

## MARY AND THE FEMALE FACE OF GOD

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THROUGHOUT THE COURSE of its history the Catholic religious spirit has honored in a plethora of ways the person of Mary of Nazareth, that New Testament disciple of Jesus Christ who was also his mother. Thanks to her historically irreplaceable personal involvement in the birth of the Messiah, coupled with her own lifelong faith in God, she is understood to be intimately linked to the coming of salvation. The power of this connection intuited between the figure of Mary and the saving mystery which surrounds the world has led to popular devotion of vast proportions, as well as to doctrinal pronouncements and theological reflections, some more exuberant than others. While the Second Vatican Council shaped a balanced presentation of Mary in relation to Christ and the Church,<sup>1</sup> all problems of exaggeration, emotionalism, and vain credulity have not disappeared; rather, some Marian developments remain open to the Reformation charge of distorting the gospel.

Study of the Marian tradition shows that much of its even legitimate growth is not explainable simply by the exigencies of preaching the gospel. Despite correct official formulations, more is going on here than immediately meets the eye. A surprisingly diverse number of scholars have proposed that one of the primary reasons for the dynamic growth of the Marian phenomenon throughout history lies in the symbolic power of her figure, which, precisely as a female representation, bears images of the divine otherwise excluded from mainline Christian perception of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. In other words, female images of God, arguably necessary for the full expression of the mystery of God but suppressed from official formulations, have migrated to the figure of this woman. Mary has been an icon of God. For innumerable believers she has functioned to reveal divine love as merciful, close, interested, always ready to hear and respond to human needs, trustworthy, and profoundly

<sup>1</sup> Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*) chap. 8, "The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church," *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott (New York: America, 1966). See commentaries by Otto Semmelroth, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* 1, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967) 285-96; René Laurentin, *La Vierge au Concile* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1965); Karl Rahner, "Zur konziliaren Mariologie," *Stimmen der Zeit* 174 (1964) 87-101; Anne Carr, "Mary in the Mystery of the Church: Vatican Council II," *Mary according to Women*, ed. Carol Jegen (Kansas City: Leaven, 1985) 5-32.

attractive, and has done so to a degree not possible when one thinks of God simply as a ruling male person or persons. Consequently, in devotion to her as a compassionate mother who will not let one of her children be lost, what is actually being mediated is a most appealing experience of God.

Most scholars who have posited this relation between the figure of Mary and imagery of the divine have been content to let the issue rest there. However, given today's theological necessity to envision God more adequately in ways inclusive of women's reality, another step may be taken. This would be the retrieval of those elements in the Marian symbol which properly belong to divine reality, and the direct attribution of them to God imaged as female. If Mary reflects the female face of God, then Marian theology and devotion have a contribution to make toward the crucial task of imaging God in inclusive fashion. In other words, the Marian tradition is a golden mother lode which can be "mined" in order to retrieve female imagery and language about the holy mystery of God.<sup>2</sup> This is admittedly an open issue. The purpose of this theological study is to test this hypothesis, judging its viability by the results it produces.<sup>3</sup>

As a first step, we conduct a reconnaissance of the positions of key scholars who explicitly argue that the figure of Mary has in fact borne imagery of the divine in the Christian tradition. Ten representative approaches, from the fields of historical theology, traditional systematic theology, feminist theology, liberation theology, psychology of religion, social science, and ecumenical thought, are surveyed. While all of the thinkers considered do posit the Mary-God connection, they envision and explain the relationship differently. In the process of exploring these diverse angles of vision, we will be looking for hermeneutical clues which may shed light on precisely how the Marian tradition may serve the task of reimagining God in female symbols. On the basis of the relation between the figure of Mary and divine imagery uncovered in the initial survey, the second part of this study gleans elements from the Marian tradition

<sup>2</sup> For this evocative mining metaphor I am indebted to Lawrence Cunningham, *Mother of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982) 103. Obviously, not all of Marian doctrine and devotion will yield fruit in this investigation. Biblical, much patristic, and some contemporary expressions (e.g., Mary as type of the Church) do not present a Mary who bears images of God, except insofar as she, like all human beings, is *imago Dei*.

<sup>3</sup> In the course of its 50 years this journal has consistently presented studies of the Marian tradition reflective of the contemporary state of discussion. Tracing the history of this publishing illumines the shifting foci of Mariology this half century. Key articles have dealt with the fundamental principle in Mariology, Mary's *virginitas in partu*, the Apocalypse, the Assumption in the early English pulpit, Mary as intercessor for the departed, Protestant theology and worship, her immortality, Cana, coredemption, Vatican I, the virginal conception of Jesus, and Mary the perfect disciple.

which can be transferred to a fully inclusive idea of God.

In the process of this exploration, doctrinal, ecumenical, and feminist interests converge. Restoring to the holy mystery those elements borne by the figure of Mary can be one contribution toward a doctrine of God freed from the biases and restrictions of patriarchy. Concomitantly, relieving the figure of Mary of its historic burden of imaging God in female form can also remove from the Marian tradition one source of its tendency to distortion and set it more firmly on a gospel path, to ecumenical advantage. Both of these moves—imaging God as a female acting subject and retrieving Mary as a genuine woman whose life was a journey of faith—can serve the insight that all women have an unsurpassable dignity as human beings made in the image of God, a truth which is struggling at this moment of *kairos* to come to expression in theory and practice. The triple wager I am making as we begin is that the Marian tradition has a great deal to offer to a more inclusive theology of God; that once this offer is received, the Marian tradition itself will be fundamentally redirected and refreshed; and that consequently one obstacle to the Church becoming a community of equal disciples will be diminished.

#### PRESUPPOSITIONS

Several basic premises guide the investigation undertaken here. Given the present state of scholarship, I take it as a well-established thesis that God has been and can be referred to in ways reflective of the reality of women. Not only did the biblical and later Christian traditions occasionally use this kind of language, thus providing some basis for its legitimacy; but theologically it can be argued that such references are necessary if the truths of the incomprehensibility of the divine mystery and the human dignity and equality of women are to emerge.<sup>4</sup> The holy mystery

<sup>4</sup>For Scripture: Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Sandra Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women* (New York: Paulist, 1986); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Sophia-God of Jesus and the Discipleship of Women," *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 130–40; Elizabeth Johnson, "Jesus the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 61 (1985) 261–94.

For tradition: Kari Elisabeth Børresen, "L'Usage patristique de métaphores féminines dans le discours de Dieu," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 13 (1982) 205–20; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), and idem, "... And Woman His Humanity: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum et al. (Boston: Beacon, 1986) 257–88; Julian of

of God so transcends the capacity of human concepts and finite images that no one of them alone or even all taken together could ever capture or exhaustively express divine being. The reality of God springs forth beyond and within all notions. Still, God's created world, the world of nature and the human world of women and men, may separately or together serve as metaphor, analogy, or symbol pointing to and evoking the divine.

Furthermore, I find truth in the thesis that the Christian tradition's patriarchy with its accompanying androcentric world view has short-changed the fulness of religious language and imagery of God, locking the divine mystery into the single predominant image of a male person or persons. This distortion has helped to shape the Marian tradition, where what was going homeless in official doctrine found a home and flourished. One of the strongest insights into the compensatory nature of the Marian tradition was articulated by Teilhard de Chardin, who was convinced that the cult of Mary served to satisfy an "irresistible Christian need" in the Church, i.e. the need to correct "a dreadfully masculinized" conception of the Godhead.<sup>5</sup> When the dogma of Mary's assumption into heaven was defined, he wrote that he was "too conscious of the biopsychological necessity of the 'Marian'—to counterbalance the 'masculinity' of Yahweh—not to feel the profound need for this gesture." The difference between Teilhard's insight and the guiding idea here lies in the fact that the overmasculinized idea of God is now recognized to be the result of patriarchy and subject to reform, rather than necessarily definitive and in need of compensation.

