal female body and being. Unless the viewer supplies the female and maternal body of the laboring woman with value and power, however, in friendly keeping with the realms of suggestion, she can be at best an earthly female and mother of genuine flesh, and otherwise a demonic female and mother of diabolical lust and primary guilt.

My own received messages roughcast her as a compelling icon, a collective figure who focuses the eternal return to the question of what patriarchal order has made of the social relations of reproduction and what monotheistic religion has managed to do with the female as mother in its sacred order, in other words, with the disruptive dimensions of maternal physics and metaphysics.

We have seen that the laboring woman is anonymous, or at best of uncertain identity, and that she lives in pain and danger; indeed, one cannot tell if she lived through her ordeal, and thus her survival is always in question. As an icon of secular depth, she is a lone sublimity of the female as mother in earthly patriarchal communities. As relative, servant, slave, or friend, tranquil and agonized by turns, she is the picture of confinement, hidden in a supporting role at the base of political economy. Her homely touch may be held more dearly than anything else in this world, but she has been constricted to the immediate grounds and consequences of the social relations of reproduction, that is, to sexual, reproductive, domestic, care taking, and subsistence functions within the household, the locus of settled life.

More importantly, the laboring woman embodies maternal physics and metaphysics, confirming and affirming the body of the biological mother in its directed and finite suffering as the matrix of potential human continuity. That is, human lives ordered by female biology have labored, like males, for food, shelter, clothing, and so forth, but have also labored comprehensively in human reproductive process, throughout the physiologically grounded moments of menstruation, pregnancy, labor, birth, and lactation, not to mention the patriarchally organized lifetimes of unremunerated or indirectly remunerated household service. Strictly in body, though, females have faced unique likelihoods and actualities of physical expendability as a matter of biological course and necessity, and in so doing have labored on behalf of species continuity. This physiological and social fact, strangely enough, has not been credited with ontological dimensions within eurocentric and near eastern religious thought, although the reflective reference between generational permanence and life everlasting scarcely seems a belabored one. One wonders about the extent to which biological mothers in these religious cultures have perceived, in visceral, affective, and cognitive styles of awareness, their own actual agency of life extension, or manifest immortality. Certainly an abundance of discourse along these lines has not been culturally encouraged. Even today, the job is dangerous, since any rendering of female reproductive

body which purports to work religiously, that is, to enter into the physics and metaphysics of human origin, sexuality, and afterlife, can be culturally deployed to restrict females anew to the grounds and consequences of our role in patriarchally organized human reproductive process, unless the rendering dips consistently into evidence, testimony, and conceptualization of male social hegemony, thus attending to a politically rooted religious body. At any rate, I strongly suspect that Christian mothers have transmuted their primary experiences of actual agency on behalf of life extension into religious identification with the Marian cycle, with its holy child as the human medium of the immortal realm.

Nevertheless, this spiritual alchemy relies on a pointed avoidance of the actual body of the biological mother: instances of religious images sponsored by monotheism which confirm uterine physiology well be restricted to the laboring woman, an almost miraculous case of Christian solidarity with the female reproductive body. Unfortunately, I have noticed that pedestrians at the sacred central crossing usually pass over her expressive face, cramped as it is by heraldic emblazonments of papacy and family, dwarfed by the vast surroundings consecrated to a major chain of male monotheistic command.

Not so with the male body, the one viewed in Christian culture as the essential divine icon of anguish, periodic respite, physical expendability, and eternal if deathly life. The male faces the actuality of physical expendability in christic death, and the male, whether divine father or divine son, apostle or prophet, pope or other priestly worker, may then offer a promise of life extension through sacred and sacrificial body and blood. This promise, however, is conditional, and can be fulfilled only in exchange for faith in the male and his abstract and physiologically uncertain promise. This religious configuration may express and redress a consciousness of human finitude, but my own conscience can only reflect upon the continuity of this system with male reproductive biology, namely the physiological uncertainty of paternity and the peripheral inclusion of male reproductive body in human reproductive process. Moreover, this atonement for male alienation from the physiological moments of menstruation, conception, pregnancy, labor, birth, and lactation cannot honestly be

