

More Mariology from Michelle Mormon

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On a Personal Note: I am currently taking a fascinating course in Mariology through my PhD studies. This was a recent paper I wrote that you may find to be of interest. I hope you find this helpful in your own search for Heavenly Mother. - Sincerely, Michelle Mormon (not Molly!)

Introduction

Comparative Mariology seeks to find common ground across religious traditions concerning Marian teachings regarding her role and personhood. However, the speculative nature of Mariology can lead into some uncharted territory that extends beyond traditional viewpoints, including esoteric studies and goddess-based spirituality. If one is not careful, the very foundations of Christianity can be called into question. Nevertheless, since Mariology is speculative, by its very definition, there are no clearly-defined rules outside the framework of traditional Catholic dogma, which leaves Marian studies open to interpretation. The goal of this paper is to examine the differing perspectives that lie beyond the framework of traditional thought, from interreligious, to the cosmic dimensions, to alternative viewpoints, in hopes of

finding some common ground that remains true to a 'biblical' worldview. However, this is not a task for the faint of heart, because in doing so, deeply held convictions will be called into question in new ways previously unconsidered. Keeping an open mind remains the key to constructing a meaningful Mariology, regardless of one's theological framework of interpretation.

Comparative Mariology

Comparative religion as an academic discipline can prove both challenging and rewarding. Finding common ground among differing religious traditions with the goal of seeking understanding of the 'other' can be rewarding, in that it gives way to a meaningful exchange of information among differing parties. At the same time, it can be challenging to find common ground among varying traditions where very little, if any, similarities exist. Clooney points out, "By such learning, intelligently evaluated and extended, we make deeper sense of ourselves intellectually and spirituality, in light of what we find in the world around us" (*Comparative Theology* 2010, 5). The goal of interreligious dialogue is not necessarily to convince the other of the 'correctness' of either side; rather it is to see what each side has to bring to the table. The end result is not to judge or condemn; rather it is to learn from one another, seek common ground, and most importantly, acknowledge one's shared history. Comparative religion seeks, first and foremost, to celebrate differences while seeking understanding of the other perspective across cultural and ideological barriers.

In the case of Mariology, it is not all that difficult to find common ground among the various historical religions, as long as one turns to goddess spirituality- the Sacred Feminine, which ties in with the ancient Wisdom traditions, by whichever name it is known – *Chokmah*, *Sophia*, or the *Shekinah Presence*. Sacred Wisdom looks beyond the outward form of the religion to the inward state of the heart. Concerning Mary herself, Luke 2:51 makes it clear that Mary "treasured all these things in her heart" (NRSV), which suggests a quiet, contemplative spirituality characteristic of feminine ancient wisdom. While Wisdom teachings belong to the established tradition, at the same time, they often transcend – and confound – the hierarchy of formalized religion. The Shekinah Presence is a good example of this, as it was "considered feminine in esoteric (not exoteric) Judaism" (Barkhurst *n.d.*, 19- *parentheses belong to author.*) This is why the Sacred Wisdom traditions are often misunderstood, and must, in many ways, remain hidden or kept underground. Certainly when one begins to examine Marian doctrines, the same principles apply; this makes it easier to examine the role of Mary outside the established perimeters of her familiar Judeo-Christian context.

Swiss author Frithjof Schuon was raised in a Christian household, and while he was, in essence, "an adamant defender of the Divinity of Christ and the other essential truths of this tradition" (Cutsinger 2000, 15), he was not afraid to delve into the deeper mysteries surrounding the Virgin Mary as found outside the boundaries of Christian thinking, including Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. His thinking was considered forward-thinking for its time, although it would become part of the Perennialist philosophical school, which seeks to find unity among thinkers of all major world religions, including the philosophy of Plato and the ancients. For Schuon, Mary is regarded as having the status of an Abrahamic Prophetess (in reference to Islam) characterized by her incredible "strength of soul which evokes such Biblical figures as Miriam and Deborah" ("Wisdom of the Virgin" 1968, 1). Simultaneously, Mary is the Eastern (Buddhist/Hindu) concept of Maya personified, as "she personifies the receptive or passive perfections of universal Substance, but she likewise incarnates – by virtue of the formless and occult nature of Divine Prakriti – the

ineffable essence of wisdom or spirituality" (Schuon 1968, 3). Schuon is very careful to distinguish between the submissive nature of Mary, as would be consistent with Islamic thought; juxtaposed against his lofty thoughts concerning her cosmic significance "by her supereminence in the whole Abrahamic cosmos" (Schuon 1968, 5). In my observation, to say that Schuon performs a delicate dialectic balancing act would be an understatement, but he does so rather astutely for someone of a Western mindset, even though he does verge outside 'traditional' thinking in all respects. One does not have to agree with Schuon, necessarily, to appreciate his ability to make relevant connections.