It also seems evident to me that what has been displaced from religious imagery and language about the divine rightfully belongs back with God. Once it is not so unthinkable to envision the holy mystery in gender-inclusive ways, then the Marian tradition can yield its powerful maternal and other female images of the divine, which can be directly attributed

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Norwich, *Showings*, tr. and intro. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist, 1978).

For theological discussion: see the comprehensive survey by Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 134–79, with extensive bibliography; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 47–71; Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Elizabeth Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *TS* 45 (1984) 441–65.

<sup>5</sup> This and the following quotation are taken from Teilhard de Chardin's letters, quoted in Henri de Lubac, *The Eternal Feminine: A Study on the Poem by Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1971) 126 and 125.

to God. Primordially, God is our loving Mother to whom we entrust our needs, etc. The figure of Mary no longer has to bear the burden of keeping alive female imagery of the divine once the holy mystery is more fully envisioned.

While psychology, cultural anthropology, and social history have analyzed the Marian tradition from the perspectives of their own operating principles, the exploration here is primarily theological. Thus the criteria for discerning where the image of God may be being borne by another symbol are derived from the Scriptures, from the classical doctrine of God, and from liturgical praise of God. Initially stated, wherever Mary is described or addressed in such a way that the ultimacy of the divine as reflected in Scripture, doctrine, or liturgy is evoked, or wherever the ultimacy of the believer's trust is correspondingly elicited, there it can be supposed that the reality of God is being named in female metaphors.

Finally, I take issue with a current idea that Mary represents the feminine "dimension" of the divine, giving us an insight into that "side" of God's reality. Those who hold such a position almost inevitably make use of some interpretation of Jungian theory which codifies certain human characteristics as masculine or feminine and works toward their integration into a whole. God is then not only independent and just (masculine traits) but also relational and merciful (feminine). The difficulty with many of these efforts, well-meaning as they are, is that they take no cognizance of the patriarchal system of relationships, a system defined by male dominance and female subordination, within which their thought is shaped. Pressured by this system, the "feminine" in God is allowed to appear only in limited references, as a partial aspect, or as a principle which mediates or tempers the strong power of God, who remains conceptualized primordially as male. Even after the feminine is attributed to God, the male still reigns. The female never appears as icon of God in all divine fulness. By contrast, the perspective which sees both male and female created in the divine image and called to equal responsibility and dignity (Gen 1:26-29; Gal 3:28) finds both sexes equally capable and equally incapable of imaging the holy mystery. In fact, both are needed, as are images from the natural world, to prevent any one image from turning into an idol. Consequently, I would argue that Mary no more reveals the feminine dimension of God than Jesus reveals the masculine dimension of God. In my judgment, God does not have a feminine dimension, nor a masculine dimension, nor an animal dimension (derived from images of God as a great mother bird, lion, or angry mother bear), nor a mineral dimension (God the rock), etc. Images and names of God do not aim at part of the divine mystery, were that even possible, but intend to evoke the whole. Nonstereotyped female imagery

by itself points to God as such, and has the capacity to represent God not only as nurturing, though certainly that, but as powerful, initiating, creating-redeeming-saving, and victorious over the powers of this world.

As an initial step, then, in retrieving images of the divine from the Marian symbol, we consider how diverse scholars have analyzed the relation between the two.

#### TEN REPRESENTATIVE POSITIONS

1. Seeking the origin of the links between the figure of Mary and imagery of the divine, scholars of early Christian history have found morphological similarities between the post-Constantinian ecclesial cult of Mary and the pervasive cults of the Great Mother in the Mediterranean world into which Christianity was moving. Very little is known precisely about how elements of the Hellenistic cults of female deities accrued to the person of Mary but, as Hugo Rahner notes in the course of his argument for the essential differences between them, such similarities at least in superficially observable matters are simply a matter of historical fact.<sup>6</sup> The Church was not fashioned in a vacuum but absorbed many of the assumptions, verbal and visual imagery, and rituals of the surrounding culture into its own theology and liturgy, in a process which affected not only the presentation of Mary but also of Jesus Christ, the martyrs and saints, and even the holy mystery of God.

In his classic study of this adaptation in the case of Mary, Jean Daniélou begins by stressing the radical distinction between the mystery cults and the Christian veneration of Mary.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as the latter originated in a historically unique revelation of God in Christ, and furthermore portrayed Mary as virginal rather than as sexually fecund Earth Mother, there is more dissimilarity than similarity between them. Once these essential differences are established, Daniélou argues, one is then free to examine the ways in which Christianity's Marian cult adapted elements from the mystery cults and substituted itself, historically in the fourth-century world and psychologically in the human spirit, for the cults wherein the female deities played an absolutely central role. The officials of the Church allowed this assimilation of pagan elements for two reasons: it was an excellent missionary strategy in a world where female deities were so highly honored; and it reflected a sacramental view of reality in which, once "baptized" and purified of its ancient content, any symbol could evoke the God revealed in Christ. It must be

<sup>6</sup> Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mysteries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 13.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Daniélou, "Le culte marial et le paganisme," *Maria: Etudes sur la sainte Vierge*, ed. D'Hubert du Manoir (Paris: Beauchesne, 1949) 159-81.

asked, however, whether such purification was actually accomplished, or whether in a form of syncretism veneration of Mary simply continued the cult of the maternal power of the female deities. In either case, Daniélou concludes, the power of the Marian cult, founded on a free decision by God, lies in the fact that it corresponds to the aspirations of the human heart, functioning in psychologically parallel ways to the cult of the Great Mother.

Other historical scholars have identified innumerable concrete ways in which this adaptation was accomplished. Places in nature where female deities had been honored with pilgrimage and prayer became associated with Mary: wooded grottoes, springs, mountains, lakes.<sup>8</sup> Shrines and temples to the goddess were rededicated to Mary the Mother of God, outstanding examples being found in Rome, Athens, Chartres, and Ephesus (it being generally conceded to be no accident that the doctrine of the Theotokos was proclaimed to an enthusiastic population in the same city where in the time of Paul the people had demonstrated in favor of their great goddess Diana: Acts 19:23–41). Artistic symbols of the goddess accrued to Mary: her dark blue cloak, turreted crown, link with the moon and the stars, with water and wind. The iconography of Mary seated on a royal throne presenting her child to the world was patterned on the pose of Isis with Horus. Similarly, the still-venerated statues of the Black Madonna at Le Puy, Montserrat, and elsewhere derived from ancient black stones connected with the fertility power of maternal deities, black being the beneficent color of subterranean and uterine fecundity. In hymns reminiscent of the aretalogies of Isis, Mary was praised with titles and attributes of female deities (all-holy, merciful, wise, the universal mother, giver of fertility and the blessings of life, protector of pregnant women, their children, and sailors at sea), and directly invoked to deliver simple people from danger.<sup>9</sup> In at least one instance popular assimilation of the goddess cult to Mary destroyed the fundamental structure of Christian faith. The fourth-century sect of the Collyridians, made up mostly of women, worshiped Mary as divine, offering sweet cakes before

<sup>8</sup> For concrete examples see Daniélou, *ibid.* 176; H. Leclercq, "Marie, Mère de Dieu," *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* 10/2 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1932) 1982–2043; E. O. James, *The Cult of the Mother-Goddess* (New York: Praeger, 1959) 201–27; Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976); J. Salgado, "Le culte marial dans le bassin de la Méditerranée, des origines au début du IV siècle," *Marianum* 34 (1972) 1–41; R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1971) 269–81.