considered as a politically neutral asymmetry. To my mind, it also memorializes an era of male social alienation from the actual mode of species continuity within the secular household, that is, an epoch predicated upon male foreclosure of the values and skills developed in daily service on behalf of actual human development, a foreclosure of inestimable human and political consequences in eurocentric and near eastern history. All in all, it is as though the male sector of the species has appropriated the power of creating, maintaining, and extending life into the beyond on a religious level of reality, the level socially assuming the status of prime movement and regeneration, and as though the actuality of female reproductive process, if approached at all within the sacred economy of monotheism, can only be handled in an abstract and physiologically uncertain fashion, or, as in Eve's case, simply consigned to the pit.

Passionate efforts are currently being made to redress this imbalance as females and mothers move into theological education and leadership after three thousand years of monotheistic exclusion. Yet I fear that the vocabularies of value and power for female and maternal body evolving on the popular front of feminist religious studies all too frequently succumb to the temptation of idealizing the female and the mother, and of neglecting the context of their tragically circumscribed history within patriarchal social order.

MAGNIFICAT Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, My life-principle increases the lord and my life-spirit rejoiced in God my Savior, for he looked favorably upon the humble state of his female slave. Lo, in time to come, all lines of descent will consider me blessed.

For the Almighty did great things for me, his name is holy, and from generation to generation his mercy is upon those who fear him.

He made might with his arm, he scattered those who show themselves pre-eminent in their hearts' way of thinking. He pulled down rulers from thrones and raised humble ones on high.

He filled the hungry with good things and sent the wealthy away empty-handed.

He assumed the care of his child Israel, recalling mercy to mind, as he promised our fathers forever in favor of Abraham and his seed.

Opening with the mysterious existence of miraculous great Madonnas, this series of chaplets has progressed from an incipient sense of annunciation, to Mary's own nativity, and then to her relation, as the mother in monotheism, with the modalities of human maternity. The Magnificat enshrines the instant when she becomes not a mother, but a thinker, for it is her strongest assertion of value and power for her own female and maternal body, and the most lengthy of her four scriptural occasions to speak. This speechlet, the best biblical show of Marian embodied power and value, proffers a superb exegetical opportunity, since the abiding tendency to idealize the female and the mother, as well as to minimize the grounds of their affliction, lurks not only within the Magnificat, but between the lines of a wide spectrum of discourses within the field of feminist religious studies.

After a heavenly messenger speaks of her impending and divine maternity, Mary travels into the mountainous hinterland and stays for three months with her kinswoman Elizabeth, another person chosen to miraculously bear a prophet. In one of the most vigorous biblical illustrations of female and maternal solidarity, the two greet one another with affection and jubilation, and in this episode of shared and parallel conception, known as the Visitation, Mary proclaims the Magnificat.

I would imagine that devout Christians, initially perceiving their own pregnancies in the midst of a supernatural solitude, then passing the word among their kin, might take great pleasure in this charming scriptural signet of female and maternal sentience. Yet the intimate

decreed of female salvation within patriarchal social order, the successful physical reproduction of heirs, lingers within Mary's words: who does one really hear but the voice of a female slave in an earthly patriarchal community who will be socially redeemed by bearing a male child? Since female functionality within patriarchal order has been prescribed almost exclusively in terms of the duties of a human bodily locus of unremunerated reproductive and care taking utility, I regard the Magnificat in some sense as an epitome of female colonization. In short, although this paean of thanksgiving may well be replete with verses about the inversion of political and economic hierarchies, to the satisfaction of liberation theologians, it declines to meditate upon affliction in terms of female and maternal body in the world. Moreover, the Magnificat does not really disclose a female and maternal body blessed with a troubling originality of consciousness. That is, most of her comments, unlike those of her son, can be traced to previous scriptural passages, and at any rate they do not reveal her own mind as much as the social usefulness of her potentially maternal body.