By contrast, John R. Dupuche of the Australian Catholic University's Centre for Interreligious Dialogue seeks to draw connections between the Virgin Mary and the frightening Hindu goddess Kali, consort of Shiva, lord of death and transformation. In my opinion, Dupuche's efforts are significantly far-reaching, although he makes an honest attempt. Basing his argument on the famous scene in which Kali is depicted with her foot perched on top of Shiva's corpse, tongue protruding outwards; Dupuche poses the following questions, "In what way does Mary bring to an end that which is limited and ineffectual? In what way is she fearsome? How does she liberate humanity?" ("The Goddess Kali" 2012, 45). As one reads on, a further connection is made between the bloodthirsty Kali and the wine of the New Covenant, as represented by Mary at the wedding in Cana, and later at the foot of the cross; as Mary is depicted as "requesting the blood of sacrifice which purifies better than water, the true marriage between God and his people, the blood which Jesus will urge his hearers to drink" (Dupuche 2012, 53). This connection, however, is far-reaching, considering Mary is never depicted in such a manner in the biblical tradition; rather Mary's triumph is found in her profound humility of spirit, of which Schuon referenced in his own writings.

Cosmic Mariology

For Cardinal John Henry Newman, the humility of Mary results in her celestial exaltation as the mysterious Lady of Revelation 12:1 is revealed; although it could be argued that "such an interpretation is poorly supported in the Fathers" (Murphy *n.d.*, 565). Even though other Patristic writers had alluded to the *possibility* that Mary might be associated with this woman, it was never *clearly* stated until the sixth century by Oecumenius, who was not even himself considered a Church Father (Svendsen 2001, 205). While Newman does not ignore the connection between the woman and the Church as a whole – and even Mary as the chief representative of Her flock – he concludes the following concerning the straight-forward meaning of this passage as he interprets it; "No one doubts that the 'man-child' spoken of is an allusion to our Lord: why then is not 'the Woman' an allusion to his mother?" (Breen, ed. 1982, 18). The cosmic significance of this interpretation cannot be overlooked, as Revelation 12 depicts Mary as the Second Eve, overcoming the serpent and reversing the curse of sin on humanity, a theme that is more readily supported by the Church Fathers, namely Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 100) and Irenaeus (*Against Heresies III*; 22:4); thus echoing back to Genesis 3:15. In this sense, Mary is the conqueror of evil; for she does indeed crush the serpent's head.

This passage does lend itself to other levels of interpretation standing outside of traditional views. Within the modern-day revival of goddess spirituality, there exists a strand of thinking linking Mary with the lost Temple traditions of ancient Israel – "the older religion of Jerusalem and Judah" (Barker 2001, 1) – prior to the reforms of King Josiah, whereby any reference to the ancient goddess Asherah was destroyed, along with her associated Temple relics, including "the item

named the Asherah, the host of heaven, the horses for the sun, the menorah, the oil, the manna, the high priest's staff that bore almond blossoms, the ark, the fire, and the Spirit" (Barker 2001, 2). It should be noted that Asherah was popularly associated with the Tree of Life, as represented in the menorah, or seven-branched lampstand, in addition to the various blossom imagery represented in this list. The prophet Jeremiah expressed strong views against the women of his day baking "cakes for the queen of heaven" (Jeremiah 7:18 *NRSV*), which he considered an abomination. The host of heaven would necessarily include the Mother Goddess within this context, as "the Deuteronomic and Josiah reforms resulted in the rejection of the council of gods idea and the expulsion of the divine family in favor of the One God" (Petersen 2013, 101). Within the Temple Theology perspective, the hidden goddess reappears in Revelation 12:1. She is fully restored to her rightful place, along with the Ark of the Covenant mentioned in the previous chapter (Revelation 11:19), also an ancient symbol traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary, as "the sign in heaven in Revelation 12 is the Queen of Heaven in the holy of holies with the ark" (Barker 2001, 3). Here Mary is the celestial Mother personified; she is the 'sign in the heavens,' heralding the revival of the Hebrew Goddess.