<sup>9</sup> A. J. Festugière, "A propos des arétalogies d'Isis," *Harvard Theological Review* 42 (1949) 209–34; J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Isis Book* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); compare with Marian praise: *Akathistos—Byzantine Hymn to the Mother of God*, tr. Paul Addiss (Rome: Mater Ecclesiae Centre, 1983).

her throne as had so many before them to the Queen of Heaven. Against them Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (d. 403), inveighed: "The body of Mary is holy but she is not God. . . . Let no one adore Mary."<sup>10</sup>

For all the real differences in structure and content between Christian faith and the mystery cults, the evidence at hand indicates a strong process of assimilation and adaptation of ideas and verbal and artistic imagery in the case of the emerging cult of Mary. As Daniélou argues, while remaining independent Christianity yet used the rich symbols of paganism purified of their ancient content to express its own revelation, and thereby insinuated itself into the hearts of new believers so recently accustomed to the beneficence and maternal power of the female deities. This comparative approach to the origin of Marian symbolism yields an interpretive principle for the present study: the Marian tradition is one conduit of imagery and language about divine reality flowing from the veneration of the Great Mother in the pre-Christian Mediterranean world. Even when well integrated into a Christian gestalt, the historical origin of this symbolism opens up the possibility of drawing upon it to reflect upon the holy mystery in female metaphors.

2. Scholars of the medieval European period, documenting its extensive growth in popular devotion and learned speculation about Mary, inevitably note that by the 16th century her figure had taken on divinized attributes and functions borrowed not from the ancient goddess but from the Christian Trinity itself.<sup>11</sup> While Protestant Reformers roundly criticized this development and while the Catholic reform sought to correct it, recent interpreters have perceived it as a quest for religious experience through the feminine image and what it connotes, an experience not available through the idea of God of the time.<sup>12</sup>

The dynamic of the medieval Marian phenomenon is complex. Theologically, scholastic systematization of Hellenistic thought-patterns lifted up the supposition that the female/maternal was and perforce had to be totally absent from God, for it was intrinsic to the maternal to be passive,

<sup>10</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 79:4, 7; see Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* 1 (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 70-73. In *The Virgin* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976) Geoffrey Ashe develops the thesis that this sect with its attractive worship of Mary was a threatening rival to the developing Catholic Church.

<sup>11</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978) 158-74; Jean Leclercq, "Grandeur et misère de la dévotion mariale au moyen âge," *La liturgie et les paradoxes chrétiens* (Paris: Cerf, 1963) 170-204; Walter Delius, *Geschichte der Marienverehrung* (Munich: E. Reinhardt, 1963) 149-70; Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1963) 281-322, esp. "Mariological Rules" 304-8.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Judith Martin, "Theologies of Feminine Mediation: Hindu and Christian," *Journal of Dharma* 6 (1981) 384-97.

in potency. Since God is Pure Act, only the active power of the masculine/paternal could be allowed to enter the notion of "Him."<sup>13</sup> The medieval scholarly idea of God thus became ever more rigorously androcentric.

On a popular level, devotion to Mary grew in proportion to emphasis on the transcendent justice of God, which made it impossible for God to forgive sin without demanding satisfaction (cf. Anselm). Sinful people felt existentially that their salvation was a precarious thing, with the temptations of Satan ever present and the danger of eternal torment in hell very real. In this scenario the divine saving quality of mercy found its expression in the womanly figure of Mary, who could be trusted as a mother to understand people's sinful inadequacies, and relied upon as queen to plead their case before her Son, the righteous Judge. Consequently, enormous veneration was poured out toward Mary, expressed in the multiplication of feasts, prayers, relics, titles, works of art, cathedrals, pilgrimages, and narrations of miracles.

In the process Mary at first paralleled and then occasionally outshone the Godhead. The creative power of God the Father was mirrored in Mary, who at the Incarnation gave the world its Savior, thereby being in some way creative of all that is renewed. As Anselm praised, "so God is the Father of all created things, and Mary is the Mother of all recreated things."<sup>14</sup> Psalms were rewritten substituting Mary for God as the acting subject of divine deeds: "Sing to Our Lady a new song, for she hath done wonderful things. In the sight of the nations she hath revealed her mercy; her name is heard even to the ends of the earth."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, standard hymns of divine praise such as the *Te Deum* were refashioned to honor Mary:

We praise thee, O Mother of God; we confess thee, Mary ever Virgin. . . . Thee all angels and archangels, thrones and principalities serve. Thee all powers and virtues of heaven and all dominations obey. Before thee all the angelic choirs, the cherubim and seraphim, exulting, stand. With unceasing voice every angelic creature proclaims thee: Holy, holy, holy, Mary Virgin Mother of God!<sup>16</sup>

In time Mary was gifted with omniscience and a certain omnipotence over heaven, earth, and hell. Biblical affirmations of God the Father were attributed to her, e.g. she so loved the world that she gave her only Son

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 4, 11, 19, tr. Charles O'Neil (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956).

<sup>14</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, "Prayer to St. Mary (3)," *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, tr. Benedicta Ward (New York: Penguin, 1973) 121.

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 96/97, *The Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary and The Psalter of Our Lady*, tr. Sr. Mary Emmanuel (St. Louis: Herder, 1932) 254.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 294-95.

(Jn 3:16).<sup>17</sup> She was prayed to as Our Mother who art in heaven, and asked to give us each day our daily bread. In moments of critical reflection there was universal insistence that these and similar honors redounded to the glory of God who "Himself" had so honored Mary. In effect, however, this kind of devotion to the Mother of God was actually devotion to God the Mother, to the ultimate mystery of the creative and re-creative God glimpsed in female form.

While Jesus Christ was acknowledged as gracious Savior, his function of judging frequently overshadowed the quality of his mercy, which in turn was attributed abundantly to Mary. Innumerable writers followed the line of thinking reflected in an influential 13th-century sermon which proclaimed that the kingdom of God was divided into two zones, justice and mercy; Mary had the better part because she was Queen of Mercy, while her Son was King of Justice, and "mercy is better than justice."<sup>18</sup> She was then depicted as restraining Christ's wrath, placing back into its sheath his sword which was raging against sinful humanity. As the period progressed, she went from being merciful mediatrix with the just Judge, to being sharer of common dominion with Christ through the pain she suffered on Calvary, and thence to power over the mercy of Christ, whom she commanded by her maternal authority. So great was the essential role of Mary's mercy that medieval theologians wrote of her what biblical authors wrote of Christ: in her the fulness of the Godhead dwelt corporeally (Col 2:9); of her fulness we have all received (Jn 1:16); because she had emptied herself, God had highly exalted her, so that at her name every knee should bow (Phil 2:5-11).

As even a brief sampling makes clear, the medieval parallels between Mary and Christ in nature, grace, and glory, in virtue and dignity, resulted in the figure of Mary assuming divine prerogatives. As coredemptrix, she merited salvation; as mediatrix, she obtained grace for sinners; as queen and mother of mercy, she dispensed it herself. All of this power resided in Mary as a maternal woman, who could be trusted to understand and cope with human weakness better than could a somewhat testy God the Father or a righteous Jesus Christ. In her person she represented ultimate graciousness over against divine severity. Hence she was the recipient of sinners' basic trust and affection.

Without in any way condoning the abuses to which such a development led, the perspective of our inquiry opens the way to see that late-medieval

<sup>17</sup> For this and the following examples, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 38-50; and Graef, *Mary* 241-322.

<sup>18</sup> This sermon is not one of Bonaventure's, but its influence stems largely from being thought so.