Contemporary feminists, however, have analyzed the affliction of female and maternal body in the world by way of improving the conditions of existence for these kinds of people; they have also fostered uprisings of unbounded, undivided female subjectivity by way of displacing ancient totalizing systems of consciousness comprised of field over field of sexual and genderic oppositions. These intellectual movements mark the moment when privileged sectors of the female global population begin, as a collective body, to think for themselves, offering unforetold emanations of disciplined imagination and resistance to structural evil. This burgeoning tradition abruptly departs from the eurocentric and near-eastern intellectual heritage, whose historical and religious thinkers have basically ignored or reviled uniquely female and maternal realities and spiritualities, with the written result of primary omission and misogynistic reverie. These inscriptions of silence and hatred have been interrupted, if at all, by designations of female functionality within patriarchal order, or by the marked terms of female and maternal inclusion within monotheistic system. Thankfully, honorable mention was sometimes made of the few females who managed to elude the formidable battery of

restraints on female creativity, and a wealth of scattered evidence as to female historical agency can at last be plundered by sympathetic minds. It seems to me that a sense of the magnitude of the feminist intellectual project, and thus of the intrinsic trickiness of the task proceeding more or less from a cultural void, are two crucial mental reflexes within the fields of feminist religious studies; I would venture, however, that they are infrequently found within the range of our contemporary discourse.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the popular strategy within the contemporary crusade to invest the female body with value and authority which insists upon a predetermined feminine psychology, a mentality of relationality and moral supremacy. The certainty of a transhistorical essence of female goodness, an inalienable, invariant, and even normative code of feminine nurture and interpersonal strength, seems to prevail within the balance of literature dedicated to exploring the interface between women and religion. The social ground of these qualities, namely, the terms of female and maternal survival within patriarchal household configurations, fails to be seriously entertained as the material basis for a spectrum of ascribed feminine behaviors; instead, the article of faith as to female goodness is exhaustively explored, often with considerable ingenuity and delicacy, and always at the expense of examining and facing the heritage of female and maternal affliction. Feminist thought and activism of the past century has often based itself metaphysically in a natural and total repository of feminine virtue, cannily deploying separatism to convince others of the moral desirability of female access to public affairs. Still, such politically expedient instincts do little to deconstruct male hegemony in invisible or visible realms, or to live up to the promise of a cultural reconstruction of the social relations of reproduction which unleashes the free potential of female and maternal being.

My own position is that the coordinates of ascribed feminine subjectivity conform to modes of being which have evolved over thousands of years of unremunerated reproductive and household service, attractive tone-poems which are nevertheless tailored to the tasks of female and maternal functionality within patriarchal order. I suggest that this functionality, the

fundament of women's history in patriarchal eurocentric and near eastern cultures ordered by monotheism, specifies that female agency be allowed to operate within the immediate grounds and consequences of physical reproduction and human bodily maintainance, entailing sexual, reproductive, emotional, domestic, and subsistence-economy services to the head of household, should he be present, and to progeny and other household members. Moreover, until quite recently, in those cases where a female in a eurocentric or near eastern social order copulated in a context acceptable to religious and civil law, her sexuality and reproductive capacity have not been fields of her own discretion and control: as a lifelong minor under: a husband's guardianship, economically and legally dependent, her means of inserting herself into the social order and gaining a modicum of derived and indirect privilege and power corresponding to his position absolutely required that she develop and enhance specific skills and qualities which would increase the odds on her own survival and that of her loved ones.^{vii} I maintain that this position, long considered to be dictated by nature and not even worthy of extended commentary, necessitates such profound restraints upon the potential depth, mutability, and unpredictability of female being that it can only be considered a primitive solution to the contradictions of human reproductive process. I find it disturbing that so many efforts in the field of feminist studies today seem to be bent upon glorifying and idealizing the terms of female and maternal functionality and their psychological consequences, rather than choosing to move into a more undisclosed universe.

Admittedly, since even these received ways of being have barely been articulated in a generalized and fixed form by the people who know them best, corrective work along these lines is certainly a valuable tack in the search for knowledge of the value and power of female and maternal ubiquity.