One of the central issues at stake in this interpretation is the question of polytheism, as opposed to the one god of traditional monotheistic Judaism. However, as Michael S. Heiser, author and Ancient Near Eastern Scholar-in-Residence at Faithlife observes, a true 'biblical' worldview takes into account the heavenly council which was there with God before the creation of the world: "Right from the start, then, God has company – other divine beings, the sons of God" (*The Unseen Realm* 2015, 24). Included in this divine entourage is Wisdom herself, and according to chapter eight of Proverbs, "she was beside the Creator as he established the heavens and marked out the foundations of the earth" (Barker 2001, 3). Mormons will be familiar with this way of thinking due to their unapologetic non-Trinitarian stance, as contrasted with other Christian denominations, as Zina Petersen notes, "Joseph Smith suggested a return (restoration) to a family model with a physicalized and thus sexualized model of God. God as a Father along with a Mother" (*Interpreter* 2013, 103- *parentheses belong to author*). Although considerable debate may follow concerning the oneness of God from within this theological construct, biblically speaking, within marriage, husband and wife "become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24 *NRSV*). From my perspective, if humans are created in the image of God – male and female—then why could God not have a wife? The Mormon view is not outside of the realm of 'biblical' Christianity, but may indeed have something powerful to offer to the wider discussion.

Speculative Mariology

Published in 2003, the novel *DaVinci Code* became an overnight sensation, and was later followed up by the movie by the same name, released just three years later in 2006. The central claim of the book was the main character, Sophie Neveu, was a modern-day descendent of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene through the French Merovingian line; moreover introducing another Mary into the equation – this time, not Jesus' mother, but his wife. The *DaVinci Code*, influenced by *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1982), sparked a revival of these forgotten, yet shocking claims as revealed by a collection of controversial documents found at Rennes-le-Chateau containing the hidden lineage of Jesus linked through the Merovingian line to present day. Now, all of a sudden, the Virgin Mary had a rival 'goddess' figure whose 'true' identity had been protected by secret societies, in this case the Priory of Sion, which many believe is a hoax.

Although the majority of her books were published prior to the release of the *DaVinci Code*, Catholic author Margaret Starbird has contributed immensely to the popularization of a belief in the sacred marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. In 1993, Starbird published *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, which also became an overnight success, and was even referenced in the *DaVinci Code*, as the book cover itself now attests. Referencing the French word *sangraal*, which she translates to 'royal blood,' Starbird poses the question of how Mary Magdalene could bring royal blood to France, and then goes on to explain that Mary Magdalene brought her daughter Sarah with her to the coast of France on an oarless boat following the crucifixion. Starbird herself admits, "I know of no way to prove beyond a doubt that the 'other Mary' was the wife of Jesus or that she bore a child of his bloodline" (*Woman with the Alabaster Jar* 1993, 27). Surprisingly, authors Lynn Pincknett and Clive Prince, who belong to this string of celebrated *DaVinci Code* 'scholars,' suggest the Priory connection is not to be trusted: "the whole Merovingian business was made up anyway; the real point of the hidden message is that it mentions the key concepts of Dagobert II, Sion, and treasure, all consistent with the Dossier Secrets' version of history" (*The Sion Revelation* 2006, 243). The evidence is speculative at best.

To add to *DaVinci Code* sensationalism, Kathleen McGowan, a self-proclaimed descendant of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene, published the first of a series of novels, wherein which she reflected on her own spiritual journey through the fictional character of Maureen Pascal (*The Expected One* 2005). As would be expected, Pascal discovers she is a living descendent of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and from there, struggles to make sense of her new role, as she must proclaim this previously hidden truth to the world. In an interview with *USA Today*, McGowan herself admitted the following concerning the book that she allegedly began writing back in 1989, "Everyone is going to think I'm on the *DaVinci Code* bandwagon, but I'm not" (Memmott 2006). As I have observed over time, McGowan's current views no longer resemble the Christian basis she once claimed to represent, as she has delved into astrology and other esoteric/Gnostic teachings. Equally revealing, the aforementioned interview with *USA Today* (Memmott 2006) admitted McGowan's publisher was careful to tiptoe around the issue of McGowan's alleged 'biblical' ancestry. I find McGowan's personal journey – as she tells it – interesting, but she does not claim to be a scholar; only a fiction writer.

