

Mary and Human Liberation

by Tissa Balasuriya, o.m.i.

Dedication to my mother
VICTORIA BALASURIYA
(1901-1985)

The congregation of the
Oblates of Mary Immaculate

And all the women who have enriched my life.

Chapter 1 Mary in Catholic Devotion
Chapter 2 Mary in Traditional Theology.

Chapter – 3

NEED OF A RENEWED MARIAN THEOLOGY

A. Development of Theology/Doctrine

The development of theology and spirituality In the Catholic Church presents an interesting example of Change and continuity, of a claim to infallibility and the fact of the transformation of doctrine and practice. This raises the question of how changes in theology, even in doctrine, take place. Is it always an evolution in the same direction, or are there changes that are a contradiction of a previous position? What are the criteria for such changes? Who is entitled to make them? How do changes come about? How prepared are local churches for changes that take place in the universal church? How can we convince ourselves and others that we are holding the same view always and not changing our thinking due to reasons which are not d faith and theology?

Is it not a fact that sometimes changes in practice precede changes in thinking and teaching? This is a slow and painful process in which there can be much pain before the new light dawns. This can be seen in the case of the church's attitude towards religious freedom.

“For most of the church’s history only rarely were Christians able even so much as to tolerate other religions, and they were almost never able to tolerate other forms of their own religion (heresies).”

“Notions of genuine human freedom as a religious right were soundly rejected by Popes Gregory XVI, Pius IX and Leo XIII because in their view these notions were inextricably bound up with indifferentism and rationalism. Nevertheless, in practice, if not in theory, Catholics took a far more tolerant view of Protestants. In this century the rise of totalitarian regimes of both the right and the left, the destruction of two world wars, and growing global consciousness helped religious leaders to focus on human dignity, the inviolable rights of the human person, the nature of human community and its relation to the state, and other issues affecting human solidarity. It was in this context, too, that Popes Pius XI, Pius XII, and John XXIII moved towards the acceptance of the ideals of human dignity and freedom consonant with the teachings of the church.”¹

In the 19th century the central leadership of the Catholic Church had long term objections to accepting democracy and liberty even in civil society, especially due to the French Revolution. Then authority was said to so come from God that it could not be from the people. The objection to the socialistic demands for societal reforms was even more deep seated, till the historic encyclical of Leo XIII on the “Condition of the Working Classes” in 1891. Even this encyclical was very much down-played in many churches during several decades.

The changes in the situation of colonial peoples after their independence made the churches reconsider the attitude towards other religions. Now due to much work for consciousness raising in some local churches, the Catholics have changed to be among the foremost defenders of democratic rights and of free and fair elections as in the Philippines in 1986.

B. Some Recent Trends in Theology

In the renewal of Catholic theology in the second half of the 20th century, especially after Vatican II, various issues have been taken up in different regions according to their concerns and needs. The earlier renewal was in Western Europe following the Enlightenment, with the studies in biblical interpretation and hermeneutics. They reflected on the mission of the Church in the context of European rationalism, Modernism, Darwin, Marx and Freud and the growing secularization in the West. They were reaping the fruit of decades of biblical studies based on linguistic, cultural and historical analysis.

In the United States, with their experience of the separation of church and state, John Courtenay Murray, perhaps the strongest theological proponent of religious freedom in the church, led in the rethinking on the relationships between church and state and the need of religious tolerance. He had a principal impact in the formulation

¹ John Linnan, CSV, on “Liberty, religious” in the New Dictionary of Theology, TPI, Bangalore, 1993 pp. 578-579.

of the Vatican II “Declaration on Religious Liberty” which recognized that the dignity of the human person consists in his responsible use of freedom.

In Germany Johannes Metz, agonized by the experience of the horrors of Nazism, developed a “political theology”, emphasizing the need of witnessing to Christian values in the social and political spheres also. Such thinking had much impact on the Western countries and contributed to the growing commitment of Western Christians and churches to social justice, at least within their societies.

The East-West cold war and the fear of nuclear annihilation motivated groups towards building up the peace movement, beyond denominational, religious and ideological boundaries.

North America was foremost in the development of Black theology and feminist theology, both having Strands of a liberational approach.

Black Theology originated in North American with the consciousness of Black people there that they were discriminated against on the basis of colour. They showed how the scriptures and church practice had been interpreted to justify White supremacy. They regarded this as a betrayal of the gospel in a racist manner. They advanced the concept and liturgies of a Black Church. Their theologizing was linked to and influenced by the struggles of the US Blacks led by Martin Luther King in a non-violent campaign and by Stokely Carmichael developing “Black power”, James H. Cone, Gayraud S. Wilmore and Camel West were pioneers of Black Theology.

Black theology was later developed in Africa and the Caribbean linked to liberation theology, feminist theology and Asian theologies. The struggles in North America against racism, poverty and the Vietnam War led to a rethinking of church life and the growth of peace education and non-violent strategies.

Latin American liberation theologians took the discussion much further with the full scale elaboration of their liberation theology. Their starting point of theology was, in addition to scriptural studies, the experience of the social exploitation of a whole continent during several centuries, and especially their domination by the capitalist North. They applied social analysis to theology and spirituality. They stressed the secular and social spheres as arenas for the realization or the values of the kingdom of God preached and promoted by Jesus Christ. The praxis of Jesus, with his option for the poor and marginalized reveals God’s concern and will for the liberation of humankind. The liberation spirituality sees the human struggle against oppression as a way of union with God. The life of the church had therefore to be directed towards participation in such struggles, especially by the organization of basic Christian communities. Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez, Brazilian Leonardo Boff, El Salvadorian Jon Sobrino, Uruguayan Juan Luis Segundo are among their well known men and women theologians.

Liberation theology has had an impact throughout the world. It has influenced the magisterium or the Catholic Church as Christian freedom and liberation are accepted as legitimate and necessary concerns of the church.²

The feminist theologians bring in the dimension of gender analysis of Christian life and thought in every area of life and study. This is a growing movement that has now a quasi-universal and radical questioning or almost all aspects of theology and spirituality. The starting point of feminist theological reflection is the acute consciousness of the systematic exclusion of women from leadership in the life of the church. They have been excluded from the study of theology, and hence from teaching and ministry as well as administration in the church.

From this reflection they see that theology and spirituality have been conditioned to legitimize male domination throughout centuries. Three dimensions of the development of feminist theology are the demonstration of the androcentric and misogynist bias in the whole of church life including scripture and theological tradition. Secondly, they try to draw up alternative norms and sources of tradition to challenge these biases. This is a process of deconstruction of traditional theology and spirituality. Thirdly they seek a reconstruction and re-envisioning of the theological themes and life relationships to free them from biases against women.

Now there are numerous feminist theologians in all the Continents of the world. Various trends are rapidly developing within this movement. Some radically question whether a male God can be a liberator for women. Thus Mary Daly repudiates the possibility of the reform of the Christian tradition and seeks a new spirituality. Rosemary R. Ruether, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza are among the leading Catholic feminist theologians from North America. There is also a trend for a more holistic spirituality that seeks to transcend difference and divisions of gender and make common cause with the other struggles of humanity today such as for the preservation of the environment. Marian theology is also developed by several feminist theologians as seen in the latter part of this book.

Theological rethinking is now developing very much in Asia and Africa, especially since emancipation from colonial rule. **In Africa** the accent has been on Issues such as African culture, family and community values, traditional religions, relation to ancestors, poverty and liberation from discrimination on the basis of race and tribe. The relationship with Islam is a dimension of Christian reflection and life in most African countries. In South Africa the numerous theologians and church leaders like Desmond Tutu and Albert Nolan and the some churches themselves contributed to the struggle against Apartheid and the recent success of the democratic process in transferring power to the Black majority in a compromise solution.

In Asia the thinking is influenced by the realities of poverty, massive populations and religious plurality, in addition to the other dimensions that are bringing about theological renewal elsewhere. Hence the ferment here, especially South Asia, is very active and leading to much further questioning than elsewhere.

² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation", Vatican City, 1986.

The nature of the human condition, the understanding of the presence of the divine in the world, and the Identity and role of Jesus the Christ, and the mission of Church are all under scrutiny in this environment. Asian theology is being developed in many countries: especially the Philippines, South Korea, India and Sri Lanka. Oppression of caste and tribals is also leading to an elaboration of liberation theology in India.

Throughout the world there is a growing concern for the **environment and ecology**. The future of planet earth is worrying many – particularly due to the noticeable changes in the climate and the known exhaustion of some limited non-renewable resources: This is a spiritual and theological problem of life style and attitude towards nature.

C. Issues Involved

In all these theologies there is process of theological de-construction and re-construction in stages including:

- i) a reflection by the victims from a lived experience of oppression and marginalization,
- ii) leading to a critical rethinking of the interpretation of scripture and tradition that was seen as de facto allied to discrimination on the basis of race, gender or social class and religion.
- iii) Consequent on the experience of these different groups there has been an analysis of doctrines and authority patterns in the church based on gender, race, class, and even caste.
- iv) The Issues raised In the process Include the understanding of the human condition of sin beginning with original sin, gender relations partly related to the Interpretation of the responsibility for original sin, the nature of the redemptive process, the role of Jesus Christ and of the church in human salvation,
- v) The rethinking of theology includes a revaluation of the type of formation of the clergy and leadership in the church. Traditionally the formation in the seminaries has been attuned to the continuation of the status quo in the church and society.
- vi) The understanding and practice of spirituality in the church had been such as not to contest such discriminations that prevailed in the dominant society. Such an approach was helped by the narrow self-centred individualistic “salvation-of-soul” perspective that prevailed in Europe especially in the modern period after the decline of feudalism. The shift is now to a broader interpersonal and social concern according to the perspective from which the spirituality is developed.

D. Re-thinking Theology – A Difficult Process

In the growth of these new theologies creativity is moving, especially in theology concerning class and religions and cultures, away from Europe, and to some extent from North America also, to the so called “younger churches” or the “Third Church” as Walter Buhlmann calls it. In the different stages of this evolution the church authorities have had difficulties of acknowledging the validity and significance of these new perceptions. They are attached to the long standing orthodoxies which have acquired a sacredness due to tradition, not to mention the advantage to them as the dominant society or social force.

The process of re-adjustment of thought and life is not without conflict and much heart-burns within the churches. The authorities think they have to preserve the simple religiosity of their faithful. The faithful brought up according to the conventional modes of thinking and pious practices have a sentimental attachment to them even when these domesticate them to accept different forms of alienation and oppression. The internalization of one’s own subjection to the powerful acquires a legitimation and sacredness.

On the other hand the more thoughtful, especially the younger generation, tend to lose confidence in the entire system and even become “unchurched”. This happened to the working class in Western Europe which Pope Pius XI mournfully regretted in the 1930s as the scandal of the 19th century. If the church does not rethink its theology and spirituality in a manner relevant to the present generation and their needs, the churches will be by-passed as irrelevant to their principal concern. During the past 50 years there has thus been a large scale “unchurching” and secularization of persons who call themselves Christians in Western Europe. Now not even 10% frequent the Sunday Mass in many Western European cities, including Rome. Many are giving up the other sacraments too.

The Catholic priesthood is ageing and decreasing in numbers. Many have left the ministry. The seminaries are largely empty, and many are being closed down or amalgamated into clusters. In the not distant future the Catholic Church in Western Europe will be a clergyless church, unless some radical changes are introduced to remedy this irrelevance. Likewise the religious life is folding up due to lack of vocations and the increasingly advancing average age of those remaining. Religious houses are becoming homes for the aged, memorials to a more active past that has no appeal to the youth of today.

The churches in Asia and Africa have to seriously ask themselves whether and how they can avoid such a fate. The more perceptive among the leaders such as Bishop Julio Labayen in the Philippines, Kim Chi Ha in South Korea, Samuel Rayen in India and the feminist theologians in every country are pathfinders seeking new orientations. But they are still somewhat marginal to the mainstream of the churches.

E. The Popes on Rethinking Marian Theology and Spirituality

Marian theology and spirituality too are subjects of this rethinking and growth. Here the Popes have led to a certain extent in the process, even though they have serious reservations about gender equality when it comes to Church ministry. Both

Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) and John Paul II (1978 -) have a warm devotion to Mary. They have written encyclicals on Mary stressing both tradition and the need of a changed theology and spirituality.

Pope Paul VI

Writing in February 1974, prior to the international year of women, he calls for updating Mariology and Marian piety.³

1) He observes the need of adapting and updating Marian spirituality to the different times and cultures.

“24. The Second Vatican Council also exhorts us to promote other forms of piety side by side with liturgical worship, especially those recommended by the Magisterium. However, as is well known, the piety of the faithful and their – veneration of the Mother of God has taken on many forms according to circumstances of time and place, the different sensibilities of peoples and their different cultural traditions. Hence it is that the forms in which this devotion is expressed, being subject to the ravages of time, show the need for a renewal that will permit them to substitute elements that are transient, to emphasize the elements that are ever new and to incorporate the doctrinal data obtained from theological reflection and the proposals of the Church’s Magisterium. This shows the need for episcopal conferences, local churches, religious families and communities of the faithful to promote a **genuine creative activity** and at the same time to proceed to a careful revision of expressions and exercises of piety directed towards the Blessed Virgin. We would like this revision to be respectful of wholesome tradition and open to the legitimate requests of the people of our time.”

2) He proposes some principles and guidelines for action.

“27. It is sometimes said that many spiritual writings today do not sufficiently reflect the whole doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit. It is the task of specialists to verify and weigh the truth of this assertion, but it is our task to exhort everyone, especially those in the pastoral ministry and also theologians, to meditate more deeply on the working of the Holy Spirit in the history of salvation, and to ensure that Christian spiritual writings give due prominence to his life-giving action.

28. Similarly the faithful will appreciate more clearly that the action of the Church in the world can be likened to an extension of Mary’s concern. The active love she showed at Nazareth, **in the house of Elizabeth**, at Cana and on Golgotha – **all salvific episodes having vast ecclesial importance** – finds its extension in the Church’s maternal concern that all men should come to knowledge of the truth (*cf. 1 Tm. 2:4*), in the Church’s **concern for people in lowly circumstances and for the poor and weak**, and in her constant commitment to peace and social harmony, as well as in her untiring efforts to

³ To Honour Mary, “*Marialis Cultus*”, Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, Art. 24 ... 39 passim; no. 56, p. 75, 76.

ensure that all men will share in the salvation which was merited for them by Christ's death.

a) Return to Biblical Inspiration

“30. Today it is recognized as a general need of Christian piety that every form of worship should have a **biblical imprint**. ... texts of prayers and chants should draw their inspiration and their wording from the Bible, and above all that devotion to the Virgin should be imbued with the great themes of the Christian message.”

b) In the liturgy

“31. What is needed on the part of the leaders of the local communities is effort, pastoral sensitivity and perseverance while the faithful on their part must show a willingness to accept guidelines and ideas drawn from the true nature of Christian Worship; this sometimes makes it necessary to change long-standing customs wherein the real nature of this Christian worship has become somewhat obscured.”

c) Ecumenical concern

Pope Paul VI notes that a convergence on the understanding of the role of Mary in salvation could draw together the churches which have been historically divided on this count too.

“32. In the first place, In venerating with particular love the glorious **Theotokos** and in acclaiming her as the ‘Hope of Christians’, Catholics unite themselves with their brethren of the Orthodox Churches, in which devotion to the Blessed Virgin finds its expression in a beautiful lyricism and in solid doctrine. Catholics are also united with Anglicans, whose classical theologians have already drawn attention to the sound scriptural basis for devotion to the Mother of our Lord while those of the present day increasingly underline the importance of Mary's place in the Christian life. Praising God with the very words of the Virgin (*cf. Lk. 1: 46-55*), they are united too with their brethren in the Churches of the Reform where love for the Sacred Scriptures flourishes”.

d) Mary and Modern Women: Feminism

Pope Paul notes that some women are getting “disenchanted with devotion to the Blessed Virgin and finding it difficult to take as an example Mary of Nazareth” Interpreted traditionally in comparison with the vast spheres of activity open to women having with equality in the home, in politics, society and scientific research and intellectual life. Paul VI **exhorts “theologians**, those responsible for the local Christian communities and the faithful themselves to examine these difficulties with due care.”

Thereafter the Pope offers his own reflections for this task. He points out that the difficulties alluded to above are closely related to certain aspects of the image of Mary found in popular writings. They are not connected with the Gospel image of Mary nor with the doctrinal data it is normal that different generations would interpret

Mary in different socio-cultural contexts. The Marian image of earlier ages should be verified with today's conditions and Mary in the Scripture.

“The modern woman will note with pleasant surprise that Mary of Nazareth, while completely devoted to the will of God, **was far from being a timidly submissive woman** or one whose piety was repellent to others; on the contrary, she was a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the **humble and the oppressed**, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions (*cf. Lk. 1:51-53*). The modern woman will recognize in Mary, who ‘stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord’, **a woman of strength**, who experienced poverty and suffering, flight and exile (*cf. Mt. 2:13-23*). ... These are but examples, which show clearly that the figure of the Blessed Virgin does not disillusion any of the profound expectations of the men and women of our time but offers them the perfect model of the disciple of the Lord: the disciple who builds up the earthly and temporal city while being a diligent pilgrim towards the heavenly and eternal city, the disciple who **works for that justice which sets free the oppressed and for that charity which assists the needy**; but above all, the disciple who is the active witness of that love which builds up Christ in people's hearts”.

II: The pope then corrects certain attitudes of piety already denounced by Vatican

“... the exaggeration of content and form which even falsifies doctrine and likewise the small-mindedness which obscures the figure and mission of Mary. ... **vain credulity**, ...merely external practices ... sterile and ephemeral sentimentality, ... Careful defence against these errors and deviations will render devotion to the Blessed Virgin more vigorous and more authentic. ... It will ensure that this devotion is objective in its historical setting, and for this reason everything that is obviously legendary or false must be eliminated. It will ensure that this devotion matches its doctrinal content – hence the necessity of avoiding a one-sided presentation of the figure of Mary, which by overstressing one element compromises the overall picture given by the Gospel. It will make this devotion clear in its motivation; hence every unworthy self-interest is to be carefully banned from the area of what is sacred.

39. ... When the children of the Church unite their voices with the voice of the unknown woman in the Gospel and glorify the Mother of Jesus by saying to him: ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked’ (*Lk. 11:27*), they will be led to ponder the divine Master's serious reply: ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’ (*Lk. 11:28*). While it is true that this reply is in itself lively praise of Mary, as various Fathers of the Church interpreted it and the Second Vatican Council has confirmed, it is also an admonition to us to live our lives in accordance with God's commandments. It is also an echo of other words of the Saviour: ‘Not every one who says to me “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven (*Mt.1:21*), and again: ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you’ (*Jn. 15:14*).”

With such a renewed Marian theology and spirituality

“56. ... Contemplated. in the episodes of the Gospels and In the reality which she already possesses in the City of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary offers a calm vision and a reassuring word to modern man, torn as he often is between anguish and hope, defeated by the sense of his own limitations and assailed by limitless aspirations, troubled in his mind and divided in his heart, uncertain before the riddle of death, oppressed by loneliness while yearning for fellowship, a prey to boredom and disgust .. She shows forth the victory of hope over anguish, of fellowship over solitude, of peace over anxiety, of joy and beauty over boredom and disgust, of eternal visions over earthly ones, of life over death”.

Pope John Paul II

THE MAGNIFICAT – GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR⁴

Pope John Paul II has emphasized the spirituality of Mary’s commitment to justice and the liberation of the weak and oppressed, especially through his reflections on the Magnificat which the Church repeats ceaselessly.

37. ... At the same time, *by means of this truth about God* the Church *desires to shed light upon* the difficult and sometimes tangled paths of man’s earthly existence. Following him who said of himself: “(God) has anointed me to preach Good news to the poor” (*cf. Lk. 4:18*), the Church has sought from generation to generation and still seeks today to accomplish that same mission.

The Church’s *love of preference for the poor* is wonderfully inscribed in Mary’s *Magnificat*. God “has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, ...filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty, ... scattered the proud-hearted ... and his mercy is from age to age on those who fear him”.

Mary is deeply imbued with the spirit of the “poor of Yahweh”, who in the prayer of the Psalms awaited from God their salvation, placing all their trust in him (*cf. Pss. 25: 31: 35: 55*). Mary truly proclaims the coming of the “Messiah of the poor” (cf. Is 11.4, 61:1). Drawing from Mary’s heart, from the depth of her faith expressed in the words of the *Magnificat*, the Church renews ever more effectively in herself the awareness that *the truth about God who saves*, the truth about God who is the source of every gift, *cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor and humble*, that love which, celebrated in the *Magnificat*, is later expressed in the words and works of Jesus.

The Church is thus aware – and at the present time this awareness is particularly vivid – not only that these two elements of the message contained in the *Magnificat* cannot be separated, but also that there is a duty to safeguard carefully the importance of “the poor” in the word of the living God. These are matters and questions intimately connected with the *Christian meaning of freedom and liberation*. Mary is totally dependent upon God and completely directed towards him, and, at the side of her Son, she is *the most perfect image*

⁴ Pope John Paul II: “Redemptoris Mater”, Encyclical Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church, Art. 37, pp. 75-77.

of freedom and of the liberation of humanity and of the universe. It is to her as Mother and Model that the Church must look in order to understand in its completeness the meaning of her own mission”.

Cardinal Ratzinger,

MAGNIFICAT – “AWAITS THE THEOLOGIAN”⁵

The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger as Prefect, has issued two documents on liberation Theology. The first in August 1984 was rather critical of liberation theology and underlined the danger of Marxist Influences in its teaching and praxis.

The second “Instruction of Christian Freedom and Liberation” issued in March 1986 after a deeper study and wider consultation, stressed the need of freedom and liberation. These have an ecumenical dimension and belong to the traditional patrimony of the Churches and ecclesial communities. (*art. 2*) The instruction invites the theologians to develop thinking from the different and new situations, from liberative praxis as well as a reading of the Scripture In the light of the experience of the Church herself.

70. Similarly, a theological reflection developed from a particular experience can constitute a very positive contribution, in as much as it makes possible a highlighting of aspects of the Word of God, the richness of which had not yet been fully grasped.

The Conclusion of the Instruction is a reflection on Mary “the most perfect image of freedom and of the liberation of humanity and of the universe” and on her ‘Magnificat’, “with its liberating effects upon individual and social existence” (*art. 97*).

98. Pastors and all those who, as priests, laity, or men and women religious, often work under very difficult conditions for evangelization and integral human advancement, should be filled with hope when they think of the amazing resources of holiness contained in the living faith of the people of God. These riches or the *sensus fidei* must be given the chance to come to full flowering and bear abundant fruit. To help the faith of the poor to express itself clearly and to be translated into life, through a profound meditation on the plan of salvation as it unfolds itself in the Virgin of the *Magnificat* – this is a noble ecclesial task which awaits the theologian.

Thus a theology of freedom and liberation which faithfully echoes Mary’s *Magnificat* preserved in the Church’s memory is something needed by the times in which we are living. But it would be criminal to take the energies of popular piety and misdirect them toward a purely earthly plan of liberation, which would very soon be revealed as nothing more than an illusion and a cause of new forms of slavery. Those who in this way surrender to the ideologies of the world and to the alleged necessity

⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation”: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Vatican City 1986.

of violence are no longer being faithful to hope, to hope's boldness and courage, as they are extolled in the hymn to the God of mercy which the Virgin teaches us."

Our reflection in the next two chapters endeavours to articulate a Marian spirituality and theology that are biblical, ecumenical, relevant for women and men of today in their struggles for meaning, justice and love.

Chapter – 4

MARY, A MATURE ADULT WOMAN

Mary in the Scriptures

There are only a few references to Mary in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Of these some are of a rather imaginative and symbolic nature – such as the infancy narratives with the stories of the angels, stars, oriental visitors and perhaps even the killing of the innocents and the flight into Egypt. They were written perhaps about 80 years after the events they describe.

The two evangelists, Matthew and Luke present the events of the infancy of Jesus in ways that are difficult to reconcile to each other. Thus Luke does not report the visit of the Magi, the massacre of the innocents by Herod and the flight into Egypt. Luke's story mentions the purification of Mary and the presentation in the temple in the verses following the circumcision and naming of Jesus a week after his birth. Thereafter "they returned to their home town of Nazareth In Galilee". (*Luke 2.39*)

In Matthew's narrative Joseph is the key actor. It is to him that the angel appeared before the birth of Jesus to warn him concerning the plot of Herod to kill the baby Jesus, and later to recall him to the land of Israel.

We have to accept with modern scholarship that much of the data mentioned concerning the birth of Jesus are ways of presenting his infancy in a symbolic manner. The Evangelists have had also the concern to show that Jesus was the Messiah awaited by the Jews. Hence they write details which are, as it were, a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the expected Messiah. E.g. the genealogies of Jesus: Mt. 1, 1-17 and Luke 3, 23-38. As Matthew writes "Now all this happened in order to make what the lord had said through the prophet come true". (*Mt. 1.22*)

Whatever be their historicity, the infancy narratives have had and still have a

deep impact on the lives of the Christians. Many consider them an actual record of events. We can reflect on the gospel texts as generally accepted by people. They can thus be significant for a popular reflection and meditation, keeping in mind their generally symbolic nature. In this, on the one hand, we can think of Mary as portrayed by the Marian dogmas of the Church – the sinless spotless virgin mother ultimately assumed to heaven as a particularly privileged person.

On the other hand when we reflect on Mary as presented in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles we see Mary as an ordinary woman of her time who went through the process of living in very trying circumstances. The Gospels have very few references to her. But more important than these is the whole life of Mary with Joseph and Jesus, her relatives and the small community of Jesus' followers during his life time and shortly afterwards. Most of it is not written and we have to use our imagination, and therefore we are subject to correction.

She was living at a time of imperial rule, of exploitation of the poor, of women of her race by the Romans. It was **a time of intense** social upheaval and even conflict in her country. It is within this context that we have to think of the life of Mary and the events mentioned in the Gospels.

Annunciation

If we accept the traditional perspective of the Virgin Mother we note a situation of deep confusion in Mary. How would society accept her? What would St. Joseph's reaction be? This was a time when the law of Moses concerning the punishment of death for adultery could still be invoked as in the case of the adulteress brought to Jesus.

Even without a virginal conception Mary could have had the issue of the acceptance of an announcement concerning her future child – that it was to be the Messiah expected by the people. Then it would have meant also that the child would have had to undergo much suffering as the past prophets had. It is likely that Mary too was terrified by such an extraordinary vocation. Her “Fiat” can be understood as a courageous positive response to bear responsibility among her people. Her future life was a carrying out of the consequences of such a calling in response to God.