In spite of variations according to historical period, territory, class, education, religion, income, race, the male reproductive partner has never been exploited for his sexual and reproductive services, nor do marriage contracts render the male vulnerable with respect to the culture at large. Moreover, he is responsible only in a peripheral sense to the household,

and may default on his responsibility to maintain his group at subsistence levels without appreciable civil and religious penalties. He may physically and sexually abuse his dependents, obstruct or deny their access to material resources, and marshal the forces of law and religion against them. All in all, he gains a proprietorial right to children produced and nurtured by female labor, a right expressed in name, law, and property relations. At best, he may assist responsibly and personally minimize the overwhelming forces that separate him from his people.

Conferring attention and distinction upon unheralded aspects of female and maternal creativity within functionalist constraints, for example, or inquiring anew as to the designs and identities of divinities in various religions, these are broad and important jobs. Yet if one is aiming to improve the odds on the manifestation of unfettered female and maternal subjectivity and that of societal praxis shared in human solidarity, another component would seem to be in order, one which would open into a wide astonishment of the unforeseen. Such a mutation would doubtless act so as to reverse, displace, and intervene in the codes of absolute sexual and generic asymmetry.

Absolute sexual and generic asymmetry is formulated in the axiom that female and male consciousness and world activity is sexually determined, and thus essentially, ultimately, inevitably, eternally opposite, yet potentially coincidental in (marital) conjunction. Now, Gerda Lerner has located the inception of monotheism in the recipe ruling that female (nature) is essentially different and thinly defined, but that female deep being, that is, the sum of junctions between supernatural order and female incarnation, can be substantiated through a biologically maternal role within the frontiers of patriarchal marriage, the social and spiritual redemption of post-virginal female body, the body which never represents the divine principle or mediates between heavenly and earthly powers.^{viii} Thus it appears that an ancient wedding between monotheism and asymmetrical sexual and generic cosmology took place; I even suspect that monotheism could not exist without the principle of asymmetry as the rudiment of human holiness. I would venture that asymmetry is the deepest vestige of our human

functionalist past, and that it thwarts the potential of feminism with respect to religious studies and originalities.

Undeniably, the physical processes of human reproduction are experienced differentially by females and males, since male inclusion is restricted to the moment of copulation. No doubt these biological givens have been culturally arranged so as to conduce to social patterns of generic asymmetry, perhaps especially in patriarchal order, given with evidence of brothers and sisters in prodigiously separate spheres. The religious difficulties occur, in my view, when this heritage is implicitly assumed to be more revealing of who we are as human beings than the amazing forces of social mutation, the motivities of generic rapprochement made manifest in our own interesting time.

Interestingly enough, the Marian popular tradition has pressed for rapprochement between Mary and Jesus, the couple incarnate of the non-protestant Christian drama. An egalitarian urge has ceaselessly angled for points of equivalence and balance, if not exact symmetry, between their respective life cycles and passions. Decrees of councils and popes tend to tag along, eventually conferring official status^{ix} upon the joys of popular devotion.^{ix} Yet the principle of asymmetry, at the root of monotheism and full within the Marian flower, dictates the curve of her life. While Jesus lived logically, poetically, and politically in his messages and works on earth, Mary lived emotionally in her virginal and maternal body in response to the existence of her male child, a feature orthodoxy deems her only avenue of participation in the central mystery of the redemption and the only basis of her intercessory powers. She dressed him in flesh and he dressed her in glory; each gave what they had to the other and each ended up in the same heavenly place. Yet divinity was made human in the son, and humanity was made divine in the mother. The couple incarnate thus cooperates within a sacred economy of utter asymmetry, and effectively blesses a mother and son rapport as the alternating current of heterosexual dynamism. Furthermore, the mother's absorption in male offspring ratifies ardent expectations as to female and maternal nurturance of human males, leaving the needs of females and mothers out of the cosmological picture.