Eastern Orthodox tradition does suggest several of the women connected with Jesus' ministry traveled to Southern France, but Mary Magdalene is not one of them. Fearing for Lazarus' life, Lazarus was placed on an oarless boat along with his sisters Mary and Martha and a certain Maximinus. Their boat landed on the coast of France, according to one account, and Cyprus according to another version of the story. Confusion has resulted from the conflation of the two characters – Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene – in the West (Kern 2016, 647-648). Further confusion remains, as part of the tradition suggests that Mary Magdalene traveled to Rome first in order to plead for Jesus' innocence, while Lazarus became the Bishop of Cyprus, as connected with the later travels of the Virgin Mary, according to legend (Kern 2016, 647; 660-661). From my observation, it is possible that if Mary Magdalene traveled all the way to Rome, the legends of her being set adrift at sea as a refugee are a strong possibility; the fact that she would travel that far in order to plead for Jesus' innocence suggests a deep love for him; perhaps even the devotion of a grieving widow seeking to avenge her husband's wrongful death.

The bold assertion that there would be living descendants of Jesus Christ walking the earth today poses problems for traditional Christians who believe very strongly in the Chaledonian formula of

451 CE, wherein Jesus was declared fully human and fully divine. This declaration followed the Council of Ephesus in 431CE, wherein the Virgin Mary was declared *Theotokos*, or the Mother of God, a declaration that said more about Christ than it did about Mary. Regarding the formal declarations of these, and other councils, the claim has been made that Constantine's motivations in calling the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea (323 CE) were entirely politically motivated, as Brown and company operate with the understanding that "Constantine used his influence to create and enforce a Christian orthodoxy that denied the goddess principle, deified Jesus, and sought to expunge all record of the marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene" (Bauder 2006, 2). Just like with Josiah's reforms, any hopes of reviving the sacred feminine elements present within her story would be forgotten or shoved underground; worse than that, Mary Magdalene's reputation would become smeared and reduced to that of a prostitute.

While this is indeed unfortunate, once again Mormons –who are not confined to the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils – have a unique perspective to offer on this issue, as "many Mormons also believe that Jesus was married. After all, they believe marriage is essential in heaven and even God has a wife, Heavenly Mother" (Stack 2006). This same article from the *Salt Lake Tribune* (Stack 2006) goes on to suggest that Mormons believed in the claims of the *DaVinci Code* nearly a century before the *DaVinci Code* ever became a reality. Nevertheless, an official declaration concerning the marital status of Christ has never been embraced either way by the First Presidency. Mormons would concur with *DaVinci Code* enthusiasts that the Council of Nicaea marked the beginning of the Great Apostasy, along with the changing of the calendar and baptism rules (Stack 2006). The Mormons were ahead of their time in terms of asking critical questions concerning the validity of the ecumenical councils and their decrees, in addition to the marital status of Jesus.

My own thoughts on this matter derive not from my personal beliefs as a Latter-day Saint, but from the perspective of an alumnus of the Ecumenical Institute Bossey in Switzerland (2004-2005), the official ecumenical school of the World Council of Churches. Something I noticed upon my studies there that also struck my classmates as odd, was the *Oikoumene* symbol for the World Council of Churches, which is, essentially, a boat without oars (see WCC website). I can recall somebody from our class asking our professor what that symbol meant, and our professor admitted that he really did not know for sure, but there were a number of possible interpretations – none of which included the aforementioned legends of either Mary Magdalene or Mary of Bethany. At the time, I had not read the *DaVinci Code*; nor was I familiar with the said legends. However, after seeing the film many years later, I recalled the symbol on my diploma and made the connection. This, along with my own personal experiences with the Sacred Feminine, left me wondering if it could all indeed be true.

Conclusion

The goal of this study has been to move beyond the confines of traditional Mariology to a comparative model. This leads one into deeper speculation concerning a field that is already speculative in nature. This can make the task of uncovering the truth even more difficult to navigate. If the goal is to remain within a 'biblical' framework of thought, the question remains how exactly that worldview is to be defined. As one delves deeper into the Marian mysteries, one will find a plethora of opinions that call deeply held convictions into question. In my own journey, I have discovered that all is not as it seems. A careful examination of 'traditional' Marian dogmas and doctrines only leads to more questions than answers, as tradition alone is insufficient for answering questions of the heart. Such is the nature of Mariology; some mysteries are better left

open to interpretation, but the beauty of comparative methodology is that it allows for exploration beyond that which can be concretely known through traditional means.

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