While most spiritual writers have interpreted Mary's “Fiat” in response to the announcement of the Angel Gabriel as a sign of her submission to God's will in respectful docility, some feminist theologians have underlined in this God's dependence on a woman for carrying out the divine plan of redemption. God is seen as giving an example of respect for a mutuality of relationships even between the Creator and the creature. How much more then should there be mutuality in human relationships between women and men.

The Visit to Elizabeth

A few months later we see Mary going through the countryside to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who had conceived a child in her old age. Mary was performing a personal loving service. This is still done in oriental families by the mother when a daughter conceives. She remained about three months with Elizabeth. Here she prays

in the prophetic tradition. Her prayer is the **Magnificat**. My soul glorifies the Lord. She announces the promises of God to her people. Perhaps we have got so accustomed to reciting it that we do not often think of the content of its message. In the context of the Old Testament prophecies she proclaims the liberative message of salvation promised by God to his people.⁶ She speaks of the deeds being realised by God. She mentions the type of impact God has on people.

“The arrogant of heart and mind he has put to rout, he has tom imperial powers from their thrones. But the humble have been lifted high. The hungry he has satisfied with good things, the rich sent empty away.” (*Luke 1.51-53*)

We can see in this a **three fold type of action**, first in the sphere of mentalities, second of political structures and power, and third the distribution of economic goods. In modern technology one may say she proclaims a cultural revolution in which the proud-hearted and the haughty are got rid of in favour of the poor simple, lowly people; a political revolution by which the political power passes from the mighty to the masses of the people; and an economic revolution by which the hungry and the starving get the good things instead of their being monopolised by the rich who are sent away empty.

We see here a total reversal of values and structures. It is undoubtedly a radical message of the type which one can read in the writings of the revolutionary prophets of the different ages. The pity however, is that the Christian tradition has succeeded in domesticating Mary so much that she is known rather as the comforter of the disturbed, than as a disturber of the comfortable. Her words can be the inspiration for radical action for change of mentalities of persons and structures of societies. The Christian tradition has unfortunately generally assigned to Mary a domesticated and a domesticating role. On the contrary the Magnificat shows how she reconciles social radicality with personal service, a revolutionary message with interpersonal love. This is a powerful and pleasing combination of practical action, deep reflective prayer and personal concern.

Fortunately modern theology, specially liberation theology sees in the Magnificat a spiritual support for the struggles of the poor and the oppressed for freedom and justice. This places Mary on the side of the needy, the weak and the exploited. It has been a great inspiration to the Christian movements for social transformation throughout the world.

Mary, A Young Mother

Birth of Jesus

The next recorded event in the life of Mary is the birth of Jesus. She travelled with Joseph from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, a distance of about 90 miles. This would have been a journey of several days when she was in the last stages of the expectation of her child. It shows a physically strong woman with good powers of endurance, rather than a type of gentle Madonna that we see portrayed in the paintings of Raphael, Lippi or Leonardo da Vinci. She was a tough ordinary woman

⁶ Samuel 2, “The Song of Hannah”

of the people. When she came to Bethlehem for the census, there was no place for her in the Inn. She was rejected by the well-to-do house holders of the day. They would evidently have seen her condition but had no sympathy for her. She must have suffered much owing to this refusal. She would have felt the unkindness of the well-to-do people to her in that delicate situation. She was thus experiencing rejection by the socially powerful of the day. She had to choose a very poor place for the birth of her child. The one who thought in terms of the Magnificat must have suffered deeply within herself at this type of treatment of the poor. Or rather she had to be with the animals. We can think of her here as undergoing the trials and hardships which many people in the slums of modern cities have to suffer everyday. She was like a squatter living in the shanty towns of many big cities of the third world.

Concerning the nativity these are the things which the Bible speaks of. They are rather hard facts of life. The theological tradition, however, has been very much more concerned about trying to find out whether the birth of our Lord left her a virgin or not, though there is no clear evidence about these in the New Testament writings. The preoccupations with these factors have tended to make of her nativity a sort of praeter natural phenomenon in which her sharing in the human suffering and anguish of a child birth in the context of social rejection are neglected or forgotten. What the gospel presents, however, is the story of a mature, adult woman facing some of the most difficult problems of womanhood and motherhood and thereby sharing their common trials. It is necessary to rediscover these in order that the life of Mary may have more meaning to ordinary women who undergo such trials.

Shepherds

On the visit of the poor Shepherds, who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks, Mary hears the message they had received from the Angel... “Peace on Earth to” (*Luke 2.14*)

The shepherds told Mary of their expectations of the child and “Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them” (*Luke 2.19*). The Gospel stories show Mary as a very reflective and thoughtful person who was deeply interested in the future of her child – any mother would be.

We see her next at the **Presentation** of Jesus in the temple 40 days after his birth. She makes the offering of the poor, two turtle doves (*Luke 2, 22-24*). The family belongs to the poor the *annavim* of whom Magnificat speaks.

Luke relates that the prophet Simeon and the prophetess Anna announced to her the suffering that she herself would have to undergo. A sword would pierce her heart. She was therefore made painfully aware of what she had to accept in future for being the mother of Jesus. We can therefore think of her having a premonition of her own sufferings due to her reflection. The presentation is often mentioned merely as an act of obedience to the Jewish rites of the day with a certain neglect of the significance of the presence of the old man and old woman. Motherhood is not an easy thing. It is a painful process not merely at moment of birth, but right through life. The mother suffers in the life of her child. So are also her joys. Mary was made vaguely aware of what was in store for her. She had once again to make an option to participate in the

redemptive liberative work of her son. It is only a strong, loving, mature woman who can accept to have a sword pierce her heart – and to go through life with it.

Flight into Egypt

Alongside the adoration of Jesus by the shepherd is the visit of the wise men from the East, the Magi. With their return by another route, Herod unleashed his fury. He felt threatened by the birth of an alternative leader of the people. Mary and Joseph, having duly received warning, had to flee to Egypt – a long journey along desert roads which even today are difficult for people to traverse by land in spite of modern means of communication. They had to retrace the steps taken by their forefathers in going out of Egypt. Mary would therefore, have had to suffer the trials of this journey in the hot sun with an infant baby.

Perhaps she had to suffer still more the mental anxiety caused by the massacre of the innocents under Herod. She would have seen that innocent children were killed and families reduced to mourning due to the jealousy of Herod for her son. The holy family were political exiles fleeing their country to safeguard the life of their child.

Her action is a common phenomenon that people engaged in radical liberation movements have to face today as we have seen in the case of the **political exiles**. She experienced the hatred, the jealousy and the venom of the political rulers of the day. She felt the brutality and savagery of the soldiers who carried out the behests of Herod. From the birth of her son Jesus, she was involved in the political issues of the day. Even if she did not herself choose to have that way.

Herod preferred to kill the **innocent children** rather than see a threat to his power. He did not inquire into the type of Kingdom the new Messiah would install. Political power generally reacts thus nervously, violently, cruelly, and oppressively.

Even today the powerful react thus. The rich are afraid that the children of the poor humans will take their thrones and privileges.

Thus the enormous effort of the rich to plan the families of the poor, instead of reforming themselves and their wasteful ways. Hence, the Herodian approach of the rich who propagate the compulsory sterilization of the poor women and men, and compel them to situations where aborting a child may seem a necessity. The murder of the innocents by Herod was a prototype of the way the rich and the powerful deal with the poor whom they consider a threat to their privileges. Mary experienced this hatred and cruelty in her own life. She had to face it bravely, sadly and even cunningly. Her approach was a mature, courageous one of a woman who knew her mind.

The story of the massacre of the innocents and the saving of Jesus reminds us of the killing of small male Israelite children by Pharaoh in Egypt and the escape of Moses who was to be later the liberator of the Israelites.

In the flight into Egypt she was a refugee and an exile in Egypt. The family returned to the land where the Jews had been slaves for several centuries. Joseph had

to be a **Migrant worker**, a non-national to whom the most menial tasks are given even in our own day. Hence, for many years, Mary along with Joseph would have experienced tribulations by being foreign workers in Egypt. In this too, she experienced personally the problems which many of the under-privileged people even in the rich countries have to face. They are the “Third World” inside the rich countries. During these times the holy family would have had to wait anxiously for their return to Palestine, their homeland. For this they had to keep track of events at home and await a favourable time to return home. Therefore her exile was again related to a political factor. She shrewdly awaited the death of Herod to be able to return to her native land.

It is a pity that the popular devotions to Mary do not recall her in these experiences (of the incarnation, the visitation, the presentation, the nativity, the flight and exile into Egypt) as a poor, courageous woman. She foreshadows the trials and struggles of women of our time too.

The Middle Aged Mary

In her life at Nazareth, Mary was identified with her people. She lived like one of them running a house and contributing to their livelihood. (*Luke 2.39, 40*)

She was not a solitary recluse in some walled off convent, but rather an ordinary woman given to the tasks of dally living.

In the temple the young Jesus reveals to Joseph and Mary the reasons of his calling. He speaks to them of obedience to the Father concerning his real mission among the people of his time. It is said that she did not understand. She was even worried that Jesus had treated them in that manner. She listened. She contemplated his words in her heart. She would have thought of his future life in which her own life would be involved. (*Luke 2.41-51*)

Other than in Matthew Chapters 1 and 2 the gospels, perhaps deliberately, present more of her than of Joseph. She, perhaps had a major say in the affairs of the family and in the formation of Jesus. We are not told when Joseph died. The Gospel lost track of him whereas Mary is mentioned up to the time of the post Pentecostal Church. She was perhaps the bread winner of the family after the death of Joseph or she contributed even prior to that. Thus she would have begun to get involved in the type of work which he considered was his mission. The loss of Jesus in the temple and his indication to Joseph and Mary that he had to be busy about his father's affairs can be understood as one of the stages in his progressive dedication to his mission. Even at the early age of twelve he indicated to them that he had a mind and a work of his own. It is most likely that having shown his prowess in Jerusalem he would have continued to concern himself with the problem of the people of his area.

It is unthinkable that Jesus would have lived a merely “**hidden**” life for the thirty years of his earthly existence. A progressive growth of his involvement and commitment is much more likely. As he advanced in years he is said to have grown strong in the Spirit. “As Jesus grew up he advanced in wisdom and in favour with God and men.” (*Luke 2.52*) This growing in favour cannot be merely a passive life of

submission to the parents, or being lost in the wilds or the desert. He must have practised what he was to preach later. Otherwise his life itself would have been a counter witness to his people; and so it would be to us. The parable of the Good Samaritan could not be related by an authentic leader who would have remained thirty years unconcerned about the lot of his people who were subjected to imperial rule and exploitation by the local religious and political rulers.

The character of Jesus, would have naturally attracted people to him. People must have come often to Jesus and Mary and discussed various issues, even before he engaged himself more fully in his public life. We can thus think of the life style that Mary lived in her house with Jesus, how his openness would have meant the openness of her own house to all types of persons of good and bad repute. Thus even in the very early stages of his life she would have had to undergo a process of education in relating to the type of people that gathered round Jesus. These included publicans, tax gatherers, sinners and prostitutes. We can re-evaluate this life at Nazareth so as not to think of these long years merely as ones in which Joseph and Mary confined themselves to their domestic chores and that Jesus was merely submissive to them. But we need not understand that it was the only thing that he would have done during the first 30 years of his life. It would be more natural to think of a gradual evolution in which his mission became clearer and his action developed.

Mary as a loving oriental mother must have concerned herself much with the thoughts, activities and life style of Jesus. She must have been wondering why he was living “in the wilds”, like a vagabond, without a house to call his own, a pillow for his head. His friendship with all types of persons including prostitutes was a scandal to the Pharisees. But Mary would have thought why Jesus was not settling down to a married life. She may have often asked herself, as oriental mothers still do, whether she should “arrange” a marriage for Jesus. She would have had to try to understand why Jesus preferred to be celibate even up to his thirties. She must have shared with him her anxieties for his future when she would be no more. She must have had the desire to have grand children of her own. He too must have often told her that he had to be about his father’s work. He may have told her that he did not expect to be able to live very long due to the opposition of the powerful ones to his point of view. If he remained unmarried it was not because he did not love any woman, but rather because he wanted to give himself fully to his cause. He would even humanly speaking have anticipated a troubled life and an early death which would not have enabled him to provide for a family. Whatever it be, this sort of problem must have provided for Mary inbuilt opportunities for her own growth in maturity, She would have increasingly shared his concerns. She would thus have experienced a process of internal liberation that was to lead to an ongoing sharing in his work and struggles.

The so-called “hidden life” of Jesus about which we know little would have been a period when the thinking of Jesus would have been developed. He would certainly have discussed them with his mother, who perhaps helped to evolve them. Mary herself may have even led Jesus to this life style.

The Jewish people were in a situation of oppression. There was a resistance to the Roman occupation and their collaborators. It is natural that Jesus, Mary and the group meeting with them would have discussed these – as takes place even today in

similar situations. The struggle grows gradually. It is important to ask ourselves how did Jesus become such an extraordinary person with such a unique message. Did he suddenly acquire it by an infusion of grace, was he born with it or did it grow gradually? Did he have discussions with Mary concerning the nature of religion and the sacred texts? They might have talked over the situation – what are we to do with the Pharisees, the Sadducees and Zealots. As Jesus grew up Jesus would have had to take up positions on these issues.

When John the Baptist was beheaded because of his strong positions against the powerful, Jesus came out with his own message of liberation. Jesus and John would have known each other well and perhaps been associated in their positions. It is said:

“When he heard that John had been arrested Jesus withdrew to Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and settled at Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee (*Mt. 4.12-13*)

This may have been because it was not safe for Jesus due to his association with John.

When John was beheaded Jesus came out. Here was a group in which when one is killed in their mission the other comes forward to carry it on – though with somewhat different accents. Jesus would naturally have discussed this with Mary who would have participated in this difficult decision of her son. Jesus would have said that he had to go ahead. He would have discussed with her about violence and peaceful methods – issues which were very important at the time. Mary too would have watched what was happening in her society and to her loved ones including John the Baptist whom she knew from his birth.

Mary would also have had the problem of trying to understand the attitudes of Jesus towards the religious practices and leaders of the day. She probably had to go through a process of understanding the deeper meaning of the type of religious teaching of Jesus. He emphasized the religion of authenticity, and sincerity. We may presume Mary did not need such a process; that she too intuitively agreed with the teaching and approaches of Jesus.

Mary would have participated in the process of Jesus putting forward his extraordinary message. **The very teaching of Jesus** would have made Mary reflect very much. The religion or spirituality that Jesus proposed is very universal. When Jesus said:

“Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, my sister, my mothers...” – (*Mt. 12.50*)

he was responding to a man who brought a message that his mother and brothers were outside wanting to speak to him. In Luke 11:27 Jesus replied to the woman who called out from the crowd “happy the womb that carried you and the breasts that suckled you”, “No, happy are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” All these would have made Mary think of the meaning of life itself – as explained by Jesus. Jesus would not have addressed this to Christians or (Roman) Catholics only! The teaching

of Jesus is not primarily about Christianity or the Church, but about the Kingdom of God which is universal. That sentence is valid for all. He was thus presenting an extraordinarily universal teaching, and not some thing parochial and limited.

The thinking of Jesus on the essence of spirituality on the nature of prayer which should be in spirit and in truth would have been a cause of much discussion and debate in the society of the day. His attitude towards formulations of prayer, and the external rituals were profoundly liberating and radical and that 2000 years ago.

“Not everyone who calls me “Lord, Lord”, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do.” (*Mt. 7.21, Mk. 12.40*)

His teaching concerning the woes of the rich, the obligations of rulers and the burdens imposed by lawyers on the ignorant – all these would have been of exceptional spiritual acumen then, (and even today). (*Mt. 23: Luke 11.39-52*)

Mary would have pondered these in her heart. She would have seen how Jesus was being misunderstood or rather misrepresented by so many, specially the powerful and the unjust. In this she would have suffered much as a mother, specially an oriental mother who is very attached to her children (even today).

She would most probably have **participated in the very evolution of this message**. The mother and son must have often spoken of these things. It is even possible that Mary herself helped the young Jesus to understand the meaning of life. She may have told him of the unkind and oppressive nature of the unjust society in which he was born as an outcaste. She might have told him of the killing of the innocent children, and of their long flight and exile in Egypt. Would it be wrong to think that Mary contributed to the growth of Jesus thinking. His sensitivity towards people would have been learnt in the home of Joseph and Mary.

Mary would certainly have had a share in the elaboration of the **programme** of Jesus teaching. He would have discussed with her the **risks** involved. This would be normal between mother and son, and more so in an ideal family the holy family would have been.

If on the other hand we hold that Jesus was God from his babyhood, and that he had the fullness of knowledge and virtue, then such relationships may not have existed between mother and son. Jesus would then have told Mary not to worry about his enemies and the Romans, for he was sure of rising up on the third day, if he was killed. Further in the 1990s they will be remembered in all the continents of the world, and even Pilate would be spoken of only because of him! In such a theological approach the relationships of mother and son would be quite different.

In an ordinary human family, as we think the holy family was, Mary would have had lot of **worries**. She would have been concerned about him; was he wise and **prudent**? Was he getting into unnecessary trouble? Where will all this lead us to – would have been her constant preoccupation during the last three years of Jesus life? If Jesus was the only child Mary’s concern would have been even more intense.

We therefore find Mary following **Jesus in his public life** – specially when he gets into trouble; she would have seen how he cleverly escaped on several occasions; sometimes by a devastating retort sometimes by disappearing from the crowd. We can think of how mothers are worried when their sons take up radical positions in revolutionary situations – as was Palestine of the day. Jesus was on the wrong side of the law, and even of the religious establishment. Large crowds followed him. This itself was upsetting to the authorities and hence dangerous for Jesus. Mary who saw how John the Baptist was beheaded would have been very worried about Jesus. She was the sorrowful mother.

But she may have even encouraged him, by being with him, by being supportive of his views. Her holiness and closeness to God would have helped her understand the profundity of the message of her son. It would seem to us that reflections such as these would be more meaningful than the elaborations concerning her being preserved from original sin and her being a virgin. It is such situations that mothers have to face in troubled circumstances that we see are so widespread in the world today.

Mary would have realized a liberation in her religious attitudes; she could have come to understand and live a type of sanctity that was lived in the midst of the active commitment to persons and public affairs. This was the example of Jesus her son. Then the growth of Mary in her spiritual life would have to be understood in a manner quite different from what is written about the stages of spiritual growth by many writers of Christian spirituality. She reconciled deep recollection with an active commitment along with her son and thus “grew in grace with God and man”, along with Jesus. (*Luke 2.52*)

In the whole process she would have been torn between her love and care for her only son and her own consciousness of the demands of integral human liberation and social justice in her times. As her son gave himself more fully to his public life, this dilemma must have been heightened within her. In living it through she grew to a mature option that was ennobling for her too.

Mary Shared in the Public Life of Jesus

In the **Marriage Feast at Cana**, Mary is actively present with Jesus and his disciples. She is participating in a secular event. She notices the embarrassment of the hosts. She invites Jesus to use his extraordinary powers to help out in the situation. She therefore knows already of his miraculous powers. In her solicitude for others, she launches Jesus on the road towards manifesting himself as a new spiritual leader. To come to such a position, Jesus and Mary must have had a deep understanding between themselves as to the role of Jesus. The servants of the household show their acceptance of the word of Mary to do whatever Jesus says. This is a single event that is mentioned. But it is likely that Mary was associated with Jesus as he went through his public ministry. She had by then grown personally to a new degree of maturity in accepting responsibility as a public person, being the mother of Jesus (*John 2, 1-12*).

The rejection of Jesus was connected with the attitude towards his family who were well known at Nazareth.

“When they heard him they were amazed, “Where did he get all this?”, they asked. “What wisdom is this that has been given him?, How does he perform miracles?, Isn’t he the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon?, Aren’t his sisters living here?”. And so they rejected him.” (*Mark 6. 1-6, Matt. 13.53-58, Luke 4. 16-30, John 6.42*)

Luke mentions the teaching at the Synagogue at Nazareth, where he announced his mission of the liberation of the oppressed. (Luke 4.18).

“When the people in the Synagogue heard this, they were filled with anger. They rose up, dragged Jesus out of the town and took him to the top of the hill on which their town was built. They meant to throw him over the cliff, but he walked through the middle of the crowd and went his way.” (*Luke 4.28-30*)

It is most likely that Mary would have known of these attempts on the life of Jesus.

The threats on his life were linked to his teachings as well as to being known that he was the son of Mary. His brothers and sisters were known though the names of the sisters are not mentioned (silence concerning women?) by the evangelists who speak of his brothers.

We meet her again off and on in the gospel story as when someone informs him that his mother is among the crowd and more particularly in the moment of trial, on the road to Calvary and at the foot of the cross. Mary followed him in his public life at least from a distance. She would have had the problem of accepting him in his life style, in his message and in his relationships.

Mary would have seen Jesus actively contesting the social and religious values of the time, that considered women as inferior, unclean and unsuitable as companions for a religious man. The life of Jesus was quite contrary to this.

Luke testifies to this, as in the story of the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee.

“She stood behind Jesus, by his feet, crying and wetting his feet with her tears. Then she dried his feet with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. (*Luke 7,38*)

“You did not welcome me with a kiss, but she has not stopped kissing my feet since I came.” (*Luke 7,45*)

Luke then mentions the names of several women who,

“travelled with Jesus through towns and villages, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom of God. The twelve disciples went with him and so did some women who had been healed of evil spirits and diseases: Mary who was called

Magdalena... and many other women who used their own resources to help Jesus and his disciples.” (*Luke* 8, 1-3)

These were women of some means who had made the option to walk together with Jesus throughout the countryside. Some were known to have had evil spirits in them.

Since his life style was one in which he contested social, cultural, economic and political values of the time, Mary would have had to go through her own process of thinking out her values concerning the whole of life. She would have had to accept the misrepresentations made by people concerning him: that he was a person of low repute, mixing up with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, insurgents and Zealots, that he was upsetting the people and rousing them to go against established values of the times and perhaps even to questioning the political leadership. She would also have suffered in seeing him going long distances with people on foot, not having a house of his own. This would naturally have led to her own deep reflection on the meaning of life and the values of the times.

She would probably have had still more difficulty as she saw her son was getting into trouble with the accepted leaders of the day, viz. Pharisees, Sadducees, the High Priests and Governors. She would have noticed his own involvement in the divisions and polarizations of the society partly due to his own teaching. She would have been apprehensive of his life as she would have seen how the leaders were trying to trap him on different occasions. Therefore, at least in relation to the life work of Jesus, Mary was involved in the issues and problems of the times. She could not have been indifferent to them. If she was, she would not have been with him in his public life up to end on the cross, and beyond that with the apostles in the early Church! We may, therefore, conclude that perhaps more than anybody else she understood the meaning of the life and message of Jesus. She would have realized why he was giving up his life and why he was refusing to be a conformist to the wrongs of the leaders of the day. Sometimes even his relatives and apostles wanted him to be more prudent to avoid trouble.

By this time the relationship between Jesus and Mary was such that she understood that for him his mission was of paramount importance. He placed service to the people before the interests of his family. His family members were worried about him. They even feared that he was going off his mind.

In the narration in Mark there are two parts separated by ten verses. The first Mk. 3, 20-21 mentions the problem as seen by the members of his family.

“Then Jesus went home. Again such a large crowd gathered that Jesus and his disciples had no time to eat. When his family heard about it, they set out to take charge of him, because people were saying, ‘He is gone mad’.”

In the second part Mk. 3, 31-35, Mark says “Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived”.

In the first part it is not clear whether Mary too thought he was beside himself. As Raymond G. Brown remarks, this would be,

“awkward after the Lucan and Matthean infancy narratives wherein Mary knew who Jesus was from his conception ...

“Luke and Matthew omit the first part of the Marcan scene and have no such awkward suggestion.”⁷

The family members were evidently deeply concerned about what Jesus was doing. “He and his disciples had no time to eat”. They would have been at least surprised that their brother or cousin-brother was having such an extraordinary impact on people. His behaviour was such that they were worried about his sanity. He was after all going against the values of society, challenging the wicked, keeping company with sinners and at the same time claiming an intimate relationship with God called ‘Abba Father’ by him. Some charged that Beelzebul the chief of the demons was in him. (*Mk. 3. 22*)

Whether Mary agreed with her relatives is not directly narrated. But at least she came with them. They must have discussed the apparently queer behaviour of Jesus with her; that is why they wanted to take him away.

In this situation Mary would have been very concerned. The people and his relatives were suspecting something terribly wrong with Jesus. If Mary knew well the mission and identity of Jesus, she would have been upset that the others thought of him in that manner. If on the other hand she did not have a clear understanding of him she would have worried – as any mother would – about her wayward son dangerously close to being possessed by the devil or “mad” and likely to be manhandled by the mob or powers that be. Their relatives would probably have had to persuade Mary to come along with them to speak to Jesus and call him away from his apparently unwise and risky mission.

The response of Jesus is,

“Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother.”
(*Mk. 3. 31-35, Mt. 12. 46-50, Luke 8. 19-21*)

Jesus not only does not accept to be called away from his mission, he uses the occasion to explain his understanding of his family of discipleship which is more important than being a physical blood relative. Jesus indicates the higher calling of discipleship in response to the word of God.

Mary can be seen as the one who responds most fully to this criterion of his family of the spiritual communion. That is a deeper meaning of her response of “Fiat” at the annunciation when she heard the Word of God calling her to the special

⁷ Raymond G. Brown S.S., “Biblical reflections on the Crisis Facing the Church”, Paulist Press, New York, 1975, p. 89 including note 79.

task. At the foot of the Cross Jesus, as it were, confirms the perception of discipleship of God as constituting a relationship to him.

“At the foot of the cross he (John) shows that Jesus does five Mary a role, not as his physical mother, but as the mother of the Beloved Disciple (now Jesus’ brother)”⁸.

If we do not presume that Mary had a knowledge and consciousness of Jesus as God or God’s specially chosen messenger, we can think in more human terms of the agony of a mother whose son (only child?) is getting into serious psychological and political trouble. Mary could then be thought of having experienced the sufferings of millions of mothers who see their children (even as adults) involved in risky political enterprises as in times of civil war, insurrections, non-violent protest movements and campaigns considered illegal by the political and military authorities. These are very common throughout the world today – in the third world, as well as the Capitalist First World and the crumbling empire of the Socialist Soviet Union that forms the bulk of the Second World.

One of the consequences of the development of Mariology in a “descending” way i.e. postulating divine maternity, immaculate conception, and virginity, Assumption, is that Mary is not thought of as a human mother of a human son who lived in very ordinary human circumstances, and faced situations similar to those faced by millions of mothers and children even today. This is the damage done by the traditional interpretation of Mariology that makes her more of a heavenly being (conversing with Angels) than a pedestrian woman of the people.