Mariology demonstrates the capacity of female imagery to model the redemptive activity of God. The medieval transfer to Mary of Christ's attribute of mercy resulted in the figure of Mary functioning as a female image of the Christological mystery. Her powerful role as mediatrix offered a female icon of Christ's intercessory role. Her unflinching compassion and will to save modeled the soteriological good news in the figure of a woman. The theological distortions of the period were very real, yet the phenomenon offers another interpretive principle for our inquiry: especially where the Marian tradition breaks the boundaries of the structure of biblical and traditional faith, there one can look for a source of female metaphors for the ultimate saving mystery of the divine, created by a dynamic of compensation for an overmasculinized and harsh, i.e. deficient, patriarchal concept of God.

3. As the Roman Catholic tradition developed after the Reformation, the priority of God and the centrality of Christ in the mystery of salvation were made clear. There was still room, however, to attribute to Mary an important function in the revelation of God's love. In a highly influential work written a decade before the Second Vatican Council, Edward Schillebeeckx reasoned that while God's love is both paternal and maternal, the latter quality is not and cannot be explicated in the man Jesus because of his maleness.<sup>19</sup> Thus God chose Mary, so that the tender, mild, simple, generous, gentle, and sweet aspects of divine maternal love could be made manifest. As partner to Christ, she explicates in her figure as a woman God's maternal redeeming love: "Mary is the translation and effective expression in maternal terms of God's mercy, grace and redeeming love which manifested itself to us in a visible and tangible form in the person of Christ, our Redeemer."<sup>20</sup> What is so interesting in this treatment of the theme is the choice of active verbs to express a relationship: Mary represents, makes manifest, explicates, translates, effectively expresses something of God which cannot come to light in Jesus Christ, Redeemer though he be. This quality is the feminine and maternal aspect of divine love, which needs expression through the figure of a woman. Schillebeeckx' interpretation thus identifies the revelatory capacity of the figure of this woman not only in a situation of distortion and abuse, as at the end of the Middle Ages, but even within the context of a rightly ordered reflection on faith. God's love, revealed

<sup>19</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964; originally 1954) 101-28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 113-14. For social background see Barbara Corrado Pope, "Immaculate and Powerful: The Marian Revival in the Nineteenth Century," *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson et al. (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 173-200.

paradigmatically in the person of Christ, needs a further translation into feminine terms to be fully expressed. Thus, in still another thought system, the path between Marian imagery and the fuller expression of divine mystery is laid.

Schillebeeckx' statement is one of the most explicit theological treatments of the thesis we are pursuing. While it is doubtful that he would treat the subject in the same way today, having repudiated the major categories of objective and subjective redemption within which he worked out his preconciliar Mariology,<sup>21</sup> it nevertheless stands as a testimony to the need for something more than is expressed in a patriarchal view of the revelation of God in Christ, and to the fulfilling of that need in the person of Mary. Schillebeeckx' reduction of the feminine to the maternal, and of the maternal to mildness and sweetness, is highly questionable in light of the experience of actual women and of feminist reflection today. Nevertheless, he was searching for an envisionment of God's saving reality in all fulness. His thesis, shaped in the context of post-Tridentine Mariology, provides a hermeneutic of that Mariology's dynamism: it expresses divine saving reality in the figure of Mary.

4. In the ecumenical climate since the Second Vatican Council, theologians such as Yves Congar, René Laurentin, Leon Cardinal Suenens, and Heribert Mühlen have paid careful attention to the Protestant critique that in the Catholic tradition Mary has substituted in a particular way for the action and experience of God the Holy Spirit.<sup>22</sup> Catholics have said of Mary that she forms Christ in them, that she is spiritually present to guide and inspire, that she is the link between themselves and Christ, and that one goes to Jesus through her. But are these not precisely the roles of the Spirit of Christ? Furthermore, Mary is called intercessor, mediatrix, helper, advocate, defender, consoler, counselor. But are these not titles which belong more primordially to the Paraclete (see Jn 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7)? Catholics have thought and preached as Leo XIII did, saying that "Every grace granted to man has three degrees in order; for by God it is communicated to Christ, from Christ it passes to the Virgin,

<sup>21</sup> He now considers this distinction almost meaningless: see *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 514.

<sup>22</sup> Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 1 (New York: Seabury, 1983) 159-66; René Laurentin, "Esprit Saint et théologie mariale," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 89 (1967) 26-42; Leon Cardinal Suenens, "The Relation That Exists between the Holy Spirit and Mary," *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982) 69-78; Heribert Mühlen, *Una mystica persona: Die Kirche als das Mysterium der Identität des Heiligen Geistes in Christus und den Christen* (Munich: Schöningh, 1968) 461-94.

and from the Virgin it descends to us."<sup>23</sup> Is this not a dislocation of the Holy Spirit, who is essential to the Trinitarian gift of grace in this world? The observation of Protestant student Elsie Gibson has been frequently quoted as Catholic thinkers have attempted to come to grips with this issue: "When I began the study of Catholic theology, every place I expected to find an exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, I found Mary. What Protestants universally attribute to the action of the Holy Spirit was attributed to Mary."<sup>24</sup>

Finding this critique basically substantiated, Laurentin has observed that this Marian development occupied spaces left vacant by an undeveloped pneumatology in medieval Latin theology and even more in post-Tridentine theology. The way forward, he suggests, is to be found by a return to the Scriptures. There the Spirit has obvious primacy, while Mary is overshadowed by, filled with, made fruitful by, and enabled to prophesy in the power of the Spirit. Consequently, the privileged sign and witness of the Holy Spirit in the community of the Church is the person of Mary, whose role of mediation and intercession occurs only within the primordial role of the Spirit.

More light is shed on this angle by patristic studies which have uncovered the maternity of the Spirit in early Syriac Christianity. The Spirit's image was that of the brooding or hovering mother bird, mothering Jesus into life at his conception and into mission at his baptism, and bringing believers to birth and mission in the waters of baptism. This doctrine of the motherhood of the Spirit fostered a spirituality of warmth which found expression in characteristic prayers:

As the wings of doves over their nestlings,  
And the mouths of their nestlings toward their mouths,  
So also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart.<sup>25</sup>

This motherhood imagery eventually accrued to the Church (Holy Mother the Church) and to Mary, once again occasioning the situation where the figure of this woman became the bearer of profoundly important characteristics of God. The action of the Holy Spirit, who is the most anthropomorphically amorphous of the persons of the Trinity and also the most functionally connected with divine intimacy and presence

<sup>23</sup> Leo XIII, *Iucunda semper*, no. 5, *The Papal Encyclicals: 1740-1981*, ed. Claudia Carlen, 2 (Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath, 1981) 356-57. See Mühlen, *Una mystica persona*, for discussion and critique.

<sup>24</sup> Elsie Gibson, "Mary and the Protestant Mind," *Review for Religious* 24 (1965) 397.

<sup>25</sup> In Robert Murray, "The Holy Spirit as Mother," *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (London: Cambridge University, 1975) 315. For contemporary expression of this idea, see Donald Gelpi, *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984).

to human beings, has been concretized in the imputed actions of the figure of Mary. This suggests another hermeneutic for dealing with the Marian tradition: we may test for how many elements of a proper theology of the Spirit of God are embedded in the affirmations made about this woman, and retrieve those elements for use in reconstructing an inclusive idea of God.

To summarize our explorations to this point: Soundings of the Marian tradition's historical origin, medieval overdevelopment, and post-Reformation systematization reveal workable connections between the symbol of Mary and the idea of God in both popular piety and theological reflection (and there is not a hard and fast distinction between these two). Roughly corresponding to each of these three periods, the Marian figure has taken on characteristics of the creating, saving, and sanctifying God, functioning to some degree in a compensatory way vis-à-vis the three divine persons of Father, Son, and Spirit.

