

Mary in Ecumenical Discussion

"They hurt Religion as much, that ascribe too little to the Blessed Virgin, as they who ascribe too much," observed the 17th century Anglican poet-priest John Donne.

That could be the theme of contemporary ecumenical discussion of the Palestinian Jewish maiden who, though relatively little mentioned in the New Testament, has, in the centuries since the earthly life of her son, figured prominently and diversely in Christian devotion.

In his new book, *The Mary Myth: On the Femininity of God*, Catholic priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley discusses four dominant themes related to Mary in the piety of his tradition — Mary as madonna (maternity), virgo (virginity), sponsa (seduction), and pieta (death).

For the rest of Western Christianity, however, heirs of the sixteenth-century Reformation, Mary tends to be little emphasized. In "Mary Reconsidered," an article in *Christianity Today*, the evangelical fortnightly, the Rev. David Steinmetz, a United Methodist who teaches church history and doctrine at Duke University, observes:

Protestants are, on the whole, extremely reluctant to talk about Mary. If a Protestant theologian should dare to suggest that Mary's role in the history of salvation is an important theological issue, he would be informed that the matter is of concern to Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, but scarcely to Protestants — as if a concern to two-thirds of Christendom could be of no significance to the remaining one-third. Even the early fundamentalists who insisted on the Virgin Birth as one of the key fundamentals of the faith were less interested in Mary than in her virginity.

But in an era of ecumenical rapprochement, especially since the Second Vatican Council, theologians from diverse Christian traditions are re-examining the received theologies, pieties, controversies, and misunderstandings. Though there is dissent from the reassessments, Mary has become an ecumenical possibility as well as a problem.

Marian controversy, like most kinds of Christian disagreement, is not peculiar to the church of the most recent centuries. Already in the fifth century, the Nestorians became separated from the rest of Christianity because they were unable to accept the view championed by Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria. His doctrinal formulation triumphed at the Council of Ephesus of 431, which formally declared Mary, "Theotokos," Greek for "God-bearer." (In Latin translation, the word was usually rendered as "Dei Genitrix," rather than "Deipara"; thus the familiar title, "Mother of God.")

Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople and his theological supporters considered the notion of Mary as "Theotokos" incompatible with the full humanity of Jesus Christ. "I have learned from Scripture," he wrote to Bishop Proclus, a successor to the Constantinople see following Nestorius' deposition by the council, "that God passed through the Virgin Mother of Christ; that God was born of her I have never learned." He proposed to call Mary "Christotokos."

This early church controversy is related to the Greek philosophic worldview in which the church operated. "The word 'born' as applied to God was a terrible stumbling block to the pagan mind of the early Christian world," Dr. Steinmetz observes. "Therefore the Virgin Mary was viewed as a sign that God had decisively intervened in human history for the redemption of mankind, that he had taken flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The early Church was interested in Mary not for her own sake, but only as a sign, a guarantee of the reality of the Incarnation. The unbiblical reluctance of Protestants to deal with the figure of Mary can be understood only as a reaction to certain later developments in the life of the Church," he adds. "In the Middle Ages, as well as earlier in the age of the Fathers, Mary increasingly became an object of interest in herself."

Without necessarily accepting the Steinmetz view of the history of Marian doctrine and devotion, contemporary Roman Catholic statements about her urge a close connection between Mary and Christ, the center of the faith.

In 1973, the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops issued a pastoral letter, "Behold Your Mother — Woman of Faith," which said Mary's "motherly intercession" in no way "diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power."

Though the pastoral used traditional phrases and concepts about Mary that would make many heirs of



the Reformation uncomfortable at best, the letter said "God's free choice is the reason for Mary's place in the plan for our redemption. She is totally dependent on her Son."

In his 1974 apostolic exhortation "Marialis Cultus," Pope Paul VI said that while devotion to Mary is "an intrinsic element of Christian worship" and "firmly rooted in the revealed Word," with "solid dogmatic foundations," Christ "is the only way to the Father and the ultimate example to whom the disciple must conform his own conduct."

"The Church has always taught this and nothing in pastoral activity should obscure this doctrine," he observed, adding that "every care should be taken to avoid any exaggeration" in such devotion "which could mislead other Christian brethren about the true doctrine of the Catholic Church."