The conversations of Jesus and Mary can be better understood in the context of such a human Mary – making allowance for the popular story telling literary style of one or other of them. Jesus and Mary talk to each other or meet,

- at the finding of the child Jesus in the temple,
- at the wedding feast at Cana,
- during the public ministry of Jesus when the family comes to take him away,
- at the foot of the Cross.

At the temple Jesus is apparently a problem for Mary and Joseph and he replies,

“Why do you have to look for me? Didn’t you know that I had to be in my Father’s house? But they did not understand his answer. (*Luke 2. 49*)

“Mary was perplexed “My son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been terribly worried trying to find you”. (*Luke 2. 48*)

This was part of Mary’s maternal cross to be “terribly worried” about Jesus. Yet Jesus seems to rebuke her – as children of 12 years seem to do today. The story shows her as the intensely human mother who had missed the son for three days. Jesus seems

⁸ Raymond G. Brown : Op.cit p. 104

to be too big for his years – asking questions from the Jewish teachers and giving “intelligent answers”. The story as narrated fits in with the idea of an extraordinarily precocious child.

At the **Wedding Feast at Cana** also Jesus seems to be telling Mary not to interfere in his programme.

“You must not tell me what to do, my time is not yet come” (*John 2.4*)

The relationship of Mary and the adult Jesus is quite interesting and even intriguing. Mary seems to know his mind, whatever be his words; or she has that much of an influence on him that she can get him to advance his time. (It may also be that Mary told Jesus, “since your apostles – the first members of the future College of Bishops – came here, the wine has been finished, you should therefore do something about it”, and Jesus had to oblige her and the hosts). Whatever it be there is an understanding between the mother and son, with his emphasis on his time and particular mission.

The third meeting has been referred to already was when Jesus was fully in his ministry and evidently continues in it despite the worries of the family. Here he insists on discipleship as the criterion of membership of his new family.

Finally at the foot of the cross this relationship is sealed with the beloved disciple representing all his disciples and his mother being a mother to all. Both not referred to by name by John who alone narrates the incident are of symbolic value for the future.⁹

Mary as a mature and ageing woman accepted the changed relationship. She co-operated in his liberative action. She shows a way in which older women, including widows can participate in personal and societal liberation.

At the Trial of Jesus

Mary was with him. In the last days of his life she too was in Jerusalem. It was an emergency situation. These were times of unrest and rebellion as the historians indicate. The plot against Jesus was gathering momentum. He was betrayed by a combination of Roman soldiers, Jewish priests and one of his apostles. She would have witnessed the apparent triumph of the previous week when the people cried Hosanna to Jesus. But when he was captured there were few followers. We can try to appreciate what she would have had to undergo during these days. Doubtless her son would have spoken to her of his own decision to go ahead with his own public contestation of the leaders of his time. Even the apostles tried to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem but he decided that it was time for him to take the risks. It is perhaps only a mother whose only son is condemned to be executed who might understand the situation in which she was then. The apostles ran away when he was captured. Mary must have followed the son. She would have been aware of the torturing of Jesus, and of the unjust and unfair trial to which he was subjected.

⁹ Raymond G. Brown: *Op.cit* pp. 101-104

The night of the imprisonment and torture of Jesus must have been a terrible night for Mary. The son whom she had safeguarded for so long was now in the hands of his enemies. She must have suffered at the thought of the way he would be treated by the cruel leaders and soldiers. Her sensitive nature would have increased her sense of pain. Her helplessness before imperial rulers, their native collaborators and the religious leadership must have caused much distress to her. Instead of the mighty being thrown down from their thrones, the Innocent one was being tortured.

On the way to Calvary she met him. Words are not recorded but she certainly suffered with him and on account of him. He was under pressure to give up his message to discontinue his mission and thus save his life; but he did not compromise, nor do we see her asking him to compromise in order to satisfy Pilate and get his release. She did not suggest a second exile into Egypt. On the contrary she was with him in his decision to go unto the end. For, as he said, **“Greater love than this no man hath, than to give up his life for his friend.”** (*John 15. 13*)

Mary & Women in Jesus Passion

Mary and several women were very close to Jesus in the last days of his life. All the evangelists mention this.

“His friends had all been standing at a distance; the women who had accompanied him from Galilee stood with them and watched it all.” (*Luke 23. 49*)

“A number of women were also present, watching from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and waited on him. Among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” (*Act 27. 55, Mark 15. 46, John 19. 25-26*)

At the moment of his supreme sacrifice the women led by Mary stood with Jesus. It is noteworthy that at the most difficult and trying moment in the life of Jesus, most of his male companions seem to have fled, or been not so close by except John. Other predecessors of the apostles and of the Popes did not measure up to this occasion.

Mary with Mary of Magdala and the other women – fortunately some are mentioned by name here – stood at the foot of the cross. Perhaps there was less danger for them from those who killed Jesus. They participated most closely in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This is the first and real Eucharist – the unique sacrifice of the New Testament. The Eucharist is much more than the last supper. It is important to remember this in connection with the restriction of the Christian priesthood to women.

Mary Stood at the Foot for the Cross

Stabat Mater dolorosa. When Jesus said “I thirst” and the soldiers gave him a sour drink his mother’s heart must have felt an intense pain and sadness. She was unable to help him in his last moments.’ She suffered the anguish of so many women

who are unable to help even in a small way to alleviate the sufferings of their dear ones under the hands of torturers and executioners. She experienced the powerlessness which is the lot of the majority of the exploited marginalized people in almost all countries of the World. How many mothers, wives, sisters suffer like her today, when arbitrary rule is becoming increasingly the order of the day, and the condition of political prisoners is so cruel in countries which call themselves democracies – of the Right or the Left. She was steadfast in making the ultimate sacrifice for her only child. He was offering his life for a cause: the integral liberation and salvation of his people and of humankind. She participated in the sacrifice. It must have been the most trying act of faith in the promise of God and in the unorthodox teaching of her son. She must have been tempted to ask whether any good would come from such a death. She too suffered due to the action of false informants, soldiers, officers of the law, the high priests, governors, and the mob and on his being stripped, spat on and jeered at.

On the cross her son was identified with criminals and insurgents. A law-breaker was preferred to him and he was rejected by the vast majority of her people who had benefited so much from him. We can therefore think of the depth of her suffering in the trial and death of Jesus. We can also consider her trying to understand the meaning of these events. The causes of his death were clear viz. The jealousy and hatred of the political and religious leaderships of the day. Knowing his innocence, the integrity of his life, the sublimity of his message, the authenticity of his witness and the peaceful nature of his methods she would have suffered all the more to see how he was being dealt with cruelly by the mob and the strange combination of Roman and Jewish leaders.

Jesus too would have suffered much at the prospect of leaving his ageing mother alone on earth. He tried to provide for her by asking his beloved disciple John to look after her. **“There is your mother”**. To Mary he offered another son. **“Woman, there is your son”**, and from that moment the disciple took her to his home. The death of Jesus meant that Mary had to face the problems of loneliness. (*John 19, 25-27*)

Generally oriental parents look forward to spending their old age with their children and grand children. In the case of Mary she had to sacrifice her son for the liberation of others. In the process she was left alone. The feeling of being alone in the world is a terrible suffering for all people. Perhaps it is greater for an ageing woman, who begins to realize physically her own helplessness. The struggles for liberation are very demanding on our human nature, specially in times of arbitrary despotic rule. While Mary suffered in the agony of her son, she must have felt intensely her own sense of losing the one for whom she had lived, and who had cared so much for her. It is likely that Jesus would have cared very much for her personally, as this was the substance of his teaching. His love and concern for others can be an indication of his even greater love for his mother. Their deep attachment to each other must have made this parting more painful and sad. Mary could have said "greater love than this no woman hath, than to offer the life of her only son for the liberation of others". Her courage and strength of character under such circumstances can be an inspiration specially to women to bear the cross of loneliness specially in old age.

Redemptive suffering, however noble it may be, is painful for those involved,

for those in prison, and those out of it; for those who die and those who survive. Jesus and Mary must have suffered because of their love for each other. Jesus also shows how in such suffering, the small group or community is very important. Mary is entrusted to John: and John to Mary. The community of liberative action endures beyond the grave. This relationship of Mary and John can have much meaning for the small groups and communities that dedicate themselves to human liberation under difficult circumstances. When one is taken to prison or killed the others share the responsibilities for his family. This is a common situation in many countries today.

Mary Remained Faithful to the End

She did not run away as most of the apostles did. She identified with him until the end in the moment of his apparent failure. In this way she acted as a strong mature person giving herself totally to a cause and making the supreme sacrifice of her own son and only child. And since we know that throughout her life she contemplated God's word in obedience, we are justified in thinking that she was aware of the cause of his death in contestation of the false value systems of his time. He affirmed the rights of all and of God against the abuses of the leaders.

She would have suffered much to see her own (only) son so treated. His very innocence would have made her suffering even more poignant and painful. She would have experienced once again the harshness of the law, of the authorities of the ruling elites. She would have seen how treacherous the religious leadership was; how the fear of the Romans affected Pilate. The very jeering of the crowd asking for Barabas instead of Jesus would have made her think of the ingratitude of the crowd, or the fickleness of the loyalties of many. **Peter's** denial must have pained her deeply. In a sense only John and her women companions stood with her at the foot of the cross. This was a moment of **supreme tragedy** for her. His life seemed a total failure, and she was going to be left alone – except for John to whom Jesus confided his mother.

In a real sense Mary is the one who **offered the life of Jesus as a sacrifice**. Jesus is the one who dies; dying is difficult. Offering one's own son and continuing to live in a hostile environment is even more demanding and heart rending. She offers the first sacrifice of the life of Jesus – born of her flesh. She is the first priest of the new testament along with Jesus, offering the flesh of her flesh. She participates in the first and foremost sacrifice of the new testament.

We see here her **strength of character**, her convictions, her perseverance. She did not try to persuade Jesus to compromise with the powers that be, and come down from the cross. She did not think it better to persuade him to come to terms with the ruling establishment and spend the rest of his life in a more quiet way. This would be the thought of most mothers, who want to save the life of their son. Even when Peter and most of the apostles ran away Mary and the women, with John, stood firmly, resolutely loyal to Jesus to the end and beyond the grave. The first of the popes and bishops ran away in the moment of danger, but these women led by Mary remained by the side of Jesus – dead or alive. She believed him and in him.

She shows herself strong, determined, to face all the insults of a mob, the opposition of the religious and political leaders and the local and foreign powers. She

was also related to the political events for he was killed as one who was a threat to the Roman powers and the high priests and the religion of the day. She is at this stage a **mature ageing woman** who has gone through many bitter experiences of life. She had risked much to save the infant Jesus by flight into Egypt. Now she cannot save him. From the crib to the cross she is present in a continuing experience.

Resurrection

It was the women who found that Jesus had risen. When they related the events to the followers, they did not believe it. Jesus then appeared to the eleven and reproached them for their incredulity and dullness, because they had not believed those who had seen him risen from the dead. (*Mk. 16. 11-14*) The Jerusalem Bible translates dullness as **“Obstinacy”**.

In Luke it is related that when the women told the apostles about the risen Jesus “the story appeared to them to be nonsense, and they would not believe them”. (*Luke 24. 11*).

In the Lukan text, concerning the journey to Emmaus the stranger (Jesus) himself tells them “How dull you are! How slow to believe all that the prophets said”. (*Luke 24. 25*)

This is a reaction of caution and perhaps of a healthy scepticism. It can also be regarded as a way in which the future Pope and Bishops reacted to women’s experience – “Nonsense!” in the Emmaus story it is said “some women of our company astounded us”.

This is an interesting experience. Women were not only present at the death of Jesus. They waited on him. They were the first to witness the resurrection. The men on the other hand at best stayed at a distance and were slow, dull and obstinate in believing the women’s experience of the risen Lord. It is important to reflect on this.

This is one experience. There are others such as the apostles in the garden of Olives – They fell asleep. They could not watch one hour – even at this solemn moment of Jesus life. When Peter was challenged by one of the housemaids “You were there too with Jesus the Galilean.” Peter denied it “I know nothing”. When another maid asked him again Peter denied Jesus “I do not know the man”. The third time Peter denied with curses... then the cock crew... (*Mt. 26. 69-75*)

These texts show how close the women were to Jesus in those last days. Mary followed Jesus. Her sacrifice was the greatest and most painful. On the other hand today men claim to have control over the Eucharistic sacrifice which is a principal function of the Christian priesthood. We have a selective use of scriptures – as when it is claimed **“Thou art Peter and on this rock.”** Why do we neglect the other texts: **“before the rock crows you will disown me three times”** (*Mt 26. 75*) or **“Get behind me Satan”**. In these questions it is useful to remember that we all tend to use scripture selectively.

The women seem to have been more faithful to Jesus through the darkest moments and days of his life. The men were generally frightened, disheartened, slow to believe, dull and obstinate. They became convinced and courageous only after receiving the Holy Spirit in plenitude.

After the death of Jesus when the small group of disciples were in great anxiety and difficulty, not knowing what their future would be, Mary was with them. “All these were constantly at prayer together, and with them a group of women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” (*Acts 1. 14*) This was the time leading up to the Pentecost. Mary was with them undoubtedly a central personality – one who was consoled by them; and they were strengthened by her deep conviction of the goodness and correctness of her crucified son.

“Neither the New Testament nor any other sources gives reliable information of the further course of her life and her death.”¹⁰

We can reflect on the perseverance, courage, determination and fidelity to Jesus teaching that would have animated this group around Mary. They would doubtless have recalled the essentials of Jesus’ message: viz love one another. If you love one another, even if you die you will live. The early Church had to face misunderstandings and the risk of death. She would have seen the Apostles and disciples going out proclaiming the message of Jesus and getting into difficulties due to that. Mary would certainly have been painfully aware of the killing of Stephen. Here was the mother of Jesus staying firm with the small group despite the threats, arrests and the killings.

She bears witness to a hope that is beyond death for she persevered in the cause after the death of her son. She was conscious of his mission identified with it, and, after his death was perhaps the principal mainstay of the cause for which he died. Since he died for the integral liberation of all we may say that she too was courageous, consistent and selfless in her participation in the same cause. At the foot of the cross she took the risk of supreme failure of not only losing the cause but also her only son. She had the courage to face public shame and jeering.

When everything around her seemed to be crumbling, when all that she had been living for seemed to be ending with the death of her son on the Cross, Mary remained steadfast as a mature, level headed, adult woman. Her faith was tried in the crucible of suffering. Her suffering was perhaps more mental and psychological, than physical. She knew Jesus was innocent. She knew he believed in his message. Yet she saw society condemning him. She saw him ostracized, rejected. She suffered because of the false values of the times; because of the difference between personal goodness and social rejection. The exploiting rulers and hypocrites won the day. Everything seemed to end in the grave. She hoped beyond hope. Jesus must surely have explained to her the meaning of his saying - he who dies will live. She is the first and closest sharer in the death/resurrection experience of Jesus.

¹⁰ John L. Mckenzie “Dictionary of the Bible”, Chapman, London, 1965. p. 552.

It is of very great importance for the understanding of Mary that her whole life be re-thought in relation to that of Jesus and their common task in which they had different roles but a similar commitment. We see in her, therefore, a type of woman who was not concerned merely with the individualistic promotion of her family and of her child. She was not trying to save money or goods. Her concern was not to make a beautiful home for him. She understood Jesus as one living for others; asserting a religion of personal freedom; and contesting the injustices of his day.

We can thus contemplate the type of woman Mary was in real life. It is this type of woman that needs to be central to Christian spirituality. Mary belongs to the whole of humanity as a strong, dedicated woman and mother; **one who was the closest associate of one of the greatest spiritual leaders of humanity**. She was a mature, adult woman who was able to face life's problems along with Jesus. She was able to take up strong positions side by side with Jesus against all forms of exploitation. It is this type of Mary that is more faithful to the New Testament than the Mary of traditional Christian theology and spirituality.

This Mary of the New Testament does not have much in common with the Mary of the theological elaborations, which are derived from a particular interpretation of one sentence or other of the scriptures. It is from such types of elaborations that Mary has to be liberated: a presentation which had made her a woman who is not female; a woman who does not know what it is to be human, who does not go through the birth pangs of bringing forth Jesus, who does not know sin, who does not feel the trials of human existence.

Mary in heaven would perhaps be sad (if not kindly amused) at what sort of attention Christians give to some of her bodily characteristics and neglect her entire life relationship to Jesus in his mission. She may be even more sad that for so long Christians did not appreciate why Jesus had to suffer and give his life in the social conditions of their time.

The most important realities concerning Mary are not so much that she is immaculate, a virgin, and in what form she is mother of God, but that she was intimately associated with Jesus of Nazareth, flesh of her flesh, in the beginning of this new community that was to carry the message of human liberation and fulfillment in loving one another, sharing what we have and in building a new humanity. In this Mary is an example to all humankind.

The Church's love of preference for the poor is wonderfully inscribed in Mary's Magnificat.¹¹

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater: The Mother of the Redeemer*, Vatican, 1987, pp. 72, 76.

Magnificat

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked on his servant in her lowliness.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
For he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name:
And his mercy is from age to age
on those who fear him.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud-hearted,
he has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."*

(Lk. 1:46-55)

Chapter – 5

MARY AND SOCIETY

The traditional Mariological dogmas are in many senses not adequate for understanding Mary in relation to society. In many ways they have been used for domesticating Mary, women, religion and spirituality. We have to try to understand Mary in relation to what Jesus was about. A holistic approach is necessary because there would have been a very close relationship and friendship between Jesus and Mary. It would be natural in an ideal family. We should also include Joseph in this – for he is perhaps one of those most discriminated against and marginalized by theology. Joseph is quite important in the first two chapters of St Matthew, and in Luke 2 about the boy Jesus in the temple.

Mary and Jesus

We can think that Mary had an understanding of Jesus. She thought of him and his views. They grew up together. We can think of a partnership of Jesus and Mary, and later a search together. After some stage Jesus would have had the leading role; but Jesus died young and Mary continued with the group of followers.

In order to reflect on Mary and society we should not begin with the traditional dogmas of a descending Mariology: immaculate conception, virginity, mother of God, assumption and coronation. We should rather begin with Jesus and his work. Then we can try to see how Mary related to Jesus. More than any one else Mary lived for Jesus. Her life was linked to his.

Having reflected earlier on what the Gospels say of Mary, it is necessary to consider Jesus' in relation to his mission of integral human liberation. Mary participated in this task, perhaps even helped to evolve his thinking, life style and way of presenting himself to the public.

The Message of Jesus

Jesus was principally concerned with the Kingdom of God, a rule of righteousness. He formed a community for this purpose – not primarily a Church. The principal teaching of Jesus is that God is love and we must love one another. That is the sum and substance of the law and the commandments. It is more important than all the books of theology. It is also the core of the teachings of the other religions. This love must express itself in action. **“I was hungry, and you gave me food”** – (*Mt. 25.35*) The mission of Jesus as in Luke 4.18 is **“to announce the good news to the poor..., to liberate the captives ... to set free the oppressed ...”** This is the principal task and message of Jesus.

Jesus did not claim to be God in such a way as to be “consubstantial with the Father”, “hypostatically uniting two natures in one person”, “the second person of the blessed Trinity”, “transubstantiated and present In the tabernacle”. These are not

words Jesus used. Jesus taught the love of God for all and we must move away from selfishness to other centeredness, towards sharing in love and thus being fulfilled. That is the beginning of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus Invited persons to be converted to the values he preached. That was his mission viz an ongoing conversion of persons and society. The conversion Jesus wanted was:

From:

Death	to	life through death to self
darkness	to	light
error and ignorance	to	truth, knowledge, consciousness, awareness of self, others and God.
selfishness	to	unselfishness
injustice	to	justice
hatred and prejudice	to	love including love of enemies, Peace, Shalom, forgiveness
greed	to	sharing
profit-seeking	to	need-serving
pride	to	humility, service
privilege	to	equality, empowerment of all.
abuse of power	to	power being service
patriarchy	to	mutuality, partnership
hierarchy	to	community, reciprocity
domination	to	participation
isolation	to	cooperation, communion
indifference & apathy	to	caring, concern, empathy, commitment
unfreedom	to	freedom
hypocrisy & dishonesty	to	honesty, sincerity, authenticity

His mission was not the presentation of highly intellectual dogmas of an abstract theology, but the practical call to conversion of all persons from evil, avarice and injustice to love sharing and communion... koinonia, diakonia. These are the content of what we understand by integral liberation.

This is what he taught, very often in parables. He did not propound dogmas and theological definitions. His method was to teach by witnessing to his message in his day to day life. He was more concerned with setting up a community rather than an institution or a hierarchy.

i) Personality of Jesus

Jesus was loving and strong, affectionate and courageous. Because of his love and concern for others he took up positions in public life. He challenged the institutions, systems, norms and taboos of the day. Nothing was beyond his critical examination, or too sacred not to be challenged. No authority was too great not to be contradicted. He questioned the assumptions of society and of religion of the day.¹²

¹² Albert Nolan : "Jesus before Christianity", Orbis, N.Y.

Jesus was an extraordinary person. We can think of Mary as an extraordinary woman, the woman who gave birth to Jesus and brought him up to be this exceptional person. I do not think Jesus began life with the fullness of knowledge. He made some mistakes such as concerning the end of the world. Even the disciples of Jesus had some questionable views about it. I do not think that we need assume that Jesus had the fullness of knowledge and the beatific vision even at the end of his life. Otherwise his agony and death would hardly be such a great sacrifice since he would have known that he would rise again on the third day.

It is most likely that Mary participated in the growth of Jesus. They would have discussed these Issues together. Those who bring up children and teachers of religion know how children question elders concerning the meaning of life. Jesus questioning these things would have meant that Mary too had to respond to them. Or it may be Mary herself inspired some of this (then heretical) thinking; specially when we think of Mary of the Magnificat, the exiled and refugee it is not difficult to think of her too as having such views on life and society.

ii) Jesus and Inter Personal Relations

Jesus had an approach of openness to others in inter-personal relations. In a society in which there were many taboos and much social discrimination. Jesus accepted and respected everyone as a person. He broke through the taboos of the time because of the love of God, and because of his deep understanding of the human condition. He did not conform his behaviour to the limits imposed by the social restrictions of the time preventing communication across the social classes, religions, races and sexes. He was loving towards all, and yet strongly critical of what was wrong in society including exploitation of the weak and the poor.

He had an outgoing approach and an openness towards community, mutuality and partnership. This included persons of both sexes. He was remarkably close to women – both those considered good and those of ill fame like the one taken in adultery. Women in turn were much attached to Jesus as is mentioned in the Gospels. They were the ones who were most faithful to him. Mary of Magdala – from whom he had formerly cast out seven devils – was loyal to him even beyond death, and was favoured by being the first to meet the risen Lord. (*Mk. 16.9*)

Rosemary R. Ruether sees a particular significance in the relationship of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. It has a more meaningful message in the context of the struggle for women's dignity and rights:

“The Mary who represents the Church, the liberated humanity, may, rather be the repressed and defamed Mary of the Christian tradition, Mary Magdalena, friend and disciple of Jesus, the first witness of the resurrection, the revealer of the Christian Good News. Blessed is the womb that bore thee, the paps that gave thee suck? Nay, rather blessed is she who heard the Word of God and kept It. (Luke 11: 27-28)¹³

¹³ Rosemary R. Ruether : “New Woman New Earth”, Seabury, New York, 1975. p. 59.

The relationship of Jesus with Mary Madgalene is one of love, trust, loyalty and mutuality that went against the social norms of the day and persevered beyond death and the tomb.

iii) Jesus and Liberation in Religion

The spirituality of Jesus was not that of the traditional religion of the time – of rituals, of long prayers, and different types of taboos. His understanding of religion was one of interiority, sincerity and authenticity, of honesty, freedom from greed and seeking for power and pleasure. His concept of holiness was one of self giving in other-centeredness. Spirituality was not merely a matter of an external authority or some sacred text telling people what has to be done. He was supremely free and honest in his search for the true and the good.

He taught that the Spirit is in each one, and each one had to respond to the inner call. There was no need of an external teacher. He was liberated and liberating with reference to women; and similarly, women with reference to him. He was friendly and relaxed with them. They cared for him. The persons disregarded by society were respected by him. (*Mt. 23. 8-9, John 16. 13*)

Religion was not to be some ostentatious practices. He was not very much concerned with the clergy of the day. He criticized them. They in turn found him a danger to religion and to their alliance with the Imperial rulers. They therefore plotted against him and wanted him killed. Thus Jesus was presenting a form of spirituality that was profoundly attractive, challenging and in a sense akin to the aspirations of men and women of modern times.

iv) Jesus and Social Liberation

Jesus was for social liberation. The wealth of the society was to be for all. He was for sharing the resources among all. The one who had two coats had to give one to another in need. He was hard towards the rich who had the obligation of sharing their wealth. He did not cajole them. On the contrary after a meal at the place of Zacheus, the host had to give away half his wealth and repay four fold for whatever was taken away unfairly by him. He knew how difficult it was to convert the rich. He spoke to them straight and direct. e.g. the woes to the rich and lawyers, blind guides, whitened sepulchers ... the parable of Dives and Lazarus. (*Mt. 23. 1-36, Mk. 12. 38-40*)

v) Jesus and Political Liberation

Jesus' stand on political liberation is quite clear. For him power had to be a service. He was against elitism, against discrimination and Inequalities. He wanted love of all, including enemies. He was for genuine reconciliation and peace that respected all. He was opposed to the exploitation of his people by the ruling classes and the Roman Imperialists. He was killed as one who might be the King of the Jews.

“But the crowd shouted back. ‘If you set him free, that means you are not the Emperor’s friend.’ Anyone who claims to be a king is a rebel against the Emperor”. (*John 19. 12*)¹⁴

All these show Jesus profounding a new approach to inter-personal relations, social life, the world and religion. Mary would have been aware of these. Jesus and Mary would have been discussing these. Any ordinary loving mother and son would have talked over these issues and even decided to face together the risks involved in such attitudes.

Or else it may be thought that Mary did not understand or approve of Jesus at least at some stages of his life. Then too she would have had to interact with him and perhaps suffer much therein.

A principal element in Marian spirituality would have to be that she was a partner in this mission of Jesus. She shared in the life, message and work of Jesus and the Jesus community.

Mary in the Early Church

Soon after Jesus’ death, Mary was present at the centre of the Jesus Community. In the Acts of the Apostles it is recorded:

“All these were constantly at prayer together and with them a group of women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers...” (*Acts 1. 14*)

Thus in the young Christian community, Mary’s presence is specially mentioned. She would doubtless have been a key personality in this group as the one closest to Jesus.