5. Feminist theologians have consistently argued for the legitimacy of imaging the incomprehensible holy mystery in terms taken from the reality and experience of women as well as men, finding long-neglected examples of this kind of naming in the biblical and theological traditions. In this context the Marian tradition has been scrutinized for the "sub-intended" prophetic impulse in its female symbols and dogmas, which reveal that women are equally *capaces dei*.<sup>26</sup> Remembering her own childhood in Catholic Bavaria, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has analyzed from an experiential point of view what Schillebeeckx was stating in more theoretical form. In that time and place the God presented for belief had been shaped by a long process of patriarchalization, as a result of which the divine image became ever more remote and judgmental. Mary became the beloved "other face" of God, the figure who bore the life-giving, compassionate, caring, saving, and closely intimate qualities so characteristic of the *Abba* whom Jesus preached. On the intellectual level a distinction was maintained between adoration of God and veneration of Mary; but on the affective, imaginative level the Catholic child experienced the love of God and the saving mystery of divine reality in the figure of this woman. Schüssler Fiorenza's analysis leads her to conclude that the Catholic cult of Mary is one fruitful source of theological discourse which speaks of the divine in female terms, images, and symbols.

<sup>26</sup> Daly, *Beyond God the Father* 82-92; Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Mistress of Heaven: The Meaning of Mariology," *New Woman, New Earth*, ed. Ruether (New York: Seabury, 1975) 36-62; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision," *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 136-48.

Two insights here prove useful for analysis of the relation between the figure of Mary and the image of God. The development of a compassion-oriented Mariology is directly related to an overemphasis on a masculinized image of God, and functions as a remedy for what is lacking in such an image. Furthermore, the qualities attributed to Mary in such a development properly belong to the holy mystery. They should be transferred back to that source, so that the reality of the divine is thought ontologically to be compassionate, intimate, and caring, and is imaged to be such in female as well as male representations.

6. Interpreters of Latin American Catholicism universally note that massive devotion to Mary is one of the most popular, persistent, and original characteristics of its peoples' piety. From one contemporary perspective, that of liberation theology, the enduring devotion of powerless poor people to the Madonna who sings of liberation ("Magnificat," Lk 1:46-55) signals Mary's identification with the oppressed in the name of God. Consequently, her cult expressly validates the dignity of each downtrodden person and galvanizes energy for resistance against dominating powers.<sup>27</sup>

Pastoral theologian Virgil Elizondo, however, argues further that from the perspective of the development of doctrine this phenomenon points not only to the liberation of downtrodden peoples but also to the liberation of a restrictive idea of God. The origin of devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, for example, involved resistance by conquered people not only to the European invaders but to the male God in whose name they dominated. In the process of this resistance the people became the recipients of a major disclosure in the development of the Christian understanding of God.

Similar to studies of the origin of the Marian cult in the fourth century, analysis of the genesis of this Mexican cult supports this contention.<sup>28</sup> The original apparition occurred on the site of an ancient temple dedicated to Tonantzin, Indian virgin mother of the gods. The dark skin of the woman of the apparition, the language she spoke, the colors she was wearing, and the flowers, music, and celestial symbols surrounding her were all reminiscent of the goddess of the defeated people. Yet it was not

<sup>27</sup> Virgil Elizondo, "Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Cultural Symbol: The Power of the Powerless," *Liturgy and Cultural Religious Traditions*, ed. Herman Schmidt and David Power (Concilium 102; New York: Seabury, 1977) 25-33; Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* 1 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978) 25-32; Andres Guererro, *The Significance of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe and La Raza C6smica in the Development of a Chicano Theology of Liberation* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1983).

<sup>28</sup> Earliest accounts of the apparition are reproduced in Donald Demarest and Coley Taylor, eds., *Dark Virgin: The Book of Our Lady of Guadalupe* (Freeport, Me.: Coley Taylor, 1956).

Tonantzín who was appearing, but the Virgin Mother of the Christian God. As Elizondo interprets the creative result of this cross-cultural encounter, the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe combined the Indian female expression of God, which the Spanish had tried to wipe out as diabolical, with the Spanish male expression of God which the Indians had found incomprehensible (for everything which is perfect in the Nahuatl cosmovision has a male and female component). Each understanding of God was expanded by the other, yielding a new mestizo expression which enriches the very understanding of the selfhood of God.

If one is willing to make the journey through the ways of thought of the oppressed poor of the New World, the full theological implication of Marian devotion for disclosure of the mystery of God begins to emerge. In Elizondo's evocative phrase, "The Marian devotion of the poor leads the universal Church to a new appreciation of the very selfhood of God."<sup>29</sup> What such devotion carries is the experience of the ultimate reality of God through female imagery. The cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe is not simply a conduit for female imagery of God belonging to an ancient religion now disappeared. Rather, in its present effectiveness as a vehicle of religious experience this cult mediates the compassionate reality of God in the form of a woman. The figure of Guadalupe is a living locus of female imagery of the divine.

7. An even stronger case is made by Latin American theologian Leonardo Boff, who carries explicit reflection on Mary's relation to deity a giant step further than has until now occurred. This he does with the idea, put forward as a hypothesis, that just as the human nature of Jesus is assumed by the Logos, so too Mary should be considered as hypostat-ically united to the Third Person of the Holy Trinity:

We maintain the hypothesis that the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and of all men and women, realizes the feminine absolutely and eschatologically, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has made her his temple, sanctuary, and tabernacle in so real and genuine a way that she is to be regarded as hypostat-ically united to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Virgil Elizondo, "Mary and the Poor: A Model of Evangelizing," *Mary in the Churches*, ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Concilium 168; New York: Seabury, 1983) 64. Whether this understanding in itself is helpful to the liberation of women is a disputed point; see Evelyn Stevens, "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," *Male and Female in Latin America*, ed. Ann Pescatello (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1973) 90-100; C. R. Boxer, *Mary and Misogyny: Women in the Iberian Expansion Overseas, 1415-1815* (London: Duckworth, 1975); Mary DeCock, "Our Lady of Guadalupe: Symbol of Liberation?" *Mary according to Women* 113-41.

<sup>30</sup> Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and Its Religious Expressions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 93. A number of commentators on Boff's hypothesis have noted its relation to the idea of his fellow Franciscan Maximilian Kolbe, for whom

There is an essential difference between the incarnation of the Logos in Jesus and the union of the Holy Spirit with Mary. But the latter union is an ontological one so profound that the Spirit can be said to have taken flesh in the Virgin Mary, who in turn personifies the Spirit.

Two major presuppositions underlie Boff's hypothesis: one, the venerable Catholic understanding that human nature as such is created with a capacity for the hypostatic union; the other, the more controverted idea that the Holy Spirit is the divine person by whom the feminine is appropriated. While in the Incarnation Jesus Christ assumed human nature in its totality, still it is the masculine which is assumed in direct and immediate fashion, while the feminine is assumed and divinized only indirectly as a secondary component of the male. Conscious of the long-standing subordination of women, Boff argues that it is only fitting that the feminine itself should also be assumed and sanctified directly and immediately. This occurs in Mary, immaculately conceived, virgin Mother of God, assumed into heaven, and coredeptrix and comediatrice of salvation. In her the feminine is "hypostatically assumed" by the Spirit, with the result that the created feminine is now eternally associated with the mystery of the being of God and is a vehicle of God's own self-realization. Mary rightly belongs not under Christ but by his side; widespread attribution to her of the functions of the Holy Spirit is legitimate.