The mother in monotheism may be neither a totem of perfection or corruption, nor an entity contrary to the father, but simply a motive occasion of contemplation, turned toward the terms of her survival as an agent in the process of universal continuity, and the prospect of a reproductive and productive futurity in human solidarity. In making her debut into an era of undisclosed, infinite being and thoughtful cosmic presence, she becomes the mother of an unknown religion.

Circling around for a conclusion, no better image than a Marian finale can come to mind, such as this exquisite mosaic of the dormition from Santa Maria Maggiore. According to apocryphal texts, her great desire to be united with her resurrected son was speedily rewarded with delivery from her body. Mary did not actually die; she simply fell asleep, and due, supposedly, to her distance from sexuality and lust, her body was not subject to decay. Her soul was welcomed into her partner's arms, and in a sweet scrambling of roles, she became a youthful spirit and the object of his tender and comforting care. Thus the mother in monotheism only appears to die; she sleeps, and awakens in order to fulfill a call to love.

I suppose my own lifespan continues to unfold in a sober, even perplexing cycle of separation and return to the received female and mother, and that composing this circlet of chaplets allowed me to conceive of this lifespan as a kind of living museum of religious perceptions. In so doing, I discovered a discipline which had never occurred to me, that of beginning to wait for, and perhaps to receive and send a message of female and maternal divinity. Though the idea of the process troubles me, and even seems foolish in retrospect, it was a simple prompting of a being in love, one deeply fulfilling of my own, albeit youthful, needs as a female and potential mother.

ⁱ This scenario, modified within eurocentric technocratic cultures to a limited extent by female access to reproductive control and earned income, may be disappearing within the household proper. Still, systematic exploitation, segregation, and discrimination face the female in cash-based employment, and the social relations of reproduction still constrain females to the immediate grounds and consequences of the entire process. Day by day, females enter a standing war of defense against male physical attack. Finally, institutions of consciousness, especially the organs of education, religion, and communication, are pervaded with male dominance syndromes wherein the male is normative human being.

ⁱⁱ John Phillips (1984) honestly evaluates this teaching and its implications within greek, rabbinic, talmudic, gnostic, catholic, protestant, islamic, jungian, and freudian thinking

ⁱⁱⁱ I am deeply influenced by and indebted to the adventuresome methodological advances achieved by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Margaret Miles, pioneers of feminist hermeneutical method I in Christian monotheistic exegesis and historical inquiry. In their respective works, each has identified the Christian past and present as a field of female historical agency and vision.

^{iv} The first two chapters of Matthew and Luke present Mary as one involved in her son's birth; she attends his death in John 19. Her debatable relation to him is alluded to in John 2 and Luke 2, and her distance from Joseph is described in Matthew 1. Other than in these passages, Mary is mentioned only in passing.

^v Judaism has evolved the Shekhina and the Matronit, and Islam has given honor to Mohammed's wives, especially Aisha, and to his daughter Fatima, a figure inspiring massive pilgrimage and riotous rites

^{vi} I do not assume that the use of religious images and texts is the same for males and females; this particular image, however, impresses me as one producing an array of responses more or less common to both groups.

^{vii} In spite of variations according to historical period, territory, class, education, religion, income, race, the male reproductive partner has never been exploited for his sexual and reproductive services, nor do marriage contracts render the male vulnerable with respect to the culture at large. Moreover, he is responsible only in a peripheral sense to the household, and may default on his responsibility to maintain his group at subsistence levels without appreciable civil and religious penalties. He may physically and sexually abuse his dependents, obstruct or deny their access to material resources, and marshal the forces of law and religion against them. All in all, he gains a proprietorial right to children produced and nurtured by female labor, a right expressed in name, law, and property relations. At best, he may assist responsibly and personally minimize the overwhelming forces that separate him from his people.

^{viii} Females have recently been welcomed as religious executrices and mediaries in Jewish and protestant quarters. Lerner, 198, 1986.

^{ix} The contemporary notion that Mary collaborated actively and equally in the redemption may someday result in freshly minted mariological doctrine.