In the Acts of the Apostles we see how much the life of this community was one of being persecuted. They were opposed as they were contesting the false values of the society and religion of the time. The Acts mentioned how they were arrested, and when they were freed. (*Acts 4. 3*)

“they went back to their friends and told them everything that the chief priests and elders had said.” (*Acts 4. 23*)

They were often arrested and flogged.

Stephen, before he was stoned to death, related at length the story of Moses – the liberation of the people by God through Moses. Stephen announced how God was concerned about the oppression of the Jews in Egypt – and heard their groans... and sent Moses to rescue them (*Acts 7. 34*). Stephen draws a connection between the liberation from Egypt and their situation then. The Jewish leaders had killed or persecuted all their prophets. (*Acts 7. 52*)

¹⁴ my. “Jesus Christ and Human Liberation”, Quest 48, CSR, Colombo, 1976.

The Acts record violent persecution and plots against the lives of the apostles (*Acts 9. 23*). Herod beheaded James (*Acts 12. 2*). The early Church had to face many difficulties. They were suspected, threatened and persecuted. The women were with them, supporting them in word and prayer perhaps helping them to hide. (*Acts 12.12*)

One can think of Mary, the Mother of Jesus as a bedrock of strength and understanding. In times of trouble and repression, men get into trouble. They are the ones who even take up arms – though not in this case. Many women stand steadfast. They do not leave the side of those in trouble. We know this even from modern experiences of repression and peaceful resistance. We can therefore surmise that Mary would have been with this Jesus community.

Property in Common

This group of Jesus followers was one in which they had every thing in common. If it was not a bad word one would have called it a sort of “Socialistic” or “Communitic” society. They shared their goods.

“The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all given great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any member who might be in need. (*Acts 4. 32-35*)

Mary knew this approach to economic and social life. She would have been a principal participant in it, for this is how the earliest disciples of Jesus understood his message and life style. A theology of Mary has therefore to be developed in terms of liberated interpersonal relations, and a community of sharing of goods and a spiritual teaching of interiority, sincerity and social justice. They had experience of being an underground Church contesting the religious and social order of the day and of paying the price for it.

We can think of the group of Mary, Joseph, Jesus, John the Baptist, the brothers of Jesus, the sons of Zebedee, the women, Mary of Magdala, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, Peter John, Andrew... Mary of Cleopas as a small community that had been evolving during a period of time. In a society in which hierarchy and patriarchy were normal, a new type of community evolved based more on sharing, partnership and bearing witness to a liberating message.

Mary was very much perhaps a mother in this situation. She would have been keeping the group together. In Jesus’ life time, her home would have been a place where many discussions took place concerning their thinking and action. They would have gathered together to mourn the death of John the Baptist who would have been very close to the family.

We can think of this as a group that was bonded in struggle, in arrests, persecution, in death and in joy. It was a new community that was attractive. In it

there was a dignity for persons. It was not money seeking or power hungry. It did not accept the inequality of the day. It was a counter culture to the Jewish and Roman societies of the day. We can think of the type of relationships and understanding that would have existed in the community. Mary the mother of Jesus would have had a close relationship with Mary of Magdala who ‘was deeply attached to Jesus in life and beyond death.

The roles of women and men in the Church could be studied in relation to what they seem to have been in the life of Jesus and the early community as seen in the Gospels and the Acts. Women had a very important and primary role in that society. It was not hierarchy that constituted the society. Participating in communicating a message, and building new communities of faith and life in self sacrifice were the principal task of the early disciples.

Models of Mary

Contemporary theology sees better than in previous generations that there are numerous ways of understanding God and human destiny. Within Christianity we discern different models of Christ as well as of the Church. The Church of first disciples, the persecuted Church of the first three centuries, the Church reconciled to the Roman Empire, the Church of feudal Europe, of capitalism and European imperialism, of the post World War II each has had its concept of Jesus Christ, of his role and identity.

Likewise we can see different understandings of Mary over the ages; even in the four gospels there are different accents. As Raymond G. Brown remarks, since there is much less historical data concerning the life and personality of Mary than even of Jesus.

“She lends herself more freely than Jesus does to a symbolic trajectory.” ...

“In later ages the Church constantly turned to Mary to meet the ever-changing aspects of Christian discipleship, translated into terms of virtue and piety. In the Constantinian period, when the threat of martyrdom had passed and the ideal of carrying one’s cross was beginning to find expression in asceticism, Mary became the model of women who were withdrawing into the Egyptian desert to lead a cenobitic life. Both Athanasius and a Coptic document that appears in the proverbs of the Council of Nicaea¹⁵ describe Mary as a perfect Egyptian nun who ate and slept only when her body demanded it, modulated her voice, shut her eyes when dressing and undressing, avoided her relatives and even other women who spoke of the things of this world, and who made progress every day.

“In the Middle Ages Mary became the fair lady of the knights, ‘Our Lady’, the symbol of chaste love. In Renaissance she became the tender mother caring for her spiritual children.

¹⁵ Hilda Graef, “Mary, A History of Doctrine and Devotion”, (London, Sheed and Ward, 1963) 50ff.

“In this century she was exalted as part of the Holy Family, that model family of Nazareth which was the Church’s rebuttal to divorce and lax morals. And most recently she has been hailed by the American Bishops as the model of the liberated woman. One cannot historicize all these diverse and even contrary pictures of Mary; but in having her assume these symbolic roles, the Church has been contemporizing the ideal of Christian discipleship. The Church has been diagnosing a way in which Christians of various times needed to hear the word of God and keep it. As Pannenberg says, ‘It is quite understandable why the Church saw itself and its faith – relationship to God and to Christ expressed in Mary rather than in some other figure.’”¹⁶

To this list we might add the models of Mary presented by the feminist theologians specially of North America, and the Latin American liberation theologies of the 1970s and 1980s.

Elizabeth A. Johnson of the Catholic University of America has presented an interesting hypothesis that Mary’s image has been developed historically as a female representation of the divine, precisely because the “feminine” has been excluded from the mainline Christian perception of God as Father, Son and Spirit. The patriarchal bias of Christian theology has ~ God more a powerful creator and just judge than a loving, caring, tender, nurturing being. God has been made theologically according to the image of man and the patriarchal society concept of maleness as tough, aggressive, dominant, and thus soft pedalling the so called “feminine” dimension of warmth, concern and love.

Corresponding to this figure of the male God there has been an interpretation of Jesus also as male who could not bring an element of maternal affection to the Christian understanding of the divine, even though he called God “Abba”, “Father”, and spoke of his being a mother caring for her little ones.

Human beings on the contrary, have a need of the loving care associated with the nurturing mother. The “womb love” of a mother is missing in the theological presentation of God specially due to the split in the conception of matter and spirit, human and divine, natural and supernatural in the medieval Christian mentality. This has come down to our times.

In this situation popular religiosity and even theology has given to Mary a quasi-divine position.

“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

¹⁶ Raymond G. Brown, “Understanding Mary”, in *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church*, Paulist Press, N.Y. 1975, p. 107.

attractive, and has done so to a degree not possible when one thinks of God simply as a ruling male person or persons.”¹⁷

Elizabeth Johnson shows how Mariology over the centuries has developed this aspect of Mary, and how It was an “excellent missionary strategy in a world where female duties were so highly honoured” (p. 505). In this perspective she surveys ten representative positions of ten well known theologians including Jean Danielou, Edward Schillebeeckx – before Vatican II, Yves Congar, Rene Laurentin – (*after Vatican II*), Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Virgil Elizondo, and Latin American Leonardo Boff.

Leonardo Boff develops a concept of a more explicit relationship of Mary to the divinity. Boff puts forward the hypothesis that as “the Holy Spirit had made her his temple, sanctuary and tabernacle in so real and genuine way that she can be regarded as hypostatically united to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity.” He compares this to the assumption of the human nature of Jesus by the Second Person of the Trinity the Logos.¹⁸

Concerning Leonardo Boffs’ hypothesis, it may be said that it shows another way in which theological imagination may be developed within the given construct of overall Western Christian theology of the relationship of God and humanity.

As Elizabeth Johnson suggests such an exaltation of Mary can indicate a missing dimension of the concept of God in traditional Catholic theology which has been heavily conditioned by patriarchal thinking. These human qualities of tenderness and mercy called “feminine” should also help us to improve our concept of the divine.

Correspondingly we must be careful not to make Mary according to this image of the ideal “feminine” that might exclude the qualities of courage, energy, creativity required for the type of programme articulated in the Magnificat for social transformation. This dichotomizing of the “masculine” and “feminine” and attributing the male qualities to God and the “feminine” to Mary is bad for both the divinity and Mary. A more wholistic approach is required in regard to both God and Mary.

We may further ask whether this way of interpreting God is not linked to the interpretation of the human predicament beginning with Genesis and God’s supposed judgment on humanity. If the “feminine” bowels of mercy or “womb love” were also seen in God, she would not conceivably have condemned all humankind to being deprived of the goal for which it is created. Thus the original sin of Western Christian theology is seen to have its repercussions even on this issue. Latin American liberation theologians, like Leonardo Boff, operate within the framework of that hypothesis of the “fall” of humanity. But we in our multi-religious context have to question deeper to purify the very idea of the human-divine relationship in this hypothesis.

¹⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Mary and the Female Face of God” in *Theological Studies* (50) 1989. pp. 500-526.

¹⁸ Leonardo Boff, ‘The Maternal Face of God’, *The Feminine and its Religious Expressions* (San Francisco Harper and Row 1987) 93 – quoted by Elizabeth A. Johnson op.cit p. 515.

The other Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism do not have a concept or perspective of the eternal damnation of any human person. In this do they not incorporate better the different dimensions in their concept of the Absolute, as in the Trimurthi of Hinduism? The three faces of God as creative, destructive and reconciling and loving. The last being shown by a feminine face.

Mary and the Liberation of Women

A message is coming from the women's movements throughout the world. In modern society too, women need liberation to be their true selves and to develop as fully realized human persons. It is our experience too as we see so much goodness and potentialities suppressed and repressed in most societies at different social levels through different mechanisms of domination.¹⁹

We have seen in the preceding chapters how a traditional Marian devotion and Marian theology have been associated with, and partly responsible for, such an oppression of women. The image of Mary was made to fit into the stereotype of the dominated patient woman, and this Marian model itself fostered a concept of holiness linked to the subordination of women to men, and of the poor and weak to the wealthy and strong.

The development of Mariology throughout the world is contributing to the liberation of women. The feminist theologians, some of whom have been referred to already, have helped immensely in this process. They are pointing out the silence and neglect concerning women in the Bible and in Tradition.²⁰ Some have shown Mary as participating as an equal person in life and work of Jesus. Some others have contributed by the critique of the traditional interpretations of Genesis Chapters 1, 2 and 3, and the concepts of original sin.²¹ Still others have interpreted Mary's privileges as indicating a woman's autonomy and non dependence on the male, or for that matter even God's dependence on a woman's consent for realizing the divine plan for humanity.²²

Latin American liberation theologians have contributed by their overall approach to theology including the use of social analysis, the rereading of scriptures from the point of view of the weak and the oppressed. Their rethinking of Christology and the accent on an "ascending Christology" has a corresponding and salutary impact on Mariology as the two are linked together in theology.

A new publication by Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemar on "Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor" has been announced by Orbis Books New York.

¹⁹ Tissa Balasuriya, OMI, "Original Sin and the Christian Mission", CSR Pamphlet 40, 1990.

²⁰ Elizabeth Schussler florenza, "In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins", Crossroad, N.Y. 1983.

²¹ Phyllis Trible, in her lectures at the Conference on "Community of Women and Men in the Church", Sheffield, 1981.

²² Mary Daly, "Beyond God the Father Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation", Beacon, Boston, 1973. pp. 81-92.

Most of these writers are our colleagues in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians.

While I am concluding this book have been gladdened by the announcement of the book of Gebara and Bingemar. The Maryknoll "World Parish" Introduces this book thus:

"The book introduces a new hermeneutics for a Marian theology. It talks about Marian theology as profoundly related to God's Kingdom... The authors tell us of voices that sing of Mary, ally / of the oppressed, mother of all who suffer. (*"World Parish"*)

"We hear especially the voices of the poor women of Latin America – mothers of the disappeared, mothers of infants who die of poverty, mothers who cannot feed their children, women who suffer from political terrorism, lack of peace, and constant struggle. For these women, Mary is a model of God's option for the poor.

Using a new hermeneutical perspective, the authors suggest a **Marian theology built upon the people's actual experience**. They lead us to grasp God's revelation in woman. In the midst of people trying to establish the justice of the Kingdom arises the figure of Mary, who is heir to the hopes of the poor and at the same time gives new impulse to those hopes." (*World Parish, Nov./Dec. 1989*)

Our effort in this book is to bring a reflection from a third world situation in which in addition to poverty, women's exploitation and social injustice there is also a plurality of religions and cultures and a considerable degree of secularity. Hence we have had to approach the issues of Mariology with a critique of theology that has further implications for Christianity as a whole.

We are presenting a Mariology in which the human Mary is seen as participating in the mission of Jesus which is one that is open all humankind. We propose a more open Mariology related to a more open Christology as required and inspired by our context.

Within this approach we include women's struggle for full humanity. This is particularly necessary in Asian countries as women are the new proletariat of the type of socio-economic system that is being foisted on our peoples.

Reflection on the liberative message of Jesus and the participation of Mary (and other women) in it can be an inspiration for the liberation of women particularly through women's consciousness of their rights and dignity. The understanding Mary's role and identity in a more human manner can motivate all the disciples of Jesus to join in the struggle necessary for the realization of women's right in a world system in which they are being exploited for profit, pleasure and power.

Women and Priesthood

One of the important areas in which the rights of women have to be realized is within religions themselves. There has been a general tendency for males to control power within religions, by restricting the clerical status to males. Christianity is a principal religion in which women were refused priestly ordination. The Catholic Church is, in this regard, perhaps one of the main bulwarks of male domination – of course based on theological arguments!

Since women are banned from the priesthood, and since power in the Church is controlled by the clergy, women tend to remain under-developed in the Church. They have less access to theological education, administration of the sacraments, decision-making on matters of doctrine and morals, and to financial resources and the freedom that flows from these powers. Thus the women have an uphill task in asserting and obtaining their rights in the Church.

The right of women to priestly ordination is one of the main issues concerning women's rights in the Christian Churches. Some denominations have already ordained women as priests. A woman Barbara Harris was ordained a Bishop in one of the American Churches. This has been a further challenge to the Churches as she is black woman who has been divorced.

The Catholic Church does not still accept the priestly ordination of women. The discussion on this issue depends on the concept of the priesthood. It is difficult to demonstrate that Jesus Christ established a male priesthood as at present in the Church. However Jesus did set up a community of disciples who were to continue his message and ministry. In so far as the priesthood implies leadership in the community we have to ask what are the goals and means used by that community. The Jesus community was to be one of love and service, of self giving and self sacrifice even unto death.

In such self giving women shared fully in the mission of Jesus. Mary was the one who was closest to Jesus from before his birth to after his death. She was found good enough for forming the person of Jesus in her womb. She offered her son on the cross as the principal victim of his death. Should she not have been worthy to fulfill the functions of the Christian priesthood such as preside at the Eucharist and share in the teaching of the doctrine of Jesus and administration of the community? If she was good enough for Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Cana, and Calvary was she not good enough for (presiding over) the breaking of bread and the sharing of goods. A well developed Mariology can be one of the best supports for the cause of equality of women and men in the Church at all levels.

In any type of community or organization some leadership is necessary. In the spirit of Jesus it has to be one of service as in Mark 10. 42-45. Jesus said “follow me”, “take up your cross and follow me”. It is a service that is a human service. It is not a biological service in which sexuality is important. In the community of Jesus women too had significant roles as we have seen earlier. There is no reason why women cannot have a role of leadership in the Church. Many of the limitations placed on women in the Christian Church are linked to the interpretation of particular

texts in a patriarchal society. They seem to have come about after the Christian community had become more organized within a patriarchal society in which men had leadership.

For a resolution of this issue it would be necessary to go into questions, such as when did the priesthood begin in the Christian Church. What is the place of Bishops and of the Papacy in it? But in the early community of Jesus if there was anyone who was close, intimate, participating and sacrificing with Jesus it was Mary. This was not only as a mother before birth and in his lifetime, but also after his death. Those who know of liberation struggles know how much women can be part of a struggle. They can keep the effort going even when some are killed in the process. In this group John the Baptist was beheaded, Jesus was crucified, Stephen was stoned to death and later on the other disciples. Mary, as long as she lived, would have been one who was central to and steadying of the group.

If the Church is to be continuation of this community of Jesus I do not see why women cannot offer the sacrifice and announce the message of Jesus. I put forward my view in Sheffield in Britain in 1981 at the World Council of Churches' consultation on "The Community of Women and Men in the Church" thus:

"There is no reason; biological, psychological, pastoral, theological or spiritual, why we cannot have a yellow, brown, black or white woman Pope".

The Papacy is a function in which sexuality is not significant. The functions of the Pope are similar to those of a head of State or of a spiritual community. There is nothing that the Pope has to do which an Indira Gandhi, a Margaret Thatcher, A Cory Aquino, or Benazir Bhutto could not do.

Priesthood is a spiritual function and not a biological one. But in a society in which power has been taken by the males and the "texts of the scriptures have been written and are interpreted by males such a discrimination against women is not surprising. Further the very election process is one in which only elderly mates can vote, hence it is natural that only men became Popes. By a similar process of selection of cardinals we have had Italian Popes for many centuries. We should not be so simplicist as to attribute divine origin to an ecclesiastical custom which can be explained in this background.

Since women participated fully in the Jesus community there is no reason why they cannot share in the leadership patterns including the priesthood. The present theological position against the ordination of women is partly due to a descending theology. The argument is: Jesus is male, therefore only mates can represent the divine principle in the Church.

But the world is growing up and the women are growing in consciousness. The experience of women is important and should not be neglected or regarded as "nonsense" as did the apostles, when they were told by women of Jesus resurrection. We men should be careful not to be "incredulous", "dull" or "obstinate" concerning the competence of women to serve the Christian Churches. (*Mk. 16. 11-14, Luke 24. 11*)

What we need is a new understanding of the Church as a community of women and men based on partnership, mutuality and reciprocity. In it, it is not the body or sexuality that is important but the human person. Functions in the Church have to be allocated or decided according to competences, talents and calling. This is a moment of growth in the Church.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops are preparing a pastoral letter in which they say that sexism is a sin, and anyone who wants to be a priest should be free of sexism. i.e. they should not consider women to be inferior to men. Therefore there is some movement in the Church. The U.S. Bishops are dialoguing both with their women's movements and the Pope. Time will settle this issue.

Mary and Social Liberation

Mary was with Jesus in opting for the poor. The Church today is coming to this position. Pope John Paul II in his recent encyclical on the "Social concern of the Church" expresses this option. Mary knew it in her life – in the birth of Jesus when she was rejected by the people of Bethlehem because she was poor. The message of Jesus was one of sharing.

Neither Mary nor Jesus would have been naive concerning the problems of social change. Thus, Jesus' parable concerning Dives and Lazarus. How difficult it was for Dives to change: likewise for the rich young man called to follow him. Mary can be an inspiration for the social struggle of our times. Mary can understand the desire for a society that is not based on class distinctions. She has had experience of property being for all. This is in the prophetic background of the Jewish people. It was her experience in the early community. Her own house would have been a place where Jesus would have begun such a practice.

We have to reflect on this and try to work out the implications of the biblical texts. The teaching of Jesus is radical and Mary would have understood it better than anyone else due to her poverty and experience of repression by the powers that be and due to Jesus' own teaching and life style. Christianity as an underground group was a radical social force for nearly three centuries till it became part of the dominant social system with the conversion of Constantine. Thereafter theology got diluted and the cutting edge of the Gospel was blunted.

Mary and Political Liberation

Mary would have been quite conscious of the political factor and its implications for the life of her people. She had to go for the census because of the decree issued by the Emperor Augustus to cover the entire Roman world. The killing of the innocent children was because of Herod's fear that a political Messiah was born not because of the birth of a divine child. After the nocturnal flight into Egypt Mary had to be sensitive to the political events in her country. It was only when Herod was dead that she could return home. When in exile her political sensitivity and sense of political injustice would have been sharpened.

Though the family returned to Israel “hearing however, that Archelaus has succeeded his father Herod as King of Judaea, he (Joseph) was afraid to go there. And being warned by a dream, he withdrew to the region of Galilee; there he settled in a town called Nazareth”. (*Mt. 2. 22-23*) Mary would naturally have been involved in this choice. Thus her domicile was decided by the political factors. That is how the holy family came to be from Nazareth. The infancy narratives, whatever be their historicity, can communicate such a message concerning the life of the holy family.

Mary saw how John the Baptist grew up to be a young man of radical options. The two families of Mary and Elizabeth and of their relatives and friends would have had long discussions about the sad condition of their people. They would have been concerned about the different political options of Jews who collaborated with the Romans, and of others like the Zealots who wanted to fight them. Both John the Baptist and Jesus were basically for nonviolent approaches.

John preached a radical message in a radical life style with deep social and political consequences:

“Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none, and whoever has food must share it.” (*Luke 3. 11*)

To the soldiers who asked him “what are we to do?” John counselled:

“Don’t take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay.” (*Luke 3. 14*)

Luke comments that with this type of radical preaching and the crowds following him,

“People’s hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John might be the Messiah.” (*Luke 3. 15, Mt. 3. 1, Mk. 1. 1-8, John 1. 19-28*)

John referred his disciples and other inquirers such as the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and Levites (*John 1. 19*) to the one who is to follow him, whose sandals he was not good enough to untie. Mary would have known the close connection between John and Jesus, and the socio-political implications of John’s message. John and Jesus had different life styles and approaches but substantially the same message of socio-economic-political liberation with a powerful critique of the dominant political leaders.

Mary would have been deeply distressed at the arrest of John the Baptist. This would have been a traumatic experience for Jesus and Mary. Matthew writes:

“When he heard that John had been arrested, Jesus withdrew to Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and settled at Capernaum on the sea of Galilee in the district of Zebulun and Naphtali”. (*Mt. 4. 12-13*)

Jesus had to withdraw because he was closely associated with John who had rebuked Prince Herod.

“Over the affairs of his brother’s wife Herodias and his other misdeeds.” (*Luke 3. 19*)

It is after the arrest of John that “Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God”. His cousin was arrested and beheaded and Jesus decided to come out into the open in Galilee. This would have been an important and trying decision for both Jesus and Mary. Jesus would have known that he was courting trouble. It is said how soon after, the

“Pharisees began plotting against him with the partisans of Herod to see how they could make away with him.” (*Mk. 3. 6*)

These too show how Mary would have been very conscious of the political dangers Jesus was facing. She would have been quite concerned with the types of options the Jewish people were making – some carrying arms like the Zealots. She would have understood Jesus’ option, but also known that some Zealots were in his entourage. All this would show that Mary would have been deeply involved in the political troubles of the time. Her son, her nephew, her cousins and the sons of her friends were all involved in trying to decide the fate of her people. Thus Mary was not a person who lived a secluded life away from the troubled area of politics. Her family was in the thick of it and it is within such a situation that Jesus made his options and proposed his message.

The difficulties of Jesus were from a combination of the socio-economic and religio-political forces in that situation. Mary would have been quite conscious of the need of taking position on issues which had political consequences. Due to the support that the religious leaders gave to the imperial rulers there was an intimate link between religious and the political systems. A critique of the superficial religiosity of the day meant also an attack on their allies – the political powers.

Mary witnessed how Jesus was captured and killed by a combination of the religious, political and military powers. The questions of the burial of Jesus and the guard set at his tomb were also issues involving political authorities. Thereafter the life of the early Christian community was closely bound up with the attitudes of the political rulers wherever they went.

Mary knew the teaching of Jesus concerning political power and its legitimacy only as service to the people. She saw the cruel abuse of power affecting her people and her own family. She was therefore, not indifferent to politics. She was deeply involved in it in a liberative manner, basically non-violently, as Jesus was.

Marian spirituality can and should carry a liberating message into the political field also as Jesus himself did. This is specially required in today’s world where the conditions of exploitation and domination are similar to those of their time.

Mary and the Liberation of Men

When the presentation of Mary is an inspiration for the domestication of women, it has also a corresponding impact of making men less fulfilled in their genuine humanity. For liberation and self realization of women and men are inter-related and inter-dependent. Hence the traditional Mariology has had an unfortunate impact on men also, inducing them to be more male dominating.

A reaffirmation of the strong and mature personality and message of Mary can have the impact of humanizing the men also. It can help them to understand the capabilities of women to be more truly themselves by developing their potentialities as mature adult persons. A transformed imaging of Mary can inspire men to help draw out the best in women. Both women and men can then consider themselves as positive co-creators of each other and of the society in which they live.

Women who are motivated to follow the Mary of the Magnificat can help men also to be more committed to the ideals of the overall transformation required by that ideal. Then women and men can be together in contesting the evils of the dominant trends in our society that enthrone selfishness and self-seeking. They can cooperate in overcoming the capital sins which beset our civilization - pride, covetousness, lust, gluttony, envy, anger, sloth – or In the Hindu-Buddhist way of expressing it: loba, moha, dwesha, thanha.

In a more particular sense it may be said that the liberation of the males is in being freed from these capital sins in relation to the females. The males can and need to free themselves from being dominating towards women. This requires that they cure themselves of the pride that is built up in them concerning their masculinity thought of as superior in a society long conditioned by male domination itself. This means an acknowledgement of the equality of the sexes and of their mutuality and partnership in the common enterprises of life. The Marian affirmation of putting down the proud in the conceit of their hearts is applicable to males in the present situation of many of our social and inter-personal relationships. We can think of the relationship of Jesus and Mary, and of Jesus with women as one in which there was such a sense of equality, respect and understanding.

In this sense the virtues of humility and service must be sought by both men and women. The service has to be mutual, and not interpreted as if it is only women who have to render service, while the men have to be the beneficiaries of such services.

We can reflect likewise on each of the capital sins or the corresponding values of the reign of God – love, truth, freedom, justice, equality and peace. These are all applicable to both men and women. The liberation of the men as males is in not being guided by the vices but in being inspired by the virtues in their attitudes towards women.

Seeing Mary as a normal strong adult woman associated with Jesus can be a motivation for men to acquire the virtue of respecting all women as equal in dignity and rights as human persons.

Mary of the Third World

In most of Asia and Africa today we need a model of Mary that also relates to our presently exploited neo-colonized Third World context. Our local rulers, authoritarian, if not despotic, are often the Pilates and Herods of modern multi-national empires.