While obviously reflecting the *lex orandi* of millions of people in the Latin American Church, Boff's hypothesis has come in for severe criticism.<sup>31</sup> The point to note for our purpose is that, unlike theologians who criticize maximalist tendencies in the cult of Mary as compensatory for a distorted, overmasculinized image of God, Boff is seeking to legitimize this development by proposing that Mary as a woman is ontologically divinized to the point of being the human embodiment of the Holy Spirit. As such, her figure as a woman is rightly revelatory of divine characteristics usually associated with the Spirit of God, such as all-encompassing warmth and love, immediate presence, inspiring energy, intimacy, and care for the weak and little ones. His work provides another hermeneutical clue for our project, i.e. it is especially in maximalist Marian devel-

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Mary is the summit where the love of the Paraclete finds its expression, and is even in a sense "His" incarnation; cf. H. Manteau-Bonamy, *La doctrine mariale du Père Kolbe: Esprit Saint et Conception Immaculée* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1975); James McCurry, "The Mariology of Maximilian Kolbe," *Marian Studies* 36 (1985) 81-97.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Galot, "Marie et le visage de Dieu," *Marianum* 44 (1982) 427-38; Kari Børresen, "Mary in Catholic Theology," *Mary in the Churches* 54-55; J.-M. Hennaux, "L'Esprit et le féminin: La mariologie de Leonardo Boff," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 109 (1987) 884-95 (a discussion of Boff's popular version of his thesis entitled *Je vous salue Marie* [Paris: Cerf, 1986]).

opment that female images of the divine are struggling to come to expression.

8. The categories of masculine-feminine, relied on extensively in Boff's proposal, are pivotal in the analysis of Mariology done by certain psychologists of religion. Drawing particularly on Jungian psychology, scholars such as Ann Belford Ulanov and Joan Chamberlain Engelsman contend that the religious power of symbols of the divine is weakened and distorted if a particular symbol system represses the feminine principle.<sup>32</sup> This repression has occurred within the image of God in the West, with debilitating effects especially upon women's consciousness and identity, although men also suffer loss of wholeness and vitality. By contrast, the symbolism of Mary functions to reveal the feminine in the Godhead (recall Jung's interpretation of the dogma of the Assumption as paving the way for the recognition of the divinity of the Theotokos<sup>33</sup>) and to open up a correlative psychic experience of deity. Even for those who do not find Mary a personally viable religious symbol, she nonetheless does represent the psychologically ultimate validity of the feminine principle, insuring a religious valuation of bodiliness, sensitivity, relationality, and nurturing qualities, such being prototypically feminine characteristics in the Jungian system. The symbol of Mary is necessary to balance the masculine principle in the deity, which expresses itself in rationality, assertiveness, and independence.

A number of feminist thinkers have resoundingly rejected the Jungian category of the feminine, arguing that it is a patriarchal invention based on a profoundly dualistic anthropology which stereotypes women and constricts them to predetermined, private, politically powerless roles.<sup>34</sup> The point to note here, however, is that in this system of thought the symbol of Mary reveals what its adherents call the feminine dimension of the divine. Without this symbol divine imagery is impoverished; with it what has been excluded from participating in God, i.e. the feminine, finds a place and in turn becomes capable of revealing the divine. For our investigation, what can be retrieved from the Jungian approach, even if we find the masculine-feminine categories not viable, is the idea that much of what has been excluded from the image of God in classical

<sup>32</sup> Ann Belford Ulanov, *The Feminine: In Jungian Psychology and in Christian Theology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1971) esp. 314-34; Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), with extensive bibliography.

<sup>33</sup> C. J. Jung, *The Collected Works*, ed. Herbert Read et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1969) esp. 2:107-200 and 355-470.

<sup>34</sup> Naomi Goldenberg, "A Feminist Critique of Jung," *Signs* (winter 1976) 443-49, and her *Important Directions for a Feminist Critique of Religion in the Works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1976).

theism can rightly be predicated of God (necessitating development in the doctrine of God), and that the figure of Mary is a resource for this development.

9. Using Jungian categories but within the framework of the social sciences, Andrew Greeley proposes in a similar vein that Mary is and should remain a symbol of the feminine component of the divine. According to his argument, the tradition of female deities arose historically from the conviction that God has feminine as well as masculine characteristics, a conviction born primordially from the experience of human sexual differentiation. An outstanding example in the world's tradition of female deities, Mary reveals the tender, gentle, comforting, reassuring, i.e. feminine, dimension of God. Greeley notes that the Protestant Reformers were right in their perception that Mary had taken on a quasi-divine role in the Catholic tradition, but wrong in judging that this detracted from the true worship of God. Her function is that of a "mysterion" who breaks open the experience of the Ultimate as "passionately tender, seductively attractive, irresistibly inspiring, and graciously healing."<sup>35</sup> Without that component human insight into God is one-sided and incomplete. The author's living commitment to this Marian insight is expressed in his lyric poetry:

Mother, wife, muse, morning star  
A revelation of God's warming charms  
To a cold and bitter world. . . .<sup>36</sup>

Greeley's thesis presents many difficulties. In addition to his acceptance of stereotypes of what constitutes the so-called feminine, his grounding of this view of Mary in the experience of sexual differentiation limits its viability for the Church as a whole. What are heterosexual women and homosexual men to make of an approach based on this figure's seductive attractiveness? Greeley's is a male construction (which he admits) which may work for heterosexual males or lesbian women (which limitation he does not seem to notice or try to overcome). Furthermore, as with Elizondo and Boff, there is the doctrinal and ecumenical difficulty that the person of Mary does function in a quasi-divine way which overshadows the priority of God. The other side of the latter problem is that the argument for keeping Mary in the role of revealing God's warming charms prevents the direct attribution of such appealing characteristics to God in Her own right. There is, too, the added problem that the ideal feminine described by these authors (as by so much of the

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Greeley, *The Mary Myth: On the Femininity of God* (New York: Seabury, 1977) 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 210.

tradition) functions as an obstacle to real women's growth, blocking the integration of questioning intellect, capacity for righteous anger, and other characteristics of the mature personality. However, the valuable points which can be gleaned from this approach are the affirmation that the Marian tradition does carry important imagery of the divine, and the suggestion of what some of that imagery might be.

10. Tracing links between the figure of Mary and the image of God has not been limited to Roman Catholic theologians and historians. A number of Anglican scholars have explored this relation, finding in Mary a life-giving symbol of divine creativity and saving love which helps to correct Christianity's heavy masculine emphasis in the concept of God.<sup>37</sup> More startling, in view of the basic intuitions of the Reformation, is a statement of a working group of German Lutherans officially engaged in studying Catholic Mariology and Marian piety.<sup>38</sup> Their report describes Mary as a double-edged symbol within the faith of the Church: she is a symbol of human faith and discipleship, and she also symbolizes the fact that God can be imaged with feminine and maternal characteristics. Noting how Marian devotion has consistently paralleled Mary to Jesus, these theologians seek to interpret positively what in the past they would have condemned as a distortion. The Marian phenomenon is to be attributed to humanity's desire for a maternal, mild, life-giving gestalt of God. The whole history of religions demonstrates this need, they affirm, and the original gospel could insinuate itself into its surrounding cultural milieu only by incorporating some feminine imagery. As Mary was the first human being to give a full response to God's word, so too as Mother of God she becomes the "revelation of the feminine-maternal side of the being of God."<sup>39</sup> The Lutherans are quick to note the danger of Mary's divinization that could result, but nevertheless do identify her with a certain revelation, *Offenbarung*, of God.

This position is reminiscent of that of Schillebeeckx, seeing the symbol of Mary disclosing something of God which the figure of Christ is incapable of modeling. While subject to the same critique of stereotyping the feminine and of limiting the capacity of female imagery to revealing only one "side" of God, its value lies in the acknowledgment of the figure of Mary as a bearer of revelation, and this from a group classically focused on the reality of revelation through Christ alone.

<sup>37</sup> Thus John Macquarrie, "God and the Feminine," *The Way, Supplement 25* (1975) 5-13; A. M. Allchin, *The Joy of All Creation: An Anglican Meditation on the Place of Mary* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> Catholica-Arbeitskreis der VELKD, "Maria: Evangelische Fragen und Gesichtspunkte. Eine Einladung zum Gespräch," *Una sancta 37* (1982) 184-201.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 191.