From the other direction, Evangelist Billy Graham, a Southern Baptist, has urged increased attention to Mary.

"In years past," he said in an interview in the Southern Cross weekly of the San Diego diocese, "I think that Protestants, in reaction to the Roman Catholic position, have made far too little of Mary. Mary was the most remarkable and the most blessed of all women. I think Protestants have backed away from her role in Scripture because they feel that Roman Catholics have given her too high a position."

Speaking to a conference on "Our Lady as an Ecumenical Problem" last year in Sydney, the Rev. J. A. Ross Mackenzie, who teaches church history at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Va., said that to follow the spirit of the Reformation "does not mean to echo in our day the legitimate protests of Luther and Calvin."

The theologian of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. noted that Calvin urged his followers to venerate and praise Mary as a teacher who instructs in her Son's commands.

The late Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod theologian Arthur Carl Piepkorn told a Midwest Marian congress a few months before his death in 1973 that "it may yet happen in our time that there will come about a happy balance between excess ardor in the veneration of the Mother of God, and an excessive coldness to the role that God Himself has given her in the drama of human salvation."

"If it does happen, as I pray it will," Pastor Piepkorn continued, "we shall see in our time a more perfect fulfillment of the prophecy that... 'All generations shall call me blessed.'"

The Rev. John de Satge, a founder in 1967 of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, suggests a rethinking of some traditional non-Roman Catholic attitudes toward Mary. In *Down to Earth: The New Protestant Vision of the Virgin Mary*, Canon de Satge asks Anglican evangelicals, with whom he identifies himself:

"Granted that in the deplorable circumstances of

late medieval Catholicism a certain formulation of doctrine was needed to counteract a particular deformation... was the Reformation replacement the only possible correction...?"

He says in another place, "We have to stop assuming that Mariology is a reprehensible deviation from the orthodoxy of the gospel; it is rather a legitimate consequence of the gospel."

Nonetheless, stumbling blocks for several Christian traditions remain, notable two papal pronouncements on Mary.

Said Pope Pius IX in 1854 in "Ineffabilis Deus," the "doctrine which holds that the most blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful."

Said Pope Pius XII in 1950 in "Munificentissimus Deus," the "Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." That, said the pope, is "a divinely revealed dogma."

Such doctrines — and presentations of Mary as "lady of all graces" or "co-redemptrix" — notes the Rev. Toivo Harjunpaa, a faculty member at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, "create serious concerns for us." Another problem for some Christians is prayers to Mary, found in Eastern Christian as well as Roman Catholic liturgical and devotional practice.

The Rev. Avery Dulles, Roman Catholic Jesuit theologian, has urged Vatican authorities to "abolish the drastic penalties" currently tied to denial of the doctrines of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception.

He said in an address in Cincinnati that the Roman Catholic theological tradition does not require the faithful to "positively affirm" doctrines "only secondarily or indirectly connected with salvation." He said it is an "appalling situation" that, at least officially there are "threats of eternal damnation" for failure to accept the two papal definitions.

Referring to Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assumption (the Dormition — Falling Asleep — of the Theotokos in Eastern Christian tradition), Canon de Satge says it is possible to view these additions "to the scriptural deposit, not as distortion from it but as congruent with it and so as legitimate extensions." While "it is... possible to hold these doctrines and to express them in such a way that they do effectively do violence to the integrity of the received faith... I cannot see why in themselves they should be thus expressed," he adds.

The Dulles and de Satge approaches to a seeming impasse have not yet rallied great or official support, and they have stirred some negative criticism. Though Christians from different traditions clearly are moving toward it, they have not yet fully come to a consensus that, as Donne expressed it, ascribes neither too much nor too little to the one whose humble assent to God turned out to be crucial in the Christian understanding of salvation through His — and her — son.

Paratore Leaving Seminary Office

Matthew R. Paratore, director of the Office of Seminary Relations at St. Bernard's for the past two years, will be leaving at the end of September to become executive secretary of The International Liaison, a coordinating agency for the Catholic volunteer ministry. For the remainder of his time at the seminary, he will serve as assistant to the new rector, the Very Rev. Frank E. Lioi.

Father Lioi, announcing the change, credited Paratore with creating "stronger bonds" between the institution and its alumni, productive contacts with bishops, vocation

directors and other seminaries and better communications "with so many of St. Bernard's friends."

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