Perhaps the historical Mary of Nazareth may be closer to this reality, than many other models of Mary which were often explicitly or implicitly utilized for patriarchy, hierarchy and domination. The contribution of feminist theology to Mariology can be of universal value in so far as sexism is a universal phenomenon. Feminism has to consider the other forms of domination, just as third world theology in general has to think of male domination within the third world context also.

Marian Spirituality would be deeply and desperately concerned with the present situation in the world where the condition of the poorest of the poor is worsening in both relative and absolute terms. Mary, as the mother of Jesus and a universal mother of all humanity, would naturally be concerned most with those who suffer so much physically and psychically.

A Marian approach to the Third World would be inspired by the perceptions and programmes implied in the "Magnificat" of feeding the hungry and exalting the humble. Marian devotion and Marian shrines throughout the world would thus be invited to look into the present situation in the world, to understand the causes of the growing gap between the affluent and the poor and to take steps to remedy the situation.

This gap can be reflected on with reference to several data and dimensions*

Population	1960	%	1986	%
World (Millions)	3008	100	5005	100
Developed Countries	909	30.2	1.144	22.9
Developing Countries	2099	69.2	3.861	77.1

G.N.P. Per Capita (US \$ 1986)				
World	1.939		3.176	
Developed Countries	5.519		11.392	
Developing Countries	372		731	
	731			

Health Expenditure (1986 US \$ per Capita)				
World	43		131	
Developed Countries	127		527	
Developing Countries	4		12	

* All data from Ruth L. Sivard, World Military and Social Experiences 1989, 13th Edition, World Priorities, Box 25140, Washington, D.C. USA.

Infant mortality		
(rate per 1000 births)		
World	118	71
Developed Countries	30	14
Developing Countries	136	79

Education Public		
Expenditure (1986 US \$)		
World (billion)	204	784
Developed Countries	187	681
Developing Countries	17	103

Military Public		
Expenditure (1986 US \$)		
World	372	866
Developed Countries	344	722
Developing Countries	28	144

Arms Imports		
(US \$ billion)		
World	2.4	47.2
Developed Countries	1.3	11.3
Developing Countries	1.1	35.9

Arms Exports		
World	2.4	47.4
Developed Countries	2.3	44.6
Developing Countries	0.1	2.7

Economic Aid Received		
(US \$ billion)		
World	5.1	50.2
Developed Countries	-	1.2
Developing Countries	5.1	49.0

The military expenditure of the developing (or third world?) countries has increased five fold between 1960 and 1986. The arms imports have grown from 1 billion to 30 billion. It will be seen that whilst arms exports are mainly from the developed countries the arms imports and use are. in the poor countries.

Much of the foreign aid received by poor countries (\$ 49.0 billion) goes back to the arms exporters of the rich countries (\$ 44.6 billion). Thus the foreign debt is directly related to the Arms industry and the consequent deaths in the Third World.

After 1945, since World War II, the poor countries of the Third World have been the arena of the 127 wars (except for two in Hungary and the Soviet border area

with China). Although the wars were in the Third World, intervention by major military powers was frequent, and increasingly covert.

War deaths were heavily weighted toward Asia, and the Far East in particular. Asia, had 55% of the world population but 70% of the war deaths. Civilian death total has risen from 1/2 the deaths in the 1950s to 3/4 of the total deaths in the 1980s.

Deaths in war represent only a fraction of the human losses. Those seriously injured and the loss to property, incomes, production and natural resources increase the burden of war several fold.

A Marian spirituality would have to reflect seriously on this most sad situation of so much human misery, that is known only to those from the war torn areas. Unfortunately many devotees of Mary reflect little on the causes of these conflicts; the causes being both local and international. Not a few of them are producers and traders of the destructive arms.

This condition of the Third World has to be meditated on in relation to the rest of the economic system that is also so exploitative of the poor and the poor countries.²³

The enormous waste for armaments and war is linked to the misery of the poor in the “dominated countries”, according to Susan George this would be the most accurate term for the Third World (cf. p.250 *III Fares the World*), 17 trillion dollars (\$ 17,000,000,000,000) has been the cost of the arms race since World War II.²⁴

Alongside this 500 000 mothers die at childbirth,

- 600,000,000 women in the child bearing years suffer from nutritional anemia,
- 2,900,000,000 lack simple sanitary facilities essential to health and,
- 5,25,000 persons are killed and 1,200,000 are injured an average year in the 127 wars since 1945;
- 3,500,000 children die annually of dehydration, preventable by oral therapy at \$ 1 per child.
- 4,000,000 die annually of six diseases, preventable by immunization at \$ 10 per child.

This is a terrible social balance sheet. Yet it does not include much suffering due to other causes such as the destruction of nature and the pollution of the environment.

Third Worldness can be got rid of in a short time if the human community had the will to do so. If Marian spirituality led to such a conviction it would have an

²³ Tissa Balasuriya, OMI, “Planetary Theology”, Orbis N.Y. 1984 – Chapter on World System, “Foreign Debt is there a Way out” – Logos, CSR, Colombo, Oct.-Dec., 1989.

²⁴ Susan George, “How the Other Half Dies – The Real Reasons for World Hunger”, Penguin Book, U.K. 1978, and: “III Fares the Land”, Penguin, England 1990.

immense impact on this situation as many of the dominators are in countries with many persons who are devotees of Mary.

In Asia (and Africa) we need to develop a Mariology that, while incorporating the best in other theologies, is also concerned with issues such as – local elites and the marginalization of the masses.

- patterns of development, specially their impact on women, debt, human life, torture, human rights,
- economic, political, social, cultural and religious domination and liberation. IMF/World Bank policies of Structural Adjustment.

Asia can also help develop a Mariology that is global and relates to the planetary theology that is emerging.

Mary and World Justice and Peace

From a consideration of the concern of Mary and Jesus for human life, human rights, sharing, freedom, truth and peace we can draw certain conclusions about the planetary dimension of a Marian spirituality suitable for today.

Mary is regarded as queen of the world, queen of humanity, mother of all humankind. These are appellations given to her by the Church and in popular devotion. We can think of the meaningfulness of the message of Jesus and of the Magnificat in the one world situation of today.

Marian spirituality must involve an approach that the goods of the earth are for all. The primitive communism of the early Christian community must be reconsidered in our situation and times. The goods of the earth are not for the particular nations or populations that possess them at present. They are not merely for big transnational companies which can dominate and exploit peoples. The mere accumulation of capital should not give them the right to buy more and more lands and assets and use them for their profit maximization. On the contrary it is necessary to bring about changes in the political and economic order that would see to it “that there is no one in need” and that, in a meaningful sense, “Everything is held in common.” (*Act 4. 32-35*)

When the Pope visited Bolivia, he drew attention to the great poverty and inequality there – one fourth of the children die of malnutrition. Our world is one in which many die of hunger while there are vast accumulations of resources among others. There is enough food for all. The mountains of butter in the affluent countries, must be redistributed to those in need. Methods must be found for bringing this about. The unjust world system leads to the death of millions of innocent children each year. This is redolent – of the killing of male children of the Jews by the Pharaoh, and the killing of the Innocents by Herod. Fear of the populations of Asia and Africa leads White “Christian” nations to propagate family planning including sterilization and abortion instead of sharing food and resources.

Technologies must be developed which provide meaningful employment for all. If there is involuntary unemployment, worth-while avenues should be provided for fulfilling leisure. These technologies, the availability of goods and of leisure and the

human freedom of persons need to be directed to the values of genuine service to all peoples. This is the demand of the core values of all the religions also.

The big companies which dominate the world economy today are a means by which the principalities and powers are profit-centered and mammonic. They have the power of decision-making and of influencing people's views and values. They control much of the information media. They influence the values of women in a manner quite different from a Marian spirituality. They tend to make women geared towards the buying of more and more goods, sometimes for wastage and vanity. They are made objects of pleasure and sex.

The arms production, the arms trade, the militarization specially of poor countries, keep on wars in the Third World. It is necessary to control the nuclear weapons as well as the production of conventional arms. These also help bring about the wars in the poor countries. At present both the rich capitalist and rich socialist countries are involved in keeping these unfortunate wars going. They both benefit from the arms sales and may even hope to have a political advantage from the further weakening of the third world countries. Presently much of the arms production is in Europe (both Western and Eastern) and North America while the wars are in the poor countries of the South and the East. With their arms sales the powerful of the world help aggravate local conflicts elsewhere. This in turn can keep the Third World countries locked in internal conflict and weak. This process is termed "low intensity conflict".

Another important area in international relations is the financial relations among nations. The indebtedness of the poor countries is growing and becoming an unbearable burden. This is so contrary to the way of life of Mary and the Early Church, "when they held everything in common". The Jewish people had the teaching that debts were to be cancelled and lands restored to owners every few decades – the jubilee years were for this.

There is an inter-relation of drought, famine, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment and political repression in the poor countries and the excesses of food in the rich countries. The unfair terms of trade make the situation worse for the poor and the weak. These are worsened by GATT and WTO.

The values of Jesus and Mary are those of peace and justice in international relations also. Marian theology and spirituality can be developed in a manner relevant to our situation. In so far as she is considered the Mother of Humanity and the New Eve, we can reflect on her as one who would be concerned with **the care of nature**, the preservation of the environment and the building of a suitable home on earth for all humanity. The movements for the care of planet Earth and of the environment can think of Mary as one who would like the resources of the world to be for all.

"They have no wine" and "do, whatever he tells you" (*John 2. 2-5*) can be extrapolated to the global scene. People have no food, no drinking water in many areas of the world. The sensitive Mary would see this and tell us do whatever "he tells you". The path presented by Jesus is a way to the resolution of the great inequalities

in the world. It is the way of unselfishness and sharing that is also the message of all the world religions.

Mary's Magnificat (*Luke 1. 46-56*)

The "Magnificat" of Mary expresses beautifully and powerfully the integral liberation for which Jesus and Mary stood. The song of Mary has a strong similarity to the canticle of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. 1-10. It is attributed to her or was said about her. Luke brings out here Mary's great faith and lowly dependence on the merciful God. Her lowliness has been turned into fruitfulness and in this all humans can have hope.

God appears here as the mighty one; divine power is exercised mostly in caring for the needy. God's holiness is shown in mercy and in "stretching out his mighty arm". The fulfillment of God's promise is in coming to the help of the needy and the oppressed.

Mary speaks of a three fold revolution that is brought about by God – a cultural, political and economic revolution. Pope John Paul II also refers to this in his recent Encyclical on Mary.

"He has shown strength in his arm and scattered the proud-hearted". That is the first type or revolution of a cultural nature. The arrogant of heart and mind are put to rout. "The mercy of God is from age to age for those who fear him". Much of our cultural values, our educational system and media of communication is debased by a certain manipulation making people proud, greedy or vain. A transformation is needed in our media. Mary's expression is quite strong here. It is even more expressive than most of the teaching of Jesus.

It is a challenge to the disciples of Jesus to develop a means of an alternative culture that places a value on the human person and human dignity. It means a combat against all forms of cultural domination and discrimination, against racism, sexism, casteism, classism and religionism. The call is for humility and respect, for the equality and dignity of all to be made the principles on which public policies are decided at local national and international levels

"And cast down the mighty from their thrones". The politically mighty who are dominating their countries and the world system will be put down. The humble people will be lifted up. They will possess the land meant for them. This is the language of the liberation of all the oppressed – the oppressed or sex, of race, of class, and of the third world. It is the language of a Marian spirituality with its incisive cutting edge and challenge.

"God will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich empty away." This refers to the economic aspect of the radical changes envisaged in this prophecy.

This threefold transformation is the leitmotif of the scriptures. The Bible has this clear message in the Old and New Testaments. Mary is in this prophetic tradition.

Mary's Magnificat gives a distinct social content to holiness. The promise of God is to come to the help of a needy – "to Abraham and all his descendents for ever".

In the traditional theology both the understanding of God and the presentation of Mary did not present adequately clearly and strongly this thoroughly radical nature of the divine intervention in human history. Holiness has to do with a total transformation of society to be according to the Divine plan. The Magnificat has an inspiring combination of faith in God and humility with a radical commitment to a total revolution.

Marian Spirituality

Marian spirituality should therefore inspire the disciples of Jesus to bring about such changes. This requires an analysis of the situation in our countries and in the world at large. Social analysis and understanding the deeper causes of human power and pride must go hand in hand with action to change these for the benefit of the needy.

In countries like Sri Lanka the Marian shrines can thus communicate a radical message for the realization of the people's aspirations for a meaningful life. The shrines must communicate an understanding of the social forces operating in the country. This has to be done explicitly if the message of the Magnificat is to be realized in our time.

Marian spirituality should endeavour to bring about new interpersonal relations in which persons are respected for their personalities; hence respect for the human body and sexuality. Woman is not to be discriminated against. There should be a partnership of women and men in the family, in society and in the Church.

Jesus and Mary do not discriminate on any basis such as class, ethnicity or race. Marian spirituality should inspire us to work towards a new society and a new world order that would be based on the values of Jesus and Mary which In fact are also the values of the other religions.

A renewed Church will have to be inspired by such a spirituality. The Church has to be a spiritual community coming down from Jesus. The Churches can be a blessing for humanity if we are not exclusive, narrow minded, ghettoish, spiritually proud and exploitative; if we do not claim control over God and over the treasures of grace. The Churches should be free of sexism i.e. men should not think they have special privileges such as a power of forgiving sins – which women do not have. Christianity itself has to be transformed to acknowledge that God can speak to others through different texts, leaders, organizations and languages.

Strategies for such Transformation

The Churches can come together to build this new society. We have to think of strategies that can be effective towards bringing about this society of equality and plurality.

Popular religiosity which is so Important in the Churches needs to be developed in such a way that Mary is understood as the woman – mother who was alongside Jesus in evolving and presenting this message and community of integral human liberation. It was a community of partnership, honesty, authenticity and of contestation of what was wrong and unjust.

This is possible in so far as people's movements come up in our countries to struggle for their real needs and rights. They can see Mary as a woman in the struggle of her people for a new type of relationship and a new understanding of spirituality. In this she paid the price of sacrificing her son Jesus.

The Marian shrines and places of apparitions can be influenced to relate to this message of an integral Marian spirituality. Marian hymns, prayers and litanies need to be rewritten to communicate the liberative message of Mary. Her images and paintings should bring out the strong working class character of Mary who went through life sharing in the mission and struggle of Jesus.

We have a task before us. We need to help liberate Mary to be the woman she was, and women need to liberate themselves to be truly themselves and partners in building a new world. The oppression and domination of woman can help them to understand and empathize with what others are suffering – what workers and people of the third world are suffering. The women of the first and second worlds can then understand more concretely the great burden placed today on third world women specially in the free trade zones, as migrant labour, in the tourist industry, in the plantations, factories and urban shanties. They are a great mass of the much exploited world proletariat of the present neo-colonial world economy. Strategies of analysis and action for change must be considered integral to our spirituality.

There is a need of the linkage of conscious women who are aware of their dignity and responsibility in the struggle with the other peoples of the world. We have seen this to some extent in the United States in the women's protest against the U.S. policies concerning Nicaragua. Women need to develop their own strategies for getting a due place and power in the Church. Such changes do not come merely due to prayer or theology. Women must develop and use their women power. The Churches depend on women. If for two weeks the women do not contribute to the Church collections unless women's rights are accepted – there will be an immediate impact on the power holders. Or if they contribute to funds which support women's emancipation (Mary's pence instead of merely Peter's pence) they can have more effective power as women church. These are non-violent methods that need to be developed.

Women power thus built up needs to be linked across the world. If women all over the world would take action against Apartheid in South Africa there will be a change. Women and men can join in such strategies.

The liberation of the women can also help in the true humanization of the men to be themselves better in understanding their humanity as partners in a common enterprise of building family and society.

The Church being universal can be a great value and help to humanity in so far as we are a community in the direction of Jesus and Mary and of the New Testament. In the struggle for the new humanity we can be one of the best organised communities in the world. The authority in the Church can then be a real service to the struggling peoples. To a certain extent the papacy is emerging in that direction. We must encourage the Pope in the things done in that direction Women can help educate him and the Bishops when they tend like their first predecessors to be “dull and obstinate”. This is a role which women performed earlier according to the New Testament!

There is thus a great task, opportunity and challenge for us all to participate in the building up of this new Christian community in the service of a renewed human community – inspired by Jesus, Mary and all the great spiritual leaders of humanity. Christians need to ally themselves with all persons of good will and movements for desirable social changes. Mary can inspire such alliances as she is the mother of all.

Mary, Queen of Martyrs

The companionship and discipleship of Jesus and Mary led to the Martyrdom of many in the first centuries of Christianity. Mary herself shared in the suffering, sorrow and sacrifice involved in the martyrdom of John the Baptist, Jesus, Stephen and perhaps some of the other disciples depending on how long she lived after the death of Jesus. Such deaths were due to the opposition of the powerful of the day against the message and life of these religious radicals who wanted a complete transformation of personal and of societal relations.

In recent decades the martyrdom of Christians is once again becoming a common feature where they opt for the liberation of their peoples. Such martyrdom is due to their opposition to the exploitative structures and relationship in their societies. The countries of the Third World are the principal areas of such martyrdom. This is because it is in Latin America, Asia and Africa that the repression of those who oppose the exploitation of the poor is the fiercest.

Christian spirituality is today understanding in a real manner that the call to the discipleship of Jesus is a call to follow the path of the cross as Mary had to do in her life.

A conscious option for the values held by Jesus and Mary leads to various forms of marginalization in secular society and not infrequently within the Church too. The forms of martyrdom vary according to the risks involved. The modern Church is being renewed by the suffering and death of many such martyrs.

An Overall Rethinking

We need in this connection a rethinking of Mariology within an overall rethinking of theological issues such as: what is human salvation, how is God related to humanity and salvation, how is salvation open to all, what is the relationship between the creator and creation, who is Jesus, what is the meaning of redemption in Jesus, what is the nature and mission of the Church. It is according to a response to

these issues that we can place Mary's relationship to the human race, the Church and each of us, as well as to God.

The essential teaching of Jesus is that the love of God and of the neighbour are one and is the fulfillment of the will of God. Truth, love, sharing, freedom, justice and peace are the core values of the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus. It is within such a concept of Christology that we can understand Mary.

What has been done historically was to give Mary a role within a perspective of divine – human relations and of Christology in which the Church controlled the sources of grace, and the clergy had the keys to the kingdom of heaven, within a male dominated patriarchy. In that theology the other religions were marginalized. Within such a theology Mary was placed as the woman who brought forth Jesus; and both of them were used to help preserve the dominant social system of individual and collective relationships.

Such a presentation of Mary is not acceptable, it is not according to the gospels. It is unfaithful to the main burden of the life of Jesus and Mary. It is against the realization of the aspirations of the majority of the human race for liberation and fulfillment. It is not acceptable to Protestantism and cannot help in inter-Christian ecumenical relations. It is not acceptable to woman today, come of age and seeking her place of equality in dignity with men in all spheres of life. It is not a Mary who can respond to the world seeking justice, and in which the vast majority are not Christians.

We are questioning the traditional dogmas as a whole construct that held together, because piecemeal adjustments as and when the Euro-American Church establishment or theologians need them are inadequate. Nor can we say that traditional theology has been transformed adequately throughout the Catholic world merely because some theologians have proposed some new concepts here and there e.g. concerning the Marian dogmas. A more thorough rethinking of Marian theology and spirituality is needed at the theoretical level as well as in practical Christian living.

Just as Jesus has to be liberated, as Kim Chi Ha says in his play on the "Gold Crowned Jesus"²⁵ so that he may respond to real life. so Mary needs to be liberated. She needs to be known for who she was and is. It is within such a perspective that we have to understand her as a loving mother and sister of all. a woman among women, a human being among us; one who faced the difficulties of life united to Jesus for a better humanity. In doing so we can contribute towards the liberation of Mary to be Mary herself. and her devotees to be better disciples of Jesus and better human beings.

²⁵ Kim Chi Ha, "The Gold Crowned Jesus", Orbis Publications, Maryknoll, N.Y. p. 66.

Chapter – 6

PRESUPPOSITIONS IN THEOLOGY

1. What are Presuppositions

In so far as religions present perspectives concerning other worldly realities – such as life after death or the nature of the Divine – their acceptance belongs to the realm of faith. They propose positions which cannot be rationally or experimentally verified by human knowledge. The propositions of religions in these fields are accepted either because of a person in whom there is confidence and trust and/or as presuppositions that form the basis of the teaching of the religion. Presuppositions are certain propositions that are accepted or assumed as true by a community or religious group even if they are not verifiable.

At the foundation of all the religions that propose meta-cosmic perspectives on human life there are some assumptions or presuppositions that are taken for granted. They cannot be demonstrated as necessarily true to the human reason but are accepted in faith in the teachers of the religions; they are as it were the implicit working hypothesis of the religions.

Explanation that religions give about birth, growth, health, sickness and cause of death **can be verified**. Sociological factors such as the distribution of food, housing and employment and psychological realities such as love and friendship, joy and sorrow can be inquired into by these human disciplines. We can also have consciousness of right and wrong, virtue and vice, of fulfillment and frustration, of acceptance and rejection, of power and powerlessness, of justice and injustice. On these there may be, and there are, differences of opinion, but they are verifiable by human experimentation and reflection. The moral teachings of the religions are developed around such a consciousness among persons of a given community.

Presuppositions are generally not called in question within the group that accepts them, unless they are found to be disadvantageous to them. They are ingrained in the life of a people and become part of their cultural heritage. For centuries the Bible story of creation in six days was not questioned by almost all the Christian people – till scientific data seemed to contradict it. People generally acquire a certain uncritical approach towards the presuppositions on which their religious and cultural life are based.

Presuppositions can be **at different levels of the evolution of a religion or faith**. They may be concerning the founder and his or her teachings, concerning the texts which contain such teachings or later elaborations by the religious community built up around the founder and the original core message of the foundation. These different levels of presuppositions do not have the same claim to the loyalty of the followers of a religion. The core values and foundational teachings are generally from the primordial religious experience of the founder. The later elaborations are influenced by the course of history and the particular evolution of a religious

community. Even a founder's teachings are conditioned by the culture of that time, generally they tend to be more universalistic – at least in their basic intuitions.

2. Evolution of Theologies

Many elements contribute to the evolution of a theology. The primordial vision of the foundations is interpreted according to various factors such as: the culture of a people, their myths that give a people its identity, their popular religiosity and its cultic practices, their philosophies, group interests and ideologies and several other relevant factors. Hence it is necessary to try to understand the origin of the content of teachings that constitute a theology and the beliefs that form part of a religious faith. They are not necessarily all from the founder or foundation.

The theology thus developed tends in turn to become part of the tradition of a people; and it acquires a certain credibility or sacredness in the community. Thus the Adam and Eve story became so much part of Christian theology as well as of folklore and a help to the ideology of patriarchy. The relationships of races, social classes, sexes and castes as well as religions are deeply influenced by the stories believed by them about each other.

In the **pluralist world** in which we live different explanations are given about the ultimate realities by the religions and philosophies. The Confucianists, Hindus, Buddhists, the Christians, Muslims, the Rationalists, and Marxists have each their own interpretations based on presuppositions which each of them begins with. Each one's culture and philosophical system supplies a medium through which to present one's explanations to the adherents and the rest of the world.

Different views or presuppositions concerning history also influence a people's thinking and culture. The oriental view of history is more cyclical rather than linear. In Hinduism and Buddhism this life is only one stage in a vast cycle of birth and death and rebirth. The cycle continues till all reach ultimate liberation in Nirvana or Moksha. The Christian view of human existence is more linear; this life determines one's ultimate eternal destiny. This is the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition.

The **systems of logic** differ as between the major cultural groups. The Western system of logic is based on the principle of contradiction; what is is, and is not its opposite. It is linked to a tendency to be exclusive of opposites. It makes a dichotomy of true and false not leaving room for the excluded middle. Its view of history is linear. The oriental logic is more inclusive and harmonizing. It tries to hold together opposites in a wider whole.

Religious beliefs have a special content concerning the **concept of the divine** – either affirming, denying or ignoring the existence of a supreme transcendental being. Among those who believe in a God, there are differences of view concerning the nature of the divinity and its impact on the universe and on human beings. For some God is impersonal, for others God is a person, and even a Trinity of persons. Some claim to have a special message from God handed down to them and indicating the path to the salvation of humankind. Some others reject the very idea of a God as an illusion, a figment of imagination of religious minded persons. Some think it is even a

dangerous alienation of human beings from a concern with the transformation of the unjust reality of their societies. For some God is unknown and unknowable. The reality beyond this life, they say, is something about which humans can only be silent as before a mystery. Still others claim a mystic, intuitive, contemplative experience of God that is unique and incommunicable.

On the basis of differing interpretations of reality the different peoples have built their philosophical systems and their religious or secularist views of life. Based on these perspectives communities of belief have been set up, ways of life organised, institutions developed, rites and rituals established and popularized. From generation to generation these are communicated to their peoples. The Secularists and Marxists too have their beliefs, their rituals and their heroes. Within each group, in so far as the way of thinking is similar and the presuppositions are accepted, there is a continuity of tradition that forms a part of their culture.

3. Inter-religions Dialogue and Presuppositions

In the dialogue of religions and ideologies, that is now developing, it is natural that at a certain stage the question of their different presuppositions is brought up. How can we cope with them? Can they co-exist? Can people compromise by being tolerant towards them all? Are they contradictory? If so can they be from the same divine source? Can we develop criteria for critically evaluating the presuppositions and the theologies (and ideologies) themselves. A genuine dialogue of religions requires that we relate to one another at this level too. Then, the dialogue is deepened and hopefully enlightening for all involved.

There are different levels of dialogue among the religions. The easiest and presently fairly common level is in participation in social services and social action. These are deepened by common religious services such as of peace. A study of religions together is a still further level. This is a more rare phenomenon as yet and tends to be confined to scholars. All these are an advance on the centennial isolation in which religions existed and functioned.

In the longer term, and at a deeper level, people are beginning to ask more serious questions concerning the conflicting views of the religions on the ultimate realities and on their perceptions concerning each other. There is bound to be a questioning of each other's presuppositions and of the theologies deduced from them.

There are also questions that arise in a special manner **for Christians from cultures which are not European**. They live in an environment that is at least bi-cultural. Their normal life is in the culture of their country with its religions, their presuppositions, beliefs, cult and community practices. As Christians their theology is based on another set of presuppositions, beliefs, cult and community life. Are they to think the latter is correct, from God and the full truth, and that the former is not so?

The Churches have advanced to the position of accepting that Christianity is open to all cultures. Western culture is now not regarded as an essential element even in Latin Christianity. The Christian faith can be expressed in terms of other cultures. This is a straightforward thing if it means translating the Bible and the ritual of the

Church into the local languages, or even changing the dress, the art, music, architecture and life style of the Christians in these countries. Much of what is called incarnation, adaptation or inculturation of the Church in Asia and Africa is of this nature.