At the end of this survey of ten discrete positions on the question of Mary as a bearer of images of the divine, our initial hypothesis appears in a stronger light. Historians of the development of doctrine, Catholic theologians with a classical doctrinal interest, feminist and liberation theologians, thinkers in the psychology of religion and the social sciences, and Reformation-tradition theologians with ecumenical openness—all diversely affirm that Marian devotion and theology are sources of understanding the holy mystery in female language and symbols. Certainly, not all would agree that this phenomenon is due to the patriarchal character of the dominant idea of God, nor that there is pressing need to retrieve lost elements of the divine kept safe in the Marian tradition and to reattribute them to God's own reality. But all do acknowledge the function of the figure of Mary in imaging the divine in a certain way not available in the predominant idea of God or Christ. It remains now to see in an initial way just what the Marian tradition might contribute to an inclusive imaging of God.

#### FEMALE IMAGES FOR GOD

Without claiming to be comprehensive, five elements present themselves as viable candidates for divine imagery. The first and most obvious is the image of God as mother. The maternal birthing and caring metaphors which the Hebrew Scriptures use to describe God's unbreakable love for the covenanted people have been concretized and carried forward in the figure of Mary. Throughout the tradition she has been portrayed predominantly as the mother par excellence, Mother of God, Mother of Mercy, Mother of Divine Consolation, our Mother. Transferring this maternal language back to God enables us to see that God Herself has a maternal countenance. All that is creative and generative of life, all that nourishes and nurtures, all that is benign, cherishes, and sustains, all that is full of solicitude and sympathy originates in Her. Maternal fruitfulness, care and warmth, and indispensable mother love flow from God the Mother toward all creatures. All mothering on earth has its source in Her. She exercises a maternity that does not leave us orphans. In a Sunday talk Pope John Paul I once spoke of God as our Father but even more as our Mother, who wants to love us even and especially if we are bad.<sup>40</sup> The image has the capacity to release profoundly attractive characteristics of God long suppressed in a patriarchal

<sup>40</sup> *Osservatore romano*, Sept. 21, 1978, 2. Discussed by Hans Dietschy, "God Is Father and Mother," *Theology Digest* 30 (1982) 132-33, from *Reformatio* 30 (1981) 425-32. See the metaphor of God as mother in Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 97-123; and reflections based on firsthand experience of maternity by Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984).

system. Notice that what is overcome here is a popular concept of heavenly interaction modeled on a patriarchal household, in which a distant and judgmental God the Father is inclined to be approachable and more lenient through the intercession of Mary the Mother on behalf of wayward children. Instead, maternity itself is predicated of God equally with paternity, and female images of the creativity and caring intrinsic to healthy mothering may then evoke the reality of God.

Another, closely related element which can be found in the Marian tradition is that of divine compassion. Biblical studies have shown how the Hebrew word for mercy is linguistically related to the term for a woman's womb, and consequently evokes the idea of "womb-love" for the one whom a mother has carried and shaped from her own flesh.<sup>41</sup> Despite the New Testament's overwhelming witness that the mercy of God is made effectively present in Jesus Christ, and the symbolizing of that fact in such images as Jesus as the mother bird gathering her brood under her wing (Mt 23:37-39), the medieval split of the kingdoms of justice and mercy resulted in the Marian tradition being the primary bearer of this good news. In much preaching and piety Mary has been presented as more approachable than Christ, especially when one is conscious of human weakness. The classical Marian antiphon *Salve Regina*, for example, salutes Mary as "mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope"; to her the poor banished children of Eve send up their sighs and pray: "Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us." In the end Mary is asked to show us Jesus, but the form of the prayer itself casts her in the life-giving role of the merciful one. Returning this language to God, to whom it properly belongs, enables us to name the holy mystery as essentially and unfathomably merciful. God is the Mother of mercy who has compassionate womb-love for all Her children. We need not be afraid to approach. She is brimming over with gentleness, lovingkindness, and forgiveness, lavishing love and pity on the whole sinful human brood. Her judgment is true, most devastating to those who refuse the call for conversion to the same kind of mercy toward others: their self-righteousness is to no avail. Yet to the most ordinary as well as to the most blatant of wrongdoers who wish to repent, She is a true Refuge of sinners. In addition to mercifully forgiving sin,

<sup>41</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* 31-59. Recognition of such interpretation has begun to make its way into official ecclesial documents: e.g., John Paul II, noting that the Hebrew term for "mercy" is rooted in the term for "womb," which gives mercy the semantic nuance of the love of a mother, writes that the OT attributes to the Lord the feminine characteristics of tenderness and readiness to forgive, and that the NT canticle of Zechariah "rather identifies God's mercy with a mother's love"; cf. the encyclical *Rich in Mercy* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1981) 56-58 n. 52, and 59 n. 61.

God consoles in all troubles and, in bending with care over those who suffer, is the true Comforter of the afflicted.<sup>42</sup> It is not the case that God is essentially just with a justice which needs to be tempered by Mary's merciful intercession. Rather, compassion is primordially divine, as is suitably disclosed in the symbol of the merciful woman.

The Marian tradition has also carried images of divine power and might. In this instance it is a strength which seeks to protect and to save, to liberate and to heal, the power of Israel's God and Jesus' *Abba* embodied by a female image. In a statement reflective of personal experience but widely typical of Western consciousness, Dorothee Soelle has described male power as having something to do with "roaring, shooting, and giving orders,"<sup>43</sup> images of power-over which are implicit in most classical discussions of the omnipotence of the patriarchal God. On the other hand, after her long study of Marian legends and images, M. Jameson was moved to comment that in the depiction of Mary's gracious presence "I have beheld an acknowledgement of a higher as well as gentler power than that of the strong hand and the might that makes the right. . . ."<sup>44</sup> The earliest known prayer of petition to Mary reflects this sense of beneficent saving power: "We take refuge under the protection of thy compassion, O Mother of God. Do not neglect our prayers in our troubles, but free us from danger, thou who alone art pure [or: revered], thou who alone art blessed."<sup>45</sup> These are phrases reminiscent of the Psalms and of the petition to the Father to "deliver us from evil" in the prayer that Jesus taught. There is a pervasive sense in the Marian cult that her power is not restricted by the demands of ecclesiastical law, nor bound by the power of Satan, nor even by the male God-figures of Father and Son to whom she is supposedly subject. Her sovereignty is unbounded, saving whom she loves if they but turn to her.<sup>46</sup> This is graphically illustrated by the widespread medieval iconography of the Madonna of the Protective Mantle. Under the umbrella formed by her

<sup>42</sup> Both this and the preceding title are taken from the Litany of Loreto; see also the Akathistos Hymn for similar titles.

<sup>43</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 112.

<sup>44</sup> M. Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1857) xix.

<sup>45</sup> Dated from late-third or early-fourth century, this prayer was published by C. H. Roberts, *Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri* 3 (Manchester: John Rylands Library, 1938) n. 470. See analysis by Gerard Sloyan, "Marian Prayers," *Mariology*, ed. J. B. Carol, 3 (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1960) 64-68.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Paule Bétérous, *Les collections de miracles de la Vierge en Gallo et Ibéro-Roman au XIII siècle*, published as Marian Library Studies 15-16 (Ohio: University of Dayton, 1983-84); and Johannes Herolt, called Discipulus, *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, tr. C. Bland (London: Routledge, 1929).

draped, outstretched arms huddle a family, a religious order, a king, even a whole town's populace; there they find protection from evil which threatens, be it plague, war, temptation, or eternal judgment. Understanding all of this as primarily imagery of the divine unlocks the realization that the power of God is not destructive, aggressive, or overbearing but operates wisely and justly in a form of advocacy for human beings. Her divine might is effective in breaking the stranglehold of evil and freeing those whom it has held in bondage, putting down the mighty from their thrones and exalting those of low degree. She powerfully seeks and succeeds in finding what is lost, like the Lukan Jesus' imaginative homemaker searching for her lost coin (Lk 15:8-10). None can escape her saving grasp. This kind of power, carried in the imagery of a female figure of "might and mercy,"<sup>47</sup> of a woman who is mighty to save, is more accurately attributable to God's own being.