It is also possible to find a measure of agreement among Christians who opt for the social liberation of their peoples from the economic and political domination by local elites, foreign rulers or transnational corporations. Christians in the so called developed and developing countries may agree on this if their societal option is in favour of the liberation of the oppressed. This is perhaps the most important area of agreement that Christians and persons of other religions should work towards, to bring about a world of justice with peace. The “Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation” programme of the World Council of Churches seeks such an agreement on principles and action.

More serious theological questions however arise if we go beyond these and try to interrelate the presuppositions of the religions and the perceptions each religion has of itself and of others concerning the ultimate realities of the meaning and destiny of human life. In this we have to go deeper than the external expressions of a culture and ask whether the stories, myths, interests and philosophical presuppositions of a people have gone into the making of its religious thinking and theology.

In order that theology may be more faithful to the foundational charism, primordial spiritual experience and core values of a religious community it is necessary to discern the elements of a given theology that pertain to that source. What thereafter are the additions to this core that have been made by succeeding generations. From this consideration we can clarify the type of faith that a believer of a religion has to give to a particular thesis or teaching of theology or practice of religion. All the teachings of a religion do not merit the same type of faith – some of them are directly from the founder, others are elaborations by successive generations who are members of the religious community.

In this perspective we can ask what elements prevalent in Europe and among the Jews prior to their acceptance of Christianity have also entered into the present admixture that is considered Christian theology. If so can the disciples of Jesus from other continents and cultures distinguish between what are the elements of a purely Jewish or European (or North American) culture and what is of Jesus Christ in modern, Western Christian theology? If so can they express the specifically Christian content – or what comes from Jesus of Nazareth – especially as from him – in terms of the philosophy, culture, stories, myths and even rites and rituals of the people of their countries?

This is naturally a very difficult question. We would have to begin by first trying to discuss what is incumbent on all in Christian theology as the message of Jesus and what is its particular clothing in Jewish and European world views, philosophy, culture and popular religiosity which pre-existed the conversion of these people to Christianity.

We must distinguish between the faith due in Christianity to what Jesus teaches and to what the Churches have subsequently developed as interpretations of his teaching. The direct teachings of Jesus can be considered the communication of his primordial spiritual experience. Of course we depend on the Gospels for information concerning this teaching. The core values of the discipleship of Jesus – which is what Christianity should be about – are also in this Jesus teaching. It is remarkable that there is hardly anything that is divisive of religions in his teaching. Rather it is a call to an interiority of life and a love of neighbour in union with God.

Our acceptance of Jesus as a supreme teacher, as one showing a path to deliverance from sin and union with God is based on faith. It can also be corroborated by personal experience of life guided by the teachings and example of Jesus. But ultimately the acceptance of the person of Jesus as the guide in life for ourselves is a response of faith in him. That he is intimately united to God is also a matter of faith. We can thus accept the Gospels, the New Testament and the Bible as a divine revelation. While the core message concerning the way human life is to lived is subject to experiential verification. Many elements in Christian theology are developments based on the presuppositions accepted by Christians in different communities or Churches. Thus: in what way is Jesus united to God? To what extent and in what way is the Bible inspired? These are issues that have been elaborated later on in the history of Christianity. The Church definitions concerning these can claim only a faith that is due to the Church in her teaching power. They are not necessarily directly from Jesus.

Much of the later conflicts among Christian Churches and differences of opinion among theologians are concerning these secondary or derived conclusions which are themselves presuppositions. Likewise the difficulties in inter-religious relations have also been concerning these secondary presuppositions and teachings that tended to make Christianity normative, exclusive and dominant.

In order that Christian theology may be a help towards the integral development and liberation of all humankind it is necessary that we clarify these issues. Thus we will be able to distinguish what is the essential teaching of Jesus and what are later elaborations. This can be a purification of Christian theology that can help the people of our time appreciate the basic teaching of Jesus which is what Christians consider the core of their faith.

The process itself is likely to be a difficult one, as Christians are accustomed to consider many teachings as belonging to the tradition of the Church and hence part and parcel of the Christian faith. It is likely to be misunderstood and even misinterpreted. We need however to investigate critically the content of theology – precisely in order to discern the core of the faith from its less essential elements. For this we should try to establish some norms of critical evaluation that have a foundation in the teaching of Jesus and/or in the common sense of humanity – we call them **“Principles of Critique”**.

4. Validity of Presuppositions

A presupposition is assumed to be true: is taken for granted; it is not necessarily the subject of proof and rational argument. To the one who believes in a presupposition of religion, it has a validity and a truthfulness based on faith or confidence in the credibility of the one who proposes or presents it. It can be borne witness to by living according to its teachings or demands. It can be inspiring and meaningful to the one who accepts it.

It is however not necessarily true for others, nor is necessarily seen as true by them. They would not think obliged to accept it in faith. They can however respect the faith of the believer particularly when it leads to good to the believer and to others.

Even within the same religious tradition such as Christianity there are certain presuppositions that are acceptable by all – e.g. that Jesus is the supreme teacher and that he gave his life in fidelity to his teaching. There are other claims of some Churches that are not accepted by others. Thus the teaching concerning the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff is a point of division of the Churches. There are other issues on which Christian Churches have divergent views; e.g. the nature of original sin, grace and redemption. There can thus be fundamental differences in the interpretation of commonly accepted texts such as the Bible.

The issues are even more profound when we have different religions presenting totally different sets of propositions based on different starting points which are also presuppositions. There may be a similarity at certain levels – as in the core values or in their applications to a concrete situation, but the total thinking within one religion may be organized in a different manner from the thinking in another. Thus Christian theology and Buddhist religious thought or philosophy may agree on certain common values and applications, but the construct of thinking and their expression are quite different from each other.

So long as these religions are practised by people in different contexts, there may be no issue concerning their inter relation. But when they are lived by different groups within the same country or region their interaction is important. The situation is worse if they lead to religious conflicts – as in the communal conflicts in some Asian countries. If one religion claims a right to dominate the others, or that it is the unique and privileged path to salvation, the relationships among the religions may lead to much conflict as the history of the past few centuries shows us.

While recognizing that religions are based on certain presuppositions we need to develop certain criteria and methodologies of dealing with their inter-relation. A first consideration would be that the presuppositions of one religion are not necessarily more valid than the presuppositions of another religion. Both are assumptions about things concerning which there can be no proof. We can of course see from their impact whether each or both lead to human fulfillment. In such a consideration we should not compare the theory of one with the practice of another, or the best of one with the worst of another. The mystic of one should not be compared with the evil doers who happen to be in another tradition.

We must be prepared to recognize assumptions to be assumptions, and hence having a validity only as such to those who accept them. We can however study the implications of different sets of assumptions or theological positions. A religion which acknowledges the equality of all races before God would have a different impact on history from one which has a concept of a chosen people who are favoured by God, specially if such favours are understood as a right to domination. Naturally in such a study it would be necessary to see the impact of an ideology which may influence the interpretation and living of the core values of a religion.

Can we have some critical principles for evaluating all presuppositions and consequently all theologies that depend on them? Or at least within each tradition can such principles be evolved. It is our contention that within the Christian tradition it is possible to evolve a critical principle that would be valid at least in its application to elaborations of Christian theology. If it is rationally convincing or is in keeping with the core values of other religions and persuasions it may have a validity for them also.

The presuppositions of a religion may be related to a myth or myths. **A myth** is a narrative concerning fundamental symbols which are vehicles of ultimate meaning. A myth tries to express through symbols ultimate reality, which ultimate reality transcends both the capacity of discursive reasoning and expression in ordinary human language.²⁶ Thus the creation story in the Bible has the character of a myth, it contains an implicit truth which is communicated through the narrative to those who accept it.

A myth should not be taken literally as if it were fully historically real and not a story. Theology may be built around a myth. Then much would depend on the interpretation given to it and its message concerning the ultimate realities.

5. The Influence of Ideology

Mariology, as all theology and spirituality, is influenced not only by the teachings of the religious founder and the presuppositions of the community but also by the interests of the group that evolves the thinking. When a line of thought is developed with a view to the fostering of the interests of a group it is called an ideology. Those in power in a society tend to develop thought patterns that will legitimize their power and help them to remain in power. This is a normal human tendency that affects all power holders.

Those in power are not generally satisfied with exercising power through the physical control over the people by means of the machinery of legal and political power including the armed forces. They wish to win over the minds of their subjects. This is why rulers develop ideologies to suit their hold over authority. They seek an intellectual justification of their power.

“Every ruling oligarchy of history has found ideological pretensions as important a bulwark of authority as its political power”.²⁷

²⁶ The New Dictionary of Theology on Myth.

²⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr. “The Nature and Destiny of Man”, Scribner’s, New York, 1964.

Religious establishments also tend to evolve their religious thinking and teaching in such a manner that it helps them to be in control of power in the religious community. This may be a conscious or unconscious influence on them. Normally they do not bring forth doctrines that would take power out of their control. It is true religious founders teach that power must be a service. (*Mk. 10. 43 If any one of you wants to be great he must be the servant of the rest.*) But those in power are inclined to reflect that their own being in power is the greatest service to the community. Thus the Bishops in the Vatican Council while agreeing to a limitation to their term of office, fixed their retirement at 75 years of age. And the Pope who is called “the servant of the servants of God” is not yet prepared to limit the life long tenure of the papacy by fixing a retirement age.

“All human knowledge” continues Niebuhr,

“is tainted with an ‘ideological’ taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge”²⁸

The Catholic Church which has exercised both spiritual and political power for centuries over whole civilizations can therefore be particularly susceptible to making its theology an ideology, i.e. making its religious teachings suit the interests of the power holders in the Church.

In considering the development of theology we have therefore to keep in mind that during almost all its history of over 1500 years the authority for the evolution of theology has been controlled by clerics who are males, and in the Catholic Church celibates. Further till this generation they have been Europeans or the descendents of Europeans in other countries such as the United States and Latin America. Hence there is a strong likelihood of Catholic theology being evolved for the furtherance of the interests of the male Euro-American clergy.

When analysing a theology or doctrine it is necessary that there be a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. Since the “ideological taint” is a common human phenomenon, it is to be expected in all theology (including the present writer’s). In Mariology we should keep in mind the suspicion, that it is possible, likely and even probable, that the male clergy would foster a theology that would be in keeping with their interests and power in the religious community. Further since these centuries have been an era of feudalism followed by European domination over most of the world Mariology, with the rest of theology is likely to be tainted with the ideology and interests of the dominant powers in Europe, and later on of the European imperialist and capitalist domination over others.

When the elaboration of a theology is concerning matters about which we have no empirical evidence and about which we cannot come to conclusions from rational investigation, there is more room for the influence of ideology. That is, the interest of the controlling group may have a major impact in conditioning the growth of a theology. Then what is in the interest of the power holders may be proposed as faith.

²⁸ Op.cit p. 194.

Myths or narratives concerning symbols which are to be pointers to the ultimate realities may themselves be taken as literal truths. Their interpretation may be such as to serve the power holders in the community. Once this route of theological development has been entered into, **tradition**, which is considered a source of revelation, can buttress the ideological positions and hand them down from generation to generation as divinely revealed truths.

It is therefore very important that an endeavour be made to distinguish myth or narrative and historical fact; presuppositions, from revealed doctrine. Thus much of the limitations in the theologizing of the previous centuries was due to their accepting the Genesis story of the creation and fall of humanity rather literally as historical data revealed by God. This mythical narrative has an element of truth and an important spiritual message concerning the human predicament but it should not be taken as the literal truth.

“Christian theology has found it difficult to refute the rationalistic rejection of the myth of the Fall without falling into the literalistic error of insisting upon the Fall as an historical event. One of the consequences of this literalism, which has seriously affected the thought of the Church upon the problem of man’s essential nature, is the assumption that the perfection from which man fell is to be assigned to a particular historical period i.e. the paradisaical period before the Fall.²⁹

When theology advances and propagates doctrines with an ideological bias, there is a tendency for them to get ingrained in a people to the extent of becoming a prejudice and a stereotype for evaluating situations. This can be clearly seen from the impact of the Garden of Eden story on the attitude of society towards women.

Since a myth is a narrative that endeavours to communicate an aspect of the ultimate or transcendent reality in relation to the origin, destiny and meaning of human life or for a community. It leaves considerable room for phantasy and imagination. This is true of the biblical story of creation or the peoples stories of their ethnic origins like St. George and the Dragon or the arrival of Vijaya and his followers from India to Sri Lanka.

Precisely because of this literary form the subsequent interpreters of the myth have also an opportunity to exercise their imagination in explaining and developing the myth. When the interpretation of a myth is done by the power holders in a community it is likely that they will do so in such a manner as to safeguard their interests.

In Christian theology we have the situation in which the original mythical presentation of the beginnings of the universe and of human life have been the subject of interpretation in later centuries by the ecclesiastical authorities. These in turn have claimed divine authority to do so on the basis of divine inspiration and the power given to them by Jesus Christ. These interpreters have also been at the same time male

²⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr: Op.cit pp. 267-268.

clergy, feudal lords and later medieval political rulers as in the Holy Roman Empire. It is therefore necessary to exercise a critical judgment on the evolution of the myth (or from the myth) into religious teaching and later even defined dogma of the Catholic Church.

We have in such a situation a combination of myth interpreted by the authorities turning into Church tradition which itself is given a quasi divine sanction being considered a source of revelation. There is then a possibility of the human imagination of teachers and authorities being utilized to interpret the myth and develop it to foster their interests.

It is in this situation that modern thinkers such as Rudolf Bultmann have developed the concept of demythization in order to try to separate the real import of a myth from its imaginative expression.

6. Role of Imagination in Theology: e.g. in Mariology

Some of the foundations of traditional Mariology are derived from the mythical presentations of the Old Testament – e.g. Genesis and of the New Testament developed rather imaginatively into theology and at times dogma. This need not be a problem if the doctrines had no unfavourable impact on the relations among persons and communities.

But in Mariology and Christology they have had disastrous consequences on the understanding of the relations of the sexes and religions. The Adam and Eve story has been a foundation of an ideology of male domination: Mariology is linked to it as Mary is presented as the second Eve. Both Mariology and Christology as they have been historically developed are closely related to the myth of the “Fall” of humanity and its consequences such as original sin and the type of redeemer that humanity is in need of. This has in turn led to the exclusivist and intolerant teachings and attitudes of Christian theology and “Christian” powers such as the European colonizers in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Oceania in the past five centuries.

There is much room for imagination in Mariology because the content of the teachings in traditional Mariology have been very much concerning things about which we do not have verifiable information or are beyond the capacity of the human mind to understand and comprehend. e.g. :

the conception of Mary and the relation of divine grace to her from the first moment of conception,

- the conception of Jesus by Mary through the “overshadowing” of the Holy Spirit,
- the “perfect and perpetual virginity of Mary”,
- her being “mother of God”,
- her bodily assumption into heaven,
- her role as mediatrix of grace and coredemptrix of the human race.

Yet these have been (and/are) very much the content of the teaching and preaching concerning Mary.

Due to their being derived from the mythical elements in both the Old and the New Testament there is much room for the human imagination to interpret them – naturally in favour of the interpreters.

Thus there are different explanations concerning the origin of Eve from Adam, but generally in favour of the priority of the male. Varying interpretations are given concerning the condition of Adam and Eve before the alleged “Fall”. This is spoken of in general Catholic theology as the state of original justice. This is something about which we cannot know anything by reason or experience. The Genesis narrative itself does not describe it except briefly and idyllically. It is later writers who refer to the action of the first parents (in the myth) as a grave sin against God’s commands. The concept of original sin as such as we have in Catholic theology is evolved over the centuries of Christians experience – with St Augustine through the Middle Ages to the definitions of the Council of Trent in the 16th century.

The differences between the Catholics and Protestants, and even among Catholics and among Protestants show what varieties of interpretation are possible. Each view presents an explanation of the state of original justice, the nature of the “fall”, its consequences and correspondingly a concept of redemption. While we know from experience that human fallibility and mortality are combined with the desire for good and for immortality, we cannot know the historical origins of this predicament. But different theories or hypotheses propose varying views about the condition of humans at a time chronologically prior to the “fall” in an earthly paradise. Is not what is said about that state and stage very much a matter of theological imagination – e.g. such as Adam and Eve not being subject to concupiscence or death?

Yet these concepts led to conclusions about the nature and necessity of the grace of Christ and of the Church for the salvation of every human being. From thence it was easy to conclude – as the Churches did – that the other religions were not salvific. Thus very vital theological questions were responded to on the basis of conclusions derived from the interpretation over time of a mythical story. Naturally each succeeding generation in the Church could give the value of “Tradition” to the interpretations of their predecessors in the faith.

The graces and privileges of Mary are deduced from the presuppositions assumed on the basis of the creation myth and its later reinterpretation specially by Paul. These in turn led to the proclamation of Jesus as Son of God and Mary as Mother of God. The immaculate conception of Mary depends on the concept of the state of original justice and original sin in Catholic theology.

The teaching on the holiness of Mary unparalleled by any other human except Jesus, is concluded from these doctrines. This holiness is interpreted in such a way as

to fit into the power system in the Church. J.F. Murphy in the article on the “Holiness or Mary” in the New Catholic Encyclopaedia³⁰ writes.

Traditionally, therefore, the Church has always attributed to Mary any grace that has been granted to a lesser saint, either in its own form or in some more eminent and fitting manner. Certain graces, of course, could not be directly bestowed on Mary. The priesthood, for an instance, was not appropriate for Our Lady **as a woman**, but the divine maternity brought her the local, not simply the sacramental presence of Christ’s body. (emphasis added)

Such theological elaborations show how the theologian’s imagination can be guided and tainted by the prevailing positive law of the Church. The conditions of the disciplinary law of the Church are said to be binding on Mary. In fact it seems easier for God to be responsible for a virgin birth and a divine – human being than to have a woman priest. This shows how the presuppositions, prejudices and prevailing ideology of an age can influence the imagination of theologians and Church teachers.

J.F. Murphy continues his explanation of Mary’s holiness as related to the sacramental life:

“Since the Sacraments were instituted as a chief means of growth in grace for the Christian, the graces gained by Our Lady would be immense, since she was prepared to receive the Sacraments with ideal dispositions. Of course, not all the Sacraments were necessary in the case of Mary; **Some she could not even validly receive**”.³¹ (emphasis added)

It is interesting to remark how the later developed sacramental theology is applied to Mary with retrospective effect. The Church discipline is binding on Mary. She could procreate the physical Jesus in her womb, but her gender is against her making Jesus sacramentally present on the altar. This shows how far ideology and prejudice can condition theological elaborations. The imagination is limited by them, but tries to be helpful with compensatory consolations.

Developments in theology concerning the virginity of Mary and the role of Joseph in the holy family are another area in which the imagination of preacher and writers as well as or ecclesiastical teachers has had much leeway. Who can know, after the time of the Apostles, whether Mary was a virgin even after the birth of Jesus? Yet due to a desire to affirm a certain perspective of holiness there has been a trend to attribute perfect and perpetual virginity to Mary even when the scriptural evidence itself is of doubtful import, as we mention later.

These considerations show us that it is important that we adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion in order to try to evaluate the impact of myth, ideology, imagination and prejudice in the evolution of dogmas. This is particularly necessary in situations in which dogmas have a divisive impact in a pluralist society or deflect the attention of

³⁰ J.F. Murphy in article on “Holiness of Mary” in the New Catholic Encyclopaedia, Washington DC. Vol IX p. 348.

³¹ Op.cit p. 349.

Christians from the more important issues of human community living and the core message of the Gospel.

7. A Twofold Criterion for Evaluating Christian Theologies

While appreciating the innumerable and unfathomable benefits Christian theology has brought to many millions of human beings during nearly two millennia, we can and need to evaluate it in relation to some of its drawbacks both for the sake of believers themselves, the Church and of inter-religious relations specially in Asian countries.

In the Catholic perspective the sources of Christian theology are the Bible and Tradition. Both these are subject to a critical evaluation.

The Bible has a core teaching of love and unselfish service which are truly meaningful, redeeming for all humanity. This is part of the primordial religious intuition, inspiration, experience and example of the Jewish people in the Old Testament and of Jesus and his disciples in the New.

However there are many elements in the Bible which are less praise worthy or are even undefendable specially as they impinge on the rights of human beings. Thus the Book of Deuteronomy calls for the total extermination of the seven nations that will be inhabiting Caanan when Israel occupies it. (*Deut. 7. 1-5, 20. 16-18*). The Israelites are to “utterly destroy them” (*Deut. 7. 2*) and to “save nothing” that breathes (*Deut. 20. 16*). Before the interests of Israel the chosen people of God, the lives of these others do not count.³²

Likewise in tradition too there are different interpretations of texts which have led to conflicts among Christians, and teachings of the Church that have been intolerant and harmful to others – e.g. concerning other religions or women.

Given this situation how can we have a valid principle for the critique of theologies and their sources – Bible and Tradition. For this we have proposed a twofold principle – one negative and one positive – both flowing from the love command of Jesus – the core of his message.

a) Negatively

Any theology that is authentically derived from God in Jesus must be loving, respectful and fulfilling of all sections of humanity of all places and times. This is the nature of the God revealed in the basic (and better) inspiration of the Bible specially by Jesus the Christ. God is Just.

Hence any element in a theology that insults, degrades, dehumanizes and discriminates against any section of humanity of any time or place cannot be from God in Jesus. If it is present in Christian theology it is an unjustifiable intrusion by later theologians and should be exorcised from the body of acceptable Christian theology. As Jesus says “from their fruits you will know them”. Fruits of hate, and insult cannot come from Jesus or God.

³² George Soares Prabhu – “Communalism and the Role of the Theologian”, MS New Delhi, 1987.

This gives a principle for the purification of a prevailing and predominant Christian theology. If there are such degrading elements in a theology their source must be searched. Perhaps they are an illegitimate inference from an acceptance source, or else the source itself may be a presupposition that is not justified or justifiable. In the latter case, that source itself must be very critically analysed and evaluated. We must be careful not to attribute to God what is of mere human elaboration.

On the application of this principle a good deal of the traditional construct of Western Christian theology will have to be reviewed.

b) Positively

Since we believe that all that is good in the world comes from God we can also draw the inference that **everything that is truly humanizing and ennobling in any religion or ideology is also ultimately from the divine source**, and must be respected as such.

God wills the happiness and fulfillment of all persons and peoples. We can conclude from this, that more a theology is truly leading to genuine human self realization and fulfillment of all persons and peoples, the closer it is to the divine source. i.e. it helps the resolution of personal problems of individuals as well as improves the societal relations of groups.

This principle of critique is in the first instance a rational and an ethical one. In that sense it can be presented and applied to any religion or ideology. It is at the same time based on the central teaching of Jesus Christ. It tries to take the core message of Jesus seriously and make it the touchstone of good theology. Should not Christian theology have this as its guiding principle?

This principle of critique affirms God as revealed in Jesus Christ viz as a God of love who cares for all irrespective of any divisions even of creed. It is an affirmation of the centrality of universal love which is made a measuring rod of the authenticity of any sacred text, Church teaching or practice.

Naturally it will seem both simple and exacting. But that is what the Gospel of Jesus was and has to be. He was himself for a purification of the religion of the day. He struggled against the wrong interpretations of the Law and the Prophets that had ended in imposing terrible unnecessary burdens on the mass of the people in the name of religion. The teaching of Jesus is very much concerning the moral life inspired by the love of God. The dogmatic definitions of later Christianity are not found as such in his teaching. At the same time much of the simple evangelical teaching of Jesus is not given an adequately significant place in the presentations of dogmatic theology.

This principle needs to be worked out in its application. Concerning this there would be differences of opinion. But the principle as such would seem to have a validity both in relation to the teaching of Jesus and human rationality. It gives us a way of applying the key value of the Jesus Gospel to the theologies that claim to be

from him. It helps us liberate Christian theologies from presentations of God that are unfaithful to the Jesus teaching e.g. of God as intolerant, partial and cruel or fostering inhumanity, dehumanization and exploitation of human beings. It thus constrains us to seek deeper into the origins of certain theological teachings which cannot be from God or God in Jesus and are of purely human sectarian sources.

This approach of critically evaluating theologies may seem at first sight a weakening and dilution of the Christian faith. This is not the intention. Nor need it be so. What is desired is not the diminishing of faith in Jesus the Christ but a **purifying and deepening of it**, and that in the contemporary context of a one world situation and of religio-culturally pluralistic societies. Such a critical dialogue can help relativize what is not certain in theology, and give more attention to what is the **Core message of the faith in God communicated by Jesus**.

While the particular presuppositions and some conclusions of religions and theologies may tend to divide the followers of the religions, the core message of the religions concerning human life and human fulfillment can help bring peoples together in mutual understanding and respect and in common action for the good of all. This can be a better, deeper and more lasting basis for inter-religious cooperation at all levels, including social justice and human liberation. Such a dialogue, can help disengage the core message of Christianity from its encrustation in a particular culture or even theological school. The **faith** in and discipleship of Jesus can then be seen in clear perspective. It can perhaps be harmonized with the core message of the other world religions· if these too can be understood in their essence beyond their particular religio-cultural expressions.

These two principles – the exclusion due to negativity, and the approval due to positive contribution to human fulfillment – give us two valuable approaches for evaluation of religions including the present theology and the tradition of the Churches.

The **Bible and tradition** are both subject to the norm of excluding what is degrading to human beings. Jesus himself changed the law as expressed in the Old Testament e.g. concerning the teaching of Moses regarding divorce. (*Mk. 10. 5*) Jesus was very strong against those who scandalized or had contempt for little children. “See that you do not despise one of these little ones”. (*Mt. 18. 10*) Jesus did not accept the ritualistic religion of the past; or the respect for the Sabbath irrespective of human need. The supreme freedom of Jesus in dealing with the Old Testament was for the genuine freedom and fulfillment of the human persons as children of God. He tried to free his people from their prejudices concerning other peoples – e.g. the parable of the Good Samaritan. Universal love and forgiveness are basic to His reinterpretation of the Scriptures.

8. A Critical Purification of Theology

When we find that some teachings of Christian theologies have been harmful, injurious and degrading to human beings, or legitimizing – grave injustice, consciously or unconsciously we should institute a critical re-examination of such theology. This is required for the good of the Church itself. Jesus did so in his day. He

was critical of what passed for religiosity but was harmful for people. The reform of the Church has come through such auto critique. When the Church was unable to accept and integrate such criticism, there were ruptures in the life of the Church as at the time of the Protestant Reformation. It is only in our day – after over four and a half centuries – that Catholics are beginning to acknowledge that there were several valid criticisms in the positions of reformers like Martin Luther. The failure of open and frank communication within the Church at that time was tragic for Christians, in so far as the Church was badly splintered, and whole communities were at war with each other for several decades.

This principle can be very helpful as a pointer to evaluation we could make of the presuppositions and content of Western Christian Theology that has been considered and presented as universal for all humanity. We may also say that what leads to fights and killing of human beings because of religious beliefs cannot be from God and Jesus. Hence If two religions have had long internecine conflicts of such a nature, it is an indication that some of the presuppositions and even some of the teachings of these two religions may have elements which are not from God but are expressions of human selfishness and perhaps ethnic aggrandisement.

The presuppositions drawn from one world view or culture may not be seen as mere presuppositions (proven or improvable) if the corresponding theology is limited to the peoples who draw their inspiration from the same culture. Europeans will not normally find difficulty in accepting Adam and Eve as the first parents of all humanity; and their fate In the garden of Eden is not such a tragedy for them as the teachings of the Church ,provide them a way out of the debacle through the Church itself. But other peoples may not necessarily accept this story and the consequences thereof; likewise European women.

A doctrine evolved in one context in which it is harmless, may have bad effects in another situation. Thus Christian theology that has been elaborated in a situation of relative isolation as of Europe during the middle ages may have to be re-thought when the Church has to live in a plural context of different religions and social systems. The exclusiveness of some of the assertions of Christian theology may be understandable in the circumstances of Western European Christians. They were out of contact with most of the rest of the world during several centuries when the Moslems isolated Europe from Africa and Asia This situation lasted from the 7th or 8th century till about the middle of the 15th century. Then the Christians regarded Europe as the Centre of the world, and the others known to them were infidels and enemies e.g. Moslems. They theologized in a situation in which all the people with whom they were in regular peaceful contact had the possibility of being Christians. Hence a theology that considered baptism essential for salvation was not seen as harmful or inconvenient to anyone there. Thus it could easily go unchallenged for centuries, because everyone more or less took it for granted. Different historical situations as of large scale secularization, or of religious pluralism would raise serious issues concerning the soundness of such theological positions.

Such an approach can also help us understand why many in the West have refused to accept the Christian religion. Some rejected it on the basis of rationalism,

atheistic secularism, the modern concept of progress and evolution that did not need religion, or because of a materialistic interpretation of reality as in Marxism.

What is called secularization is often a rejection by people of elements of the teaching of a religion they do not find respectful for them, or necessary as an explanation of the meaning of life. This is not necessarily the rejection of the divine (as in an atheistic secularism) but the affirmation that a given interpretation concerning the divine is not acceptable to them. The process of secularization has helped in the purification of religion and religious teachings. The world has thus taught the Churches some lessons concerning some of the less acceptable or less relevant aspects of their theology or practice.

Other schools of thinking are also in crisis as the world is far from experiencing continuing progress; Western civilization is in a moral crisis and searching for values on which to rebuild itself. Marxist socialism too has failed to solve the problems concerning the ultimate meaning of life even when it has contributed towards a more just social order. It is within this situation that the Churches are coming together in searching their identity as disciples of Jesus and in a more open dialogue with the world religions, which till recently they considered as pagan.

9. Applicable to Other Religions too

This principle of critical evaluation in relation to the degrading and dehumanizing impact on any human persons or groups is applicable to other religions too. Thus if any teaching or practice of Hinduism Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Shintoism, Judaism or any other religion looks down on other religions, considers itself as so possessing the truth as to be intolerant of others, or marginalizes a section of humanity such as the poor or women, to that extent it is subject to self purification. For this would be against its own better inspirations. It cannot be from God, the Absolute who cares for and loves all humankind. Or it cannot be a principle of genuine enlightenment that liberates persons to fulfillment and genuine lasting happiness.

Evaluating the Myths of a Religion : Criteria

Within the framework of this overall principle of critique we can propose some criteria for evaluating the myths of a religion. A myth is a narrative which seeks to express through symbols the ultimate reality which transcends both the capacity for discursive reasoning and expression in ordinary human language. Formally myths are narratives about symbols, functionally they are vehicles of ultimate meaning.

Since the beginning and end of the universe and of human life are beyond our experiential knowledge, the religions claim certain revelations by the ultimate, beyond or in the universe, and/or utilize different myths to interpret their perspectives on these issues. Here **Myth** is used to signify some event which is said to have taken place in primeval time, and is considered fundamental for the whole order and regulation of life.

The myths, or conceptual framework which thus purport to explain human life and its meaning and destiny cannot be rationally proved – or, for that matter even

disproved by empirical evidence, as they are generally placed beyond known and verifiable history. They can have a verisimilitude as a good story, as giving feasible explanations, and because they may have entered the cultural ethos and collective memory of a people or of whole civilizations.

As Raimundo Panikkar writes,³³

“Religions deal mainly with the collective ultimate self-understanding of a human group. The truth of religion can be gauged only within the unifying myth that makes the self-understanding possible.”

The myths of religions or of a particular human community are deep rooted collective perceptions that influence their thinking and actions at a primordial level. They are generally accepted unquestioningly as true and valid. They are part of the strong emotive subconscious of a people.

The myths generally give an advantage to the dominant group within a community. It may be an ethnic group, a class, royal family, a priestly caste or the dominant sex. Myths thus consolidate prevailing inequalities by internalizing them within peoples mind-sets and cultures. Myths even give an aura of sacredness to such convictions which are thus not to be questioned but accepted as true.

Some Criteria

The myths of a religion have to be understood empathetically from within the religious tradition and in relation to the cultural background of their origins and development.

Among myths, the founding myths are of primary importance as the basis of much that follows in belief and life.

Such founding myths cannot be evaluated historically – unless they are clearly contrary to proven scientific data and evidence. They cannot be directly verified at source if they are claimed to be from a divine revelation, as the same source is not available for us for consultation.

i) They can however be evaluated from their consequences. If the consequences of a myth are opposed to the human fulfillment of one group of humanity or other it is natural that such group would be entitled to reject such a myth. Thus if the creation myth is interpreted in such a way as to discriminate against females from the beginning, there is every justification for it to be rejected as unfair to half of humanity. Within an unequal and unjust society it is natural that there be a hermeneutics of suspicion concerning its myths, specially among those disadvantaged by them.

ii) Another criterion for evaluation can be from within the religious tradition itself. If a religion has an understanding of the Divine Absolute as loving and just

³³ Raimundo Panikkar, in “Towards a Universal Theology of Religion”, Ed. Leonard Swidler, Orbis, New York, 1987. p. 129.

towards all human beings, it can be concluded that any revelation said to be from such a Divine Absolute cannot be degrading and insulting to any person or group of persons within or outside that community. Such an unjust revelation would contradict the very idea of an all loving and just God or absolute, i.e. the myth and its development would lack **internal coherence**.

This criterion is applicable to the original myth or myths as well as their subsequent development and interpretations, even if these be by the religious authorities constituted within that community to teach the doctrines authoritatively.

iii) The emerging consciousness of humanity can be an indication of the goodness or badness of such elements within a religious tradition. It may be that slavery was accepted as legitimate within the Christian communities. However today it is seen as clearly opposed to the concept of God and the content of divine revelation as understood in the main Christian Churches. The collective conscience of humankind finds slavery a grave denial of human rights.

iv) In a world increasingly unified by communications, it is natural that humanity is more conscious of the plurality of religions and of their founding myths. In so far as some of them contradict each other or discriminate against others, there would be, at least, a questioning of these myths, if they are considered universally valid.

v) The ability of a myth or traditional mental construct to respond meaningfully to the new human consciousness regarding sexuality, feminism, ecology, nature, genetic engineering, astro-physics and overall human personality development is also a criterion for evaluating it. These have very wide implications in the modern world, and will be increasingly so in the coming century.

vi) If a myth or its interpretation tends to **deflect** the attention of the believers of a religion from the more important issues and obligations of the core values of the religion, it can be harmful to them and others by a neglect of duties and a diversion of attention to less important or less relevant issues. Thus if a myth deflects believers from taking action on the social and ecological causes of diseases by suggesting that the principal cure for diseases is in prayers or offerings to a deity, it may be harmful to the human community itself.

A Consequent Rethinking

In the Asian context where we have several world religions that have their different explanations of the origins of human life, of human destiny and the process of salvation and liberation, we have to rethink Christology and Mariology at a deeper level than is done in some other contexts. In Europe, North and South America the need to rethink the key dogmas of the Christian tradition are not felt so acutely. The other religions are not regarded – as yet – as a major issue to Christian theology and life, even though we can see the beginnings of a reaction as in the book on “The Myth of Christian Uniqueness”.³⁴

³⁴ “The Myth of Christian Uniqueness” – St. John Hick and Paul Knitter, Orbis, New York 1987.

European and Latin American Christology and Mariology do propose an “ascending” approach to the understanding of Jesus and Mary. They are not satisfied with the traditional deductive approach – e.g. of first beginning with the assumption that Jesus Christ is the son of God second person of the Trinity and universal saviour of humanity. They contribute very valuable insights to the understanding of Jesus and Mary from a study of the scriptures and from their experience of the struggles for social liberation. These are valuable and most significant contributions to theology.

Latin American liberation theology brings in the concept of human liberation in society through social analysis and reading of the scriptures and of tradition. But they do not yet question the traditional bases of theology based on the Christology of the Councils (such as of Nicea, Chalcedon and Trent) which affirm that eternal salvation is only through Jesus Christ. They seem to be content to place in greater relief the message of societal liberation and as it were juxtapose it to the traditional theology of salvation through Jesus Christ. For them the concept of mission derived from the tradition is not so much of a problem as they do not meet acute questioning by persons of other religions.

In Asia we have to question the bases of a theology that has been hurting our peoples for centuries, and which are still an obstacle for Christians to be fully open to inter religious dialogue and to be accepted as such by others. We have to probe further to find out what has gone wrong in our countries in the presentation of Christianity during these past five centuries since Vasco da Gama.

In this it is our suggestion that the critical rethinking has to be concerning the basic construct or framework of Christian theology. This is based on the responses given to the issues raised by us elsewhere concerning the origin of humanity, our proneness to sin, and the nature of salvation, the role of religions and religious foundations in salvation, the identity of Jesus Christ, Gautama the Buddha, the Prophet Mohamed and the seers of the other religions.³⁵

Limits of Religions

In the Asian context given the multi religious character of our societies as well as the influence of secular and Marxist philosophies we have to probe into the role, function and limits of religions concerning human liberation and eternal salvation.

Ideologies such as Secularism and Marxism do not claim to be agents or agencies leading humans to an eternal other worldly destiny. Hence they do not claim to provide alternative or competing paths to eternal beatitude. However their critique of religions can have a healthy impact for the purification of religions. In similar manner the values of the religions can contribute to the very humanization of Marxists, socialists and secularists in practical life as in the USSR and Eastern Europe at present.

³⁵ Tissa Balasuriya, OMI “Humanity’s Fall and Jesus the Saviour” in *Voices of Third World Theology*. Dec. 1988. pp. 41-75.

A more immediately relevant question is the recognition of the limits of religion in relation to the eternal salvation of humans. Religions can help in the human search for eternal life by:

- a) showing a path or teaching a message of personal and societal purification, liberation and fulfillment,
- b) providing models and examples of persons who lead such holy, liberated and liberating lives.
- c) by forming communities of holiness and liberation and fostering the practices of self purification and worship,
- d) by linking among themselves and providing an undergirding of core values for personal and societal growth and fulfillment.

Beyond these it may be asked whether religions can meditate the actual transition of a person after this life to the hereafter – in heaven, Moksha, ‘Nirvana for the blessed. Here we have to note that religions as communities and organizations are this worldly realities. Their values may be the ethical and spiritual basis for human happiness or otherwise in the next. The community may help in their being communicated and lived. But we have no evidence as to what happens actually after death. We may believe in faith in the help and power of God’s grace and mediators. The religions as earthly communities and organization cease to have impact on us beyond the death. Our bodies return to dust and ashes, as to what happens to the spirit, the soul, the life principles is a matter of the relationship between it and the Transcendent God, Yahweh, Allah, Brahman.

In so far as God’s grace is necessary for salvation, the teaching of the Church is that God’s grace is available to every person irrespective of one’s religion or even without adherence to a religion. In so far as salvation is through the redeeming action of Jesus Christ, he has not denied it to any person of goodwill. God’s grace and the merits of Jesus Christ cannot be controlled or channelled exclusively by any religion or religious authority. Even if we accept a doctrine of such merits Jesus has not left anyone a monopoly over his gifts.

St Paul in the same epistle to the Romans speaks of the just judgment of God. (*Rom. 2, 2-16*)

In this sense the question of salvation of human beings after this life on earth by the religions is a non-issue. The debate whether religions are salvific in the next life is a question concerning which we cannot have evidence. Different religions can have faith beliefs concerning the criteria on which salvation takes place, and the agencies operating such a redemption or liberation. But the earthly religions as institutions and organizations do not operate beyond this life.

What is relevant and important is the role of religions concerning the realization of human fulfillment, salvation and liberation in this for individuals and communities on this mother earth.

The critique of the presuppositions in the inter-religious dialogue can thus take us to a better understanding of the limits of religions organizations, and of their

potential contribution towards ennobling human life and safeguarding Nature on this planet.

Chapter – 7

THE BASIC PRESUPPOSITION OF ORIGINAL SIN

The evolution of Marian Theology in the Catholic Church is a process that has been going on for over 15 centuries from the early Fathers through the Council of Ephesus 431 to the definition of the doctrine of the bodily Assumption of Mary to heaven on 15th August 1950 by Pope Pius XII. Mariology is intimately linked to the development of Christology. Christology is dependent on the evolution of the thought concerning the role and identity of Jesus Christ in the divine plan of salvation.

Christian theology of salvation has been evolved on the basis of the predicament as said to be revealed in the Bible. The condition of humanity is deduced from a reading of the first three chapters of Genesis in the light of the apostolic preaching of Jesus as universal saviour and specially the epistles of St. Paul, particularly Romans Chapter 5.

Christian tradition evolved its teaching on the origins and present state of humanity accepting the Genesis story as historical truth. This was so for many centuries, till the modern, critical studies of scripture. This teaching is based on several assumptions or presuppositions which are or were taken for granted. Theological imagination had to be exercised on several issues such as:

1. A state of original justice of humanity.
2. A fall from this state due to original sin
3. The inability of humanity to redeem itself from this fall, which was said to be deprivation of the grace of God required for human salvation.
4. The transmission of original sin by human generation, implicitly considering sexuality as the process of the communication of original sin. Its impact on the human intellect and will.
5. Impact of original sin on human life on earth, on nature, work, child bearing, relationship between the sexes.
 - punishment by God? Death as the “wages of sin”.
6. The need of a redeemer. Identity of Jesus Christ as a divine – human redeemer.
7. The way in which redemption takes place through Jesus:
 - a) as a teacher – message
 - b) as an example, ideal, model
 - c) as founding a community of salvation
 - d) as bringing about a change in human nature through his death.

8. Role of Baptism on persons – adults, dying, Infants concerning original sin, remission of sins.
9. Exemption from original sin – Mary Immaculate
 - how is it known – what is its impact on Mary
 - consequences on Marian theology, Catholic spirituality.
10. Role of Church:
 - a) dispenser of graces
 - b) nature of conversion, Baptism
 - c) mission of Church

All these and more are affected by the understanding of the creation story and the interpretation given to original sin based on biblical texts, presuppositions, ideology and theological imagination. Once elaborated the teachings get the strength of tradition, considered a source of revelation in the Catholic Church.

We appreciate the Genesis presentation of the origins of the human race due to creation by God, and of the human condition of sublime aspirations and inherent weaknesses, and the relationship to nature.

We have no difficulty with original sin in the sense of a human proneness to evil, that we all experience; nor with the concept of the collective sinfulness of a society or an environment that has a corrupting influence on persons. What we question is the hypothesis of original sin as propounded in traditional theology according to which human beings are born in a situation of helpless alienation from God due to the originating original sin of the first parents.

Critical Evaluation of the Traditional Doctrine of Original Sin

The traditional doctrine of original sin as generally prevalent in Christian theology has several drawbacks.

- A) In its Sources
 - i) is not directly from the Bible
 - ii) is not taught by Jesus
 - ii) or by St Paul, as such.
- B) Lacks internal coherency, and is not compatible with the goodness of God
- C) In its Consequences
 - i) discriminates against females,
 - ii) discriminates against persons of other religions or of no religion,
 - iii) it led to a wrong accent in the understanding of the mission of the disciples of Jesus and of the Church.

A. In its Sources

i) The teaching on original justice and original sin is not contained in the Old Testament in any direct way. The Genesis accounts attribute evil to human freedom, and not to God's intention. God is shown as having goodwill towards humanity.

The Old Testament does not make any explicit or formal statement regarding the transmission of hereditary guilt from Adam and Eve to the entire human race. It has passages that refer to the universal tendency towards sin, and how sin was present in human history as in Genesis chapters 3, 4, and 5. This is, of course, quite different from the subsequent theological definition as in the Council of Trent.

The concept of a supernatural state and a fall that cannot in anyway be made good by human repentance cannot be apodictically concluded from the Old Testament. It would seem to be strange that the God of the Bible who speaks to the Jewish people through the prophets and sacred writers, did not reveal so important a datum concerning the human condition. It can be of course responded that God's ways are not our ways, and that revelation is gradual and progressive.

The Jewish people did not understand the story of Genesis to imply a human fall and inadequacy due to which they could not reach their eternal destiny without a divine redeemer. They had hope in God and expected salvation from God. The Messiah they expected was a redeemer of their race. The practice of the Torah was sufficient for the Jews to attain their eternal beatitude.

ii) Jesus who taught clearly and categorically concerning what constituted holiness and goodness does not speak of Original Sin. He does not speak of his mission and ministry as one of redemption i.e. of having to buy back "emere" humanity. This would imply paying a price to someone who kept humanity as it were captive. God could not be under obligation to anyone, much less to Satan, as such a theory of redemption would imply. If Jesus had a consciousness of his mission he would have clearly stated so. Jesus calls for belief and trust in him and in his message as in John chapter 3, but this cannot be interpreted as a belief in the doctrine concerning original sin and redemption from it.

The teaching of Jesus concerning human salvation is that we must love God and love neighbour as ourselves. The conditions for salvation are stated clearly in the teaching on the last judgment (*Mt. 25*) "I was hungry and you fed me ... come and possess the kingdom which was prepared for you. What makes a person good and holy are his honest behaviour and not mere externals."

The teaching of Jesus is one that all human persons can practice – e.g. the Sermon on the Mount. He does not say that God's grace is denied to anyone, or is based on the sacraments of the Church.

The Gospels do not say that Jesus baptized anyone. If baptism was essential for salvation and the spiritual life, he should have given it his most serious attention. The conversion that Jesus wanted was a change of life – as in the case of Zaccheus who had to repay four fold for his illegal takings. The conversions in the lifetime of Jesus were in depth, and did not lead to the rite of baptism.

One may also ask whether Jesus would have known about the future development of doctrine by his disciples in the course at centuries. If he had seen the disastrous consequences of this doctrine on the Christian mission, would he not have

warned his followers of it. This of course, takes us to another problem of the knowledge of Jesus.

iii) The Apostolic Teaching

a) The teaching of the Apostles as portrayed in the Acts and the Epistles in the New Testament (the Early Kerygma) has clearly the message that all human beings are sinners and that salvation is through Jesus Christ. St. Peter in his first proclamation after receiving the Holy Spirit announces the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ (*Acts 2. 38*). Again in his speech before the members of the Council in Jerusalem, Peter declared

“Salvation is to be found through him alone; in all the world there is no one else whom God has given who can save us.” (*Acts 4. 12*)

Paul in his preaching in Pisidia in Antioch presents a similar message

“We want you to know, my fellow Israelites, that it is through Jesus that the message about forgiveness of sins is preached to you; and that everyone who believes in him is set free from all the sins from which the Law of Moses could not set you free.” (*Acts 13. 38-39*)

The Epistles of Paul likewise present such a teaching. e.g. Rom. 3.25:

“God offered him, so that by his death he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him.”

Rom. 5.8-9:

“But God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. By his death we are now put right with God; how much more, then, will we be saved by him from God’s anger! We were God’s enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his son.”

The first Epistle of John states:

“We have someone who pleads with the Father on our behalf – Jesus Christ, the righteous one. And Christ himself is the means by which our sins are forgiven, and not our sins only, but also the sins of everyone.” (1 Jo. 2, 1-2)

There is thus a clear apostolic teaching about human sinfulness and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The reference to an original sin communicated by generation is only in Paul’s epistle to the Roman 5. 12-21 and 1. Cor. 15, 21-22. Other references would seem to be to personal sins.

b) While this is true, the apostles teaching has also the position that God is just and judges everyone according to one’s actions. God has no favourites, and divine grace is available to the Gentiles even before baptism or meeting with the Apostles and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The Jewish patriarchs and prophets like Abraham, Moses, Samuel and David were with God though they had no knowledge of Jesus. On the contrary their sayings are invoked as testimony of the mission of the future Jesus: Acts 3. 13; 3. 22-26. A question arises as to how the Apostles would have thought of the salvation of these ancient seers who lived long before the birth of Jesus.

Secondly, Peter and the disciples had a spiritual experience in the meeting with Cornelius to whom the Spirit sent Peter. The Acts record that Cornelius a gentile captain in the Roman regiment was addressed by an Angel of God who said "God is pleased with your prayers and works of charity, and is ready to answer you". (*Acts. 10. 4*) Peter began his response to Cornelius thus:

"I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what race he belongs to." (*Acts 10. 34-35*)

Cornelius was therefore pleasing to God before he had heard of Jesus. He received the Holy Spirit in the same way as the Apostles had received, and hence Peter baptized him and his household. Here there is salvation prior to any contact with Jesus. The words of the voice from heaven to Peter

"Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean" (*Acts 10. 15*)

may be good inspiration to us, remembering the theology of creation in which all reality comes from God.

At the meeting in Jerusalem (*The Council of Jerusalem*) in Acts Chapter 15 there was a long debate concerning the necessity of circumcision for the Gentiles to be saved.

"After a long debate, Peter stood up and said, "And God, who knows the thoughts of everyone showed his approval of the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them: just as had to us. He made no difference between us and them; he forgave their sins because they believed. So then, why do you now want to put God to the test by laying a load on the backs of the believers which neither our ancestors nor we ourselves were able to carry? No! We believe and are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are." (*Acts 15, 6-11*)

Paul in his address to the City Council at Athens refers to their religiosity which he appreciates positively,

"I found an altar on which is written, 'To An Unknown God'. That which you worship, then, even though you do not know it, is what I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is lord of heaven and earth and does not live in man-made temples.

Yet God is actually not far from anyone of us; as someone has said,

“In him we live and move and exist!” It is as some of your poets have said,

“We too are his children.” (*Acts 17, 23-28*)

c) A third consideration is that the apostles say salvation is through faith in Jesus. How is this salvific faith to be understood. Some of the Reformers thought in terms of a trusting faith due to which God redeems irrespective of human actions. The general Catholic position is that faith to be salvific has to express itself in good works. In this sense it is the love of God and love of neighbour that manifests and nourishes faith and leads to holiness and salvation. Since the grace of God is not deficient for anyone, we may presume that anyone doing what one can would receive the necessary graces for salvation.

Peter in his First Epistle in which he speaks of the costly sacrifice of Christ that set people free from sin also says

“You call him Father, when you pray to God, who judges all people by the same standard, according to what each one has done.” (*1 Pet. 1. 17-19*)

Paul writes to the Corinthians:

“For all of us must appear before Christ, to be judged by him. Each one will receive what he deserves, according to everything he has done, good or bad in his bodily life.” (*2. Cor. 5. 10*)

The Acts of the Apostles also insist on the type of life that conversion to the discipleship of Jesus meant. It was not a faith of mere belief without a change in life. It was not enough to say “Lord, Lord” to be saved.

“All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute money among all, according to what each needed.” (*Acts 2. 44-45*)

“There was no one in the group who was in need.” (*Acts 4, 34*)

St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans exhorts the disciples

“Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers.” (*Rom. 12. 13*)

The story of Ananias and Sapphira punished for deception concerning the price for which they had sold a piece of land indicates that conversion had to be honest before the community in sharing property. (*Acts 5, 1-11*)

James is quite strong in his insistence on right action as the test of faith.

“You will be doing the right thing if you obey the law of the Kingdom, which is found in the Scripture.” Love your neighbour as you love yourself. (*James 2. 8*)

“My brothers, what good is it for someone to say that he has faith if his actions do not prove it?” (*James 2. 14*)

“You see, then, it is by his actions that a person is put right with God, and not by his faith alone.” (*James 2. 24*)

In the New Testament writings there are thus some texts which stress that salvation is from God through Jesus Christ and others which make human good-will and action the criterion of salvation and the judgment by God. We have to reconcile these two aspects which form part of the mystery of human action and divine inspiration or grace. Both have to be kept in a dynamic relationship in our theological perspective.

These two aspects however need not refer to an original sin as understood in later theology i.e. a sinfulness in human nature whereby humankind is unable to do good without a special divine redeemer. The concept of the divine grace understood as flowing from Christ need not be a problem for dialogue with persons of other theistic religions provided this grace is seen as graciously available to all human beings.

St. Paul

The principal **scriptural arguments** for original sin and original justice are drawn from the letters of **St. Paul**, specially Rom 5, 6-21 in which Paul speaks of reconciliation with God by the death of his son while we were enemies. He writes:

“Sin entered the world through one man, and through it death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned...”

As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous. ..

These texts themselves do not contain the theological conclusions that were drawn in subsequent centuries both by Catholic and Protestant theologians and church leaders. The teachings were elaborated in order to clarify and explain what redemption, reconciliation and renewal in Jesus Christ mean. The apostle teaches that the death of Jesus was redeeming for the whole of humanity. “factus nobis justitia. sanctificatio et redemptio” (*1 Cor. 1. 30*) “God has made us members of Jesus Christ and by God’s doing he has become our wisdom, and our virtue and our holiness, and our freedom” He is “the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the World”. (*Jn. 1. 29, Jerusalem Bible*)

“He has taken us out of the power of darkness and created a place for us in the Kingdom of the son that he loves, and in him we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of sins “in quo habemus redemptionem et remissionem peccatorum. (*Col. 1. 13-14*)

The apostolic preaching and writings contain the idea of freeing, redeeming, reconciling, renewing in Jesus Christ by his death. They do not however have clearly

the later teachings that were developed concerning an original justice in which humanity was immortal. It might even be argued that since St Paul says that: The results of the gift also outweigh the results of one man's sin (*Rom. 5. 16*) why should there not have been a removal of human mortality also which is said to be a result of Adam's sin? Further Paul has a positive appreciation of the religious spirit of the Greeks and recognizes in them the reverence for the 'unknown God'. (*Acts 17. 22-34*)

St Paul as also later Christian teachers, took Adam to be one historical person as was Jesus of Nazareth. At this stage the books of the Bible were not seen as giving the explanation of the origins of human life and its problems in mythical form. All the same St Paul does not have the implications of a fall as developed by later generations.