The immanence of God, so often underplayed in classical theism, is yet another element emphasized in the Marian tradition. In an effort to offset the distant, too-masculine God of the Reformation, Paul Tillich developed the idea of God as the Ground of being, a metaphor which symbolized the "mother quality of giving birth, carrying, and embracing, and, at the same time, of calling back, resisting independence of the created, and swallowing it."<sup>48</sup> In the Catholic tradition that function has partially fallen to the figure of Mary. Indeed, it has been Catholic experience that, as John Paul II tellingly observed, the eternal love of the Father manifested in history through the Son given for us "comes close to each of us through this Mother and thus takes on tokens that are of more easy understanding and access by each person."<sup>49</sup> This closeness of the love of God, this sense of the divine presence surrounding and pervading the creature, is given striking expression in the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe":

Wild air, world-mothering air,  
 Nestling me everywhere. . .  
 Minds me in many ways  
 Of her. . . .  
 I say that we are wound  
 With mercy round and round  
 As if with air: the same  
 Is Mary, more by name.  
 She, wild web, wondrous robe,

<sup>47</sup> Anselm, "Prayer to St. Mary (2)," in Ward (n. 14 above) 110.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 293-94.

<sup>49</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1979) no. 22.

Mantles the guilty globe. . . .  
 And men are meant to share  
 Her life as life does air. . . .  
     Be thou then, O thou dear  
 Mother, my atmosphere. . . .  
 World-mothering air, air wild,  
 Wound with thee, in thee isled,  
 Fold home, fast fold thy child.<sup>50</sup>

The imagery of such insights refers most properly to the reality of God. So redirecting it enables us to realize that it is the wild Spirit who is our true atmosphere, who folds us fast. Most truly it is in Her that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). God the Spirit is closer to us than we are to ourselves. She holds fast to all who spring from Her being, surrounds them, and continuously loves them into life. All that is awakens and sleeps, develops and decays in the presence of Her holy love, and is finally enfolded into Her eternal presence at the end. Rather than Mary being the figure who functions to make a distant patriarchal God close, immanence as well as transcendence is properly attributable to God's own being. This interiority of God to creation has been effectively evoked in the image of a woman, matrix of all that is gifted with life.

Lastly, the understanding of God as source of re-creative energy is one more element which can be drawn from the cult of Mary. "May is Mary's month" writes the poet Hopkins, and all that is swelling, bursting, and blooming so beautifully does so under her aegis. Marian symbols of earth and water, vines, flowers, eggs, birds, and young animals evoke her connection with fertility and the motherhood of the earth.<sup>51</sup> The theme of overturning the ancient sin and beginning again, so connected with her historic pregnancy, finds its parallel in the springtime renewal of the earth. As Anselm wrote, "plenty flows from you to make all creatures green again."<sup>52</sup> Attributing this imagery directly to God allows us to affirm that it is God's own self that is the source of transforming energy among all creatures. She initiates novelty, instigates change, transforms what is dead into new stretches of life. Fertility is intimately related to Her creative divine power. It is She who is ultimately playful, fascinating, pure, and wise, luring human beings into the "more." As mover and

<sup>50</sup> *A Hopkins Reader*, ed. John Pick (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 70-73.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 56-57. See analysis of symbols which connect Mary with natural life by René Laurentin, "Foi et mythe en théologie mariale," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 89 (1967) 281-307.

<sup>52</sup> "Prayer to St. Mary (3)," in *Ward* (n. 14 above) 120.

encourager of what tends toward stasis, God Herself is ever new and imaginative, taking joy in creating and re-creating all that exists.<sup>53</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Maternity with its creativity, nurturing, and warmth; unbounded compassion; sovereign power that protects, heals, and liberates; all-embracing immanence; re-creative energy: thus is borne out the hypothesis that the Marian tradition is one fruitful source of female imagery of God. Not just "dimensions" but ultimate metaphors for the divine mystery are available here. Received within a believing community that is trying to let go of gender dualism (not difference) as a basic filter for viewing reality, each of these retrieved images has the potential to contribute to a new naming and experiencing of the holy mystery.

Several cautions should be noted at this point. It is not the case that these characteristics exhaust the fulness and depth of women's reality. The life experience of women, made in God's image and likeness, can generate many more images of the divine beyond what is found in the Marian tradition. Conversely, these are not the only images needed for the rehabilitation of the patriarchal idea of God; others such as friend, not easily found in the Marian tradition, need to be retrieved from other sources. What has been pursued here is only one path among the many that need to be explored as we deconstruct and reconstruct theology toward genuine inclusiveness. Any claim to a total synthesis would be premature.

A further caution lies in the fact that, with the exception of the ideas of Mary's saving power and re-creative energy, even the images we have retrieved are liable to be interpreted as stereotypically feminine, instances of the "patriarchal feminine" which defines women in preconceived categories helpful to the male.<sup>54</sup> This danger arises from the fact that the Marian tradition has been shaped by the forces of a patriarchal history which (however unconsciously) excluded certain good human elements from the idea of God and transferred them in diminished form to the Marian symbol, there to function as a restricting ideal for female persons. However, these characteristics of mothering, compassion, and presence, so particular to the historical experience of women, are being reclaimed, reimagined, and revalued by contemporary feminist analysis in ways that liberate. Realization of this state of affairs undergirds the argument that

<sup>53</sup> See the extraordinary series of paintings and meditations by Meinrad Craighead, *The Mother's Songs: Images of God the Mother* (New York: Paulist, 1986).

<sup>54</sup> See Rosemary Radford Ruether's trenchant analysis of this notion in "The Female Nature of God: A Problem in Contemporary Religious Life," *God as Father?* ed. J. B. Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (Concilium 143: New York: Seabury, 1981) 61-66.

these themes and symbols should not now be transferred to God via the categories of "dimension" or "trait," for this would merely perpetuate the inherited, basically distorted patriarchal system. Rather, each element that this exploration has turned up represents a missing or underdeveloped piece in our repertoire of references to God and, as shaped by women's experience, should be allowed to connote and evoke the whole of the divine mystery in tandem with a plethora of other images.

This theological study has tested the hypothesis that the Marian tradition is a rich source of divine imagery, and found it a viable one. Maternity, compassion, liberating power, intimate presence, and recreative energy—in a manner of speaking, Mary has treasured all these things in her heart (Lk 2:19), awaiting the day when what has been guarded in her symbolism could find its rightful place once again in the divine mystery. For the renewal of the doctrine of God, for the growth in human dignity of real women made in Her image and likeness, and for a properly directed theology of Mary within a liberating community of disciples, it would be well to allow this imagery to disperse beyond Mary, in the direction of the reality of the holy mystery of God.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The question arises: Once relieved of bearing divine imagery, what pattern should a theology of Mary now take? The direction has already been set by biblical scholarship's rediscovery of Mary as a believing disciple; by church documents' emphasis on Mary as a woman of faith related to Jesus Christ and the pilgrim Church (Vatican II's *Lumen gentium*, Paul VI's *Marialis cultus*, John Paul II's *Redemptoris mater*); and by feminist and liberation theology's focus on Mary as a genuine historical woman, a poor woman of the people. The next step might well be an incorporation of these insights into a praxis-oriented theology shaped by categories of memory, narrative, and solidarity.