On the contrary, St. Paul in the same epistle to the Romans speaks of the just judgment of God:

“For God judges everyone by the same standard”. (*Rom. 2. 11*)

“For God will reward every person according to what he has done”. (*Rom. 2. 6*)

“For it is not by hearing the law that people are put right with God, but by doing what he commands”. (*Rom. 2. 13*)

The Gentiles do not have the law; but whenever they do by instinct what the law commands, they are their own law, even though they do not have the law. Their conduct shows that what the Law commands is written in their hearts. Their conscience also shows that this is true, since their thoughts sometimes accuse them, and sometimes defend them ... God through Jesus Christ will judge the secret judgments of all”. (*Rom. 2 15-16*)

Thus St Paul has a doctrine that explains how all persons – Jews and Gentiles – can be justified according to their fidelity to their conscience. This is quite different from the future elaborations of Christian thinkers about original sin and the necessity of Baptism for remission of this inherited sin for being just before God.

St. Augustine

There was no universal agreement on the issues concerning the existence, nature and consequences of original sin prior to the time of St. Augustine. Quite a few held the view that became traditional doctrine e.g. the Latin writers such as Hilary, and Ambrose. But many others did not agree with this view. Gregory of Nazianzus teaches that unbaptised children are without sin; likewise Chrysostom.

In the fourth century **St. Augustine (354-430)** profounded the teaching on original sin as communicated by the first parents through generation. He opposed Pelagius who regarded the fall of Adam and Eve as personal and not transmitted through them to the whole of humankind. According to Pelagius humans are free to choose good or evil and the grace of God is a helpful but unnecessary crutch. Christ's crucifixion did not redeem mankind because mankind did not need redemption.

Adam's sin was his personal sin, and no one else's. Jesus' life and teachings simply held up a supreme example of goodness for men to emulate.

Augustine developed a position between the two opposites of Manichaeism and Pelagianism. Manichaeism posited the existence of a natural evil in itself; while Pelagius held that human beings could of their own free will overcome evil. Augustine's position, evolved through these controversies, was that the sin of Adam and Eve is transmitted by generation to all human beings. It is principally in the concupiscence connected with sexual relations. Due to original sin human beings are a fallen mass – a “*massa damnata*”, that would all deserve eternal damnation but for the grace of God and redemption by Christ. Infants without baptism are destined to eternal damnation as they are in sin and do not have the grace of God. Their punishment however is most lenient.

Due to the concupiscence of the sexual act, original sin is communicated to children by their parents. Hence children are not born children of God but of the world, even in legitimate marriages.³⁶

This teaching was the mainline Catholic doctrine right through the Middle Ages, with further developments by St. Anselm and the 13th century Scholastics.

We can see in the evolution of this doctrine how much the presuppositions and assumptions of a group influence the development of dogma – leaving room for imagination combined with authoritarian justifications. Thus the text of John 3.5 “unless anyone be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven” is interpreted in relation to the later practice of infant baptism. On the other hand the existence and impact of original sin are sometimes argued from the practice of infant baptism.

After Augustine the doctrine was further developed with refinements as new questions arouse such as concerning the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

B. Lacks Internal Coherence

The doctrine is **based on unproved and unproveable assumptions** as for instance concerning the conditions in the Garden of Eden. Pope John Paul II in his recent Encyclical on the Blessed Virgin Mary cites the Vatican Council II Constitution on the Church quoting Irenaeus:

“The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience. What the virgin Eve bound through her unbelief, Mary loosened by her faith.”

Thus the present Pope and the Vatican Council II speak of Eve as having been a virgin in the Garden of Eden. This is obviously a presupposition – which is linked to the idea that the original sin was connected with sexuality.

³⁶ St. Augustine: *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione* 1.10; 1. 57; III, 17, P. L. XLIV

- If original justice was a condition in which their passions were under control of reason and virtue, how could Adam and Eve have “fallen” and sinned against God?
- How can such a punishment of all humankind for one act of the first parents be reconciled with the justice of God who is love.
- If Jesus atoned for their sin superabundantly why were not the losses due to the sin made good – i.e. a return to original justice?
- In so far as it gives special privilege to the baptized, this doctrine would go against the teaching of Paul that “there is no respect of persons with God” (*Rom. 2. 11*) If on the other hand God’s grace is available to all persons of good will the emphasis on baptism of persons to save them from original sin would not be so necessary.

This doctrine is **unjust by the rest of humanity** – they have a judgment passed on them without their being responsible for any fault of Adam and Eve. Even a normal human Court of Law will not accept such a trial and judgment for the whole of humanity for ever.

The whole doctrine is built on assumptions concerning a condition about which we have no knowledge and on a medieval Western European philosophical interpretation about the human person, nature and the supernatural.

C. In Its Consequences

i) Discrimination against Females

The interpretation of the Genesis story given by the Fathers of the Church, specially after Augustine, was that woman was the cause of the fall. She was the temptress, the accomplice of Satan and destroyer of the human race. The identification of Eve with evil became so natural in Christian thought that the serpent acquired female features as in Michael Angelo’s painting of the Fall in the Vatican Sistine Chapel, Eve takes the fruit from a muscular seductress serpent.³⁷

Thus Tertullian wrote bitinglly against women:

“Do you not realize that Eve is you? The curse God pronounced on your sex weighs still on the world. Guilty, you must bear its hardships. You are the devil’s gateway, you desecrated the fatal tree, you first betrayed the law of God, you who softened up with your cajoling words the man against whom the devil could not prevail by force. The image of God, the man Adam, you broke him, it was Child’s play to you. You deserved death, and it was the son of God who had to die!”³⁸

Male theologians and clergy have been responsible for perpetuating this denigration of women through out the centuries. Sometimes it was linked to the praise of Mary as our fallen humanity’s solitary boast.

³⁷ Marina Warner: “Alone of All her Sex”, pp. 58 and figure 8.

³⁸ St. Jean Eudes, “The Wondrous Childhood of the Most Holy Mother of God”, Anon trans, New York, 1915, p. 90, quoted in Marina Warner: op.cit p. 57.

This facile but damaging interpretation given to the Genesis story should call in question both the origin of the Genesis text as well as Paul's use of it to explain the role of Jesus Christ in redemption, and the Church's application to Mary as the second Eve. How much are all these the fruit of presuppositions, ideology of male superiority and prejudice and theological imagination?

This doctrine of Original Sin was interpreted in a manner that was anti-sexual. Human sexual relations were said to bring into being a person who was a sinner, an enemy of God. St Jean Eudes in the 17th century thus sympathized with women's plight;

“It is a subject of humiliation to all the mothers of the children of Adam to know that they are with child, they carry with them an infant ... who is the enemy of God, the object of his hatred and malediction, and the shrine of the demon.”³⁹

In the mentality of Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome, the woman had a special responsibility for this situation, because child birth was through the womb, and womb was woman's. They praised celibacy and virginity as a higher and holier state than marriage, as did also the Council of Trent in Canon 10 of its 24th session.

“Virginity and celibacy are better and more blessed than the bond of matrimony!”⁴⁰

This doctrine tended to make Catholic moral theology hyper conscious about sins of sexuality, and correspondingly neglect the other sins such as those of injustice and abuse of power. Original sin was de facto closely linked with concupiscence and sexuality. Since the female was considered more related to the body, and the male to the spirit and mind, this anti-sexuality was linked to an anti-female attitude. This was particularly so among the male clergy who dominated the Church in its thinking, ministry and administration.

ii) Is Negative Towards Nature

The interpretation of the Genesis story of the fall had also an attitude that was anti-nature and anti-world which were considered cursed by God. This is quite contrary to the goodness of God and many passages of scripture which show the earth as fruitful and blessed by God. (*Deut 8, 7-10*)

“For Yahweh your God is bringing you a good land ...
in which you will not lack any thing ...
You shall eat and be satisfied ...
You shall bless Yahweh your God and in the good land which he has given you.”

³⁹ In Rev. J. Waterworth trans. The Canons and Decree of the Council of Trent (London 1848) – Marine Warner op.cit p. 336.

⁴⁰ Matthew Fox, Original Blessing, Bears Santa Fe, N.M. 1983.

It did not help Christians to see the joy and beauty of Creation. It could lead to a neglect of the care of nature and ecology.

iii) Discriminates against persons of other Religions or of no Religion

The doctrine of original sin as developed in Christian theology taught that humanity was in such a state of original and unavoidable sinfulness that only Jesus Christ and his merits could save human beings. For many centuries this was understood as requiring the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as saviour and membership of the Catholic Church. Even today, it is generally interpreted to imply that salvation is by some means or other, through Jesus Christ.

The dogma concerning redemption was developed from the presuppositions concerning original sin. Jesus the universal saviour was said to confer the graces merited by him through the Church founded by him. The Church did so through the sacraments of which baptism had to be the first. Baptism is said to remove the stain of original sin, not concupiscence but the other consequences of original sin whereby humans are alienated from God.

This claim of the Church to be the vehicle of eternal salvation has a twofold impact which is questionable. First it claims for a religious establishment the power to mediate salvation beyond this life. This can be questioned by those who do not acknowledge a religion at all. Even if we maintain that salvation is through Jesus Christ, it does not follow that we can claim that Jesus Christ wanted a Church – say the Catholic Church – to be the mediator of that salvation. In fact both Jesus and Paul speak of a direct relationship between God and the human person. In the ultimate analysis holiness and salvation are in the relationship between a person and one's conscience and God. (*Rom. Chap. 2, Jesus Last Judgment – Mt. 25*)

This explanation of the doctrine of original sin seemed to reduce the chance of eternal salvation of persons of no religion. Even when the human conscience was given the ultimate say in determining human actions, morality and spirituality, it was regarded as a less reliable path to salvation.

To us this is a form of **religionism**, in which one or several religions claim to be able to mediate eternal salvation even after death. This is an area which religion as an organised community cannot reach, and salvation at that stage is a mystery of a person's relationship to the Absolute Transcendent – God.

A second aspect of discrimination in this doctrine is concerning persons of faiths other than Christianity. Though the Churches now affirm the possibility of salvation through other religions, the weight of the Christian tradition has been to explain original sin in such a way that the remedy for it was said to be in and through the Church thanks to the merits of Christ. This did not cause much difficulty in Euro-American society where all were presumed to have the opportunity of baptism, and therefore of undoing the damage of original sin.

The traditional perspective of original sin is linked to a **concept of God** that is not acceptable to the other religions in our Asian countries. In our countries this idea of humanity being born alienated from the Creator would seem an abominable

concept of the divine. To believe that whole generations of entire Continents lived and died with a lesser chance of salvation is repugnant to the notion of a just and loving God.

In fact part of the cause for the excesses of missionary zeal in being against other religions was due to such a theological perspective of “salvation only in the Church”. St. Francis Xavier said he was like mad going in search of souls to be saved, that were going into hell. The traditional theology and spirituality had such a thrust. Missionaries would go to the ends of the earth to save souls. People had to be baptized and thus saved. Hence even baptisms in the womb, when a foetus was in danger of death. That was the impact of the concept of original sin.

iv) Led to a wrong accent on Mission

Jesus preached the reign of God and conversion to righteousness. The conversion he wanted was a personal, internal change of heart and a consequent transformation in human relationships and the structures of society. The conversion he wanted was from selfishness and hatred to unselfishness and love as explained later.

But over the many centuries specially since the Church became a powerful body in the Roman world, the main object of the mission of Christians has been the conversion of persons and countries to the Church. Christianity became Church-centered and not Jesus-God, or human-centered.

The theological basis for this was the teaching concerning original sin and the need of redemption through Christ by belonging to the Church. Theologians posited that human nature itself was “fallen” and needed an “ontological” redemption i.e. of human nature itself. It was argued this could be done only by a divine-human person who could redeem humanity and restore the friendship with God.

The evolution of this dogma was closely related to the development of Christology, viz of regarding Jesus as a unique divine saviour of a fallen humanity. As M. Flick and Z. Alszeghy, two well known theologians of the Gregorian University in Rome explain, the doctrine of original sin originated or at source (*peccato originale originato*) as formulated in the Council of Trent cannot be deduced from the biblical sources or the patristic tradition. It is rather the case of a progressive conceptualization from the intuition of the universal sinfulness of humanity gradually evolved, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to its later more profound understanding and expression in relation to the salvific impact of Christ.

The earliest apostolic teaching contained the idea of conversion to Jesus Christ, baptism and remission of sins (*Acts 2. 38-40; 3. 26*) St. Peter filled with the Holy Spirit declared before the princes, and the people.

“Neither is there salvation in any others. For there is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved”. (*Acts 4. 12*).

The Jewish people who accepted this teaching and were baptized then had no understanding of original sin as developed later or of the doctrines concerning justification as in Catholic-Protestant debates of the 16th century. They understood

conversion more in terms of “being one heart and one soul”. Salvation then was interpreted more in terms of a radical social transformation.

“And with great power did the apostles give testimony of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and great grace was in them all. For neither was there anyone needy among them. For as many as were owners of lands or houses, sold them and brought the price of the things they sold.

And distribution was made to everyone according as had need.” (*Acts 4. 33-35*)

The Apostolic teaching was a witness to the power of God in Jesus Christ “We ought to obey God rather than men”. (*Acts V. 29*)

The story of Ananias and Sapphira who were punished for deceiving concerning the price for which they had sold a piece of land (by keeping back a part of it for themselves) indicates that the conversion had to be one of heart and in truth and honesty before the community concerning the sharing of their property with those in need.

It is in later centuries that questions were raised concerning the meaning and mode of salvation.

Questions began to be raised as to how far Jesus is saviour of all persons, and whether it was due to their personal sins or even prior to that. What was the effect of Baptism concerning the remission of sin?

The doctrine concerning the Church or Ecclesiology was developed on the basis that Jesus Christ the redeemer had entrusted to the Church the continuation of his redemptive mission on earth till the end of time.

The Church therefore claimed the right and felt the obligation to bring all peoples to her faith community. At the same time it claimed supreme spiritual authority on earth. She considered herself the infallible guide in matters of belief and morality. The ministers of the Church could absolve sins or even by refusing to do so bind persons for eternity.

This perspective made the Church quite authoritarian in matters spiritual. In a long period of history the Church rulers had temporal power also.

Thus original sin, the doctrine concerning salvation (soteriology) and missiology were linked together conceptually. It is this view that made the Church historically intolerant of other religions, and even of non European cultures.

The claim of the Church to be guided by the Spirit of Truth does not prevent the theologians and pastors of the Church leaving room for their theological imagination. This is particularly likely in matters concerning which there is no empirical evidence or criteria of positive verification, and no clear biblical statement. But problems arise when conclusions of such theological evolution are harmful to others or to the whole of humanity. Then we are entitled to ask how is one sure that the teachings are from

the Holy Spirit? Could they be influenced by the presuppositions and assumptions of the theologians, by the self interest of the group theologizing and even by the “gift” of theological imagination which can be quite fertile and ingenious in evolving formulations to satisfy the needs of a group of believers specially when they exercise dominant political, cultural and spiritual power in a society?

Here our criteria for evaluating doctrines can be very helpful. If a doctrine is dehumanizing of a category of persons or affecting them unduly and unjustifiably it cannot be from God who is love or from Jesus who is so humanly divine in all his teachings and life. We are then entitled to question the fruits of the imagination which may claim to pass for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – even if such doctrines have prevailed in the Church for centuries.

Naturally the challenge to such teachings will come from those who are affected by it, and normally not by those who stand to benefit or do not lose from such teachings. This can be seen in the case of original sin which has been passed down from generation to generation in its different formulations.

Considering the overall baneful effects of this doctrine of original sin as it was evolved including its missiological implications, we may go further and ask whether this doctrine itself is not the original sin of traditional Christian theology? It is so profound in its impact even today throughout the Catholic world (the Protestant is no better) that we must face it squarely.

A theology that wishes to meet the exigencies of a male dominated, socially unjust and multi-religious society has to seriously rethink these presuppositions and its consequences in theory and practical spiritual life.

The Mary of real life, and even of the Scriptures cannot be encountered without a deep questioning of this original sin of Mariology. This is important for the liberation of Mary to be Mary, the mother of Jesus and hence one concerned with all his concerns.

Chapter – 8

REFLECTION ON TRADITIONAL MARIAN DOCTRINES

A reflection on the traditional Marian doctrines is important because they determine to a large extent the presentation of Mary in popular preaching, in theology and spirituality of the Catholics. Vatican II also invoked these doctrines in its chapter on Mary in the Constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium*. These dogmas highlight the special privileges and graces that Mary received from God rather than her active role in the life and ministry of Jesus in the contemporary social situation. On Jesus himself the accent of traditional theology was on his divine prerogatives in the salvific mission as the Son of God.

The three foundational dogmas of traditional Mariology are her Immaculate Conception, her divine motherhood and her virginity. These are prior in chronology to the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. But they have been evolved in the Church thinking in view of the exigencies of the redemptive mission of Jesus in the context of the “fall” of humanity and the need of a human-divine redeemer to save humankind. In considering these traditional Marian teachings in greater focus we can see the impact of the presuppositions, ideology and imagination on their evolution, and their consequences on Christian Spirituality.

I) Immaculate Conception of Mary

The Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary developed very gradually in the consciousness of the Church. It was finally defined as dogma by Pope Pius IX in 1854. The doctrine is not contained in the scriptures in any direct form. The two principal scriptural Texts adduced in its favour are Gen. 3.15 and Luke 1.28 and both partly due to inaccurate translations.

The words of God in the Vulgate (Jerome’s translation) of the Genesis read “I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed; she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel”. But it is now generally accepted that a more accurate rendition of the Hebrew is “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head”. It is the seed of the woman, and not the woman who is to crush the serpent. But the mistranslation stuck as the Council of Trent accepted the Vulgate as the canonical text.⁴¹

The second text Luke 1.28 translated “Hail Full of Grace” is also more accurately rendered as greatly blessed or highly favoured by God. The same word *kekharitomene* is used to describe Stephen in Acts 6.8 it refers to a close union with God.

These two texts thus maltranslated were used for arguing from Gen. 3.15 that Mary would never be under the sway of Satan, and Luke 1.28 that she would have the plenitude of grace. As the Encyclopaedia of Biblical Theology concludes,

‘We have to avoid the danger of presupposing as proved what we hope to get from the text. We can, at any rate conclude that Gen. 3.15 refers to Mary not in itself but considered in the light of tradition.’⁴²

Pope Pius IX had recourse to both these texts in his bull “*Ineffabilis Deus*” of 1854 defining this dogma.

Tradition

The argument from tradition is based upon the patristic conception of Christ as the “New Adam” and Mary as the “New Eve” (*Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*).

⁴¹ New Catholic Encyclopaedia, Washington DC, 1967. Article on Immaculate Conception by E.D. O’Connor.

⁴² Marina Warner, *op.cit* p. 245.

Subsequently the definition of Mary's divine maternity strengthened the conviction that Mary's holiness was flawless. The feast of Mary's conception was celebrated in the East from the 6th century.

In the medieval period there were fierce debates concerning the Immaculate Conception of Mary. St Bernard of Clairvaux argues against it in his protest to the Canons of Lyons who celebrated the Immaculate Conception. "Holy Spirit could not have been involved in anything so inherently evil as the conception of a child."⁴³ "Do you mean that the Holy Spirit was a partner to the sin of concupiscence. Or are we to assume that there was no sin where lust was not absent."⁴⁴

The Dominican, St. Thomas Aquinas held that the Immaculate Conception would detract from Christ's dignity as the universal saviour (*Summa Theologica* 3a, 27. 2, ad. 2). Then she would not need Christ's redemption as stated in 1 Tim. 4. 10 and Mt. 1. 21. Aquinas taught that Mary was sanctified in her mother's womb "after animation" i.e. 40-80 days after conception according to the views of biology of the time. The debate was between those who argued for the Immaculate Conception out of respect for Mary's holiness and those who opposed it as she too needed redemption. It was the Franciscan Duns Scotus (1264-1308) who gave a response which became the more generally accepted solution viz that Mary was preserved from original sin from the first instance of her conception by the merits of Jesus.

All the same the debates were so heated that Pope Sixtus IV, 1482 had to forbid the two sides – the Dominicans and the Franciscans from accusing each other of heresy on this count.

Pius IX's Encyclical "Ineffabilis deus" defined that,

"the doctrine, that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from all stains of original sin in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, saviour of the human race has been revealed by God".

This doctrine deals with a matter about which we can have no empirical evidence, and is not revealed in Scripture. It is taught by the Church on the basis of tradition. It shows the extent to which the theological imagination can be operative. We have no difficulty in accepting it. Our problem is rather with the concept that the rest of humanity is stained or sinful at conception.

This accusation that all of humanity other than Jesus and Mary are under the hegemony of Satan at conception is based on the hypothesis of original sin; and this is what we find unproved and unproveable. We appreciate the holiness of Mary, but it is not necessary to so depreciate the rest of humanity for this. When the English hymn sings of "Mary's unspotted womb", there is an unfair implication that all other wombs are spotted or stained. Our criticism has therefore to be concerning the ground doctrine of Original Sin which accuses the rest of humanity of such sinfulness.

⁴³ New Catholic Encyclopaedia, p. 380.

⁴⁴ Marina Warner, op.cit p. 240.

Some Consequences

Catholics who are devoted to Mary find much inspiration and solace in the thought that Mary is Immaculate, a powerful intercessor and loving mother. She is the patroness of many shrines. The clergy, religious and nuns find in her a model of dedicated celibacy. The families see in her the mother caring for all.

There are some particular responses to the Immaculate Conception from feminist writers that deserve attention. Mary Daly in "Beyond God the Father" presents an interesting perspective.

The Immaculate Conception,

"Can be understood as the negation of the myth of feminine evil, a rejection of religion's Fall into servitude to patriarchy ... Seen outside its 'normal' context, the symbol of the Immaculate Conception foreshadows the coming Fall into the sacred, in which women are "conceived" as free from the crippling burden of submission in the role of 'the other' and therefore are able to bring the human psyche beyond the pseudo – sacred of oppressive symbols and values".⁴⁵

The slowness in the evolution of the doctrine is because the Church-men theologians "dimly glimpsed the unintended threat to male supremacy".

"Sprung free from its Christolatrous context, it says that, conceived free of 'original sin', the female does not need to be "saved", by the male. The symbol then can be recognized as having been an infiltrator into sexist territory, an unrecognized harbinger of New Being."⁴⁶

Rosemary Radford Ruether regards the Immaculate Conception as exemplifying,

"the primordial potential for good of created existence transformed by sin. In this theology of the male feminine, we sense the hidden and repressed power of femaleness and nature as they exist both beneath and beyond the present male dualisms of nature and spirit. Precisely for this reason we cannot accept this theology on male terms. We must question the male theology of female "disobedience", and sexuality as the cause of sin, and mortality as the consequence of sin. This very effort to sunder us from our mortal bodies and to scapegoat women as cause of mortality and sin is the real sin. This sin has alienated us from that fruitful unity of mind and body that we have lost and that we seek in our redemptive quest."⁴⁷

"In the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Mary is "pure nature", who affirms the capacity of created beings, to bear the holiness of divine being."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Mary Daly, "Beyond God the Father", p. 86.

⁴⁶ Mary Daly, *op.cit* p. 87.

⁴⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sexism and God-Talk", Beacon Press, Boston, 1983, pp. 151-152.

⁴⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Mary the Feminine Face of the Church", SCM, London, 1979, p. 61.

The Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches and the various Protestant denominations do not accept the concept of the Immaculate Conception because it removes her from the general run of humanity into a separate transhuman category. It robs her of her full humanity and also of the greatness of her achievement.

As Marina Warner concludes,

“If on one plane the perfection of Mary is defined as the conquest of the natural laws of child-bearing and death, then the prevailing idea of perfection denies the goodness of the created world, and of the human body, and postulates another perfect destiny where such conditions do not obtain. This is dualism, and the Virgin Mary is a symbol and an instrument of that dualism.” (p. 254)

She finds that Eve and Mary both create,

“the feeling that in its very nature humanity is fatally estranged from goodness, which for a believer, is God. Any symbol that exacerbates that pain runs counter to the central Christian doctrine that mankind was made and redeemed by God, and more important, it is a continuing enemy of hope and happiness.” (p. 254)

From a feminist point of view the way Mary’s special privileges are postulated can be a downgrading of the rest of humanity, specially of women. For those concerned with social transformation, they could be a deflecting of attention from the real issues of society. In the multi-religious and secular contexts of Asian societies they do not present any hope to persons of other religions. On the contrary the assumption or hypothesis of original sin places all of them in a disadvantageous position in relation to God as they are said to be born in original sin and have no redress till at least they make an act of volition for the good (according to the hypothesis). This is not an encouraging doctrine for them. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception implies this. Hence in our context we need to critically rethink it, or at least the dogma of original sin as traditionally proposed in Catholic teaching.

How Human is Mary?

If Mary is immaculate, in the sense that she has no stain of sin; or attraction or inclination to sin how does she merit anything, how can she be virtuous? How far is she a person whom we can imitate or follow? If everything in her is a gift of God, due to the “foreseen” merits of Jesus (as said by some theologians) how far is she a human person? Who is this woman who cannot be tempted to sin? Even Jesus was tempted several times. She has no weaknesses, no fallibility. She is as it were in a state of original justice.

This is the Mary of our traditional theology. These qualities of Mary have been subjects of theological definitions – as so many things in Christology. But we have to ask serious questions concerning these qualities. Mary has to be liberated to be truly human. This is necessary even for us to understand her life, her struggles and her agonies.

Otherwise we have a sort of **dehydrated Mary**; one who cannot feel the attraction of what is less good; she would not participate in any thing in which the body would feel some pleasant sensations, or in which the spirit would be inclined to be selfish or proud. Then she would not be quite human.

Because we want to make her great, we propose her these dehumanizing or non-humanizing conditions. She is said to be the perfect mother because she does not even feel the attraction to sexuality. This is considered a more perfect condition than the present normal condition of human beings. If the life in the Garden of Eden continued in that form, with the “Virgin Eve”, would there have been a human race? These are questions to be asked in the perspective of such assumptions.

Is it better for Mary to be Immaculate, or to be normally human as other women and men have been and are? Would Jesus wished to have privileged his mother so much that she would not have shared the common condition of humanity. Jesus himself is said to have accepted the condition of a slave while being divine (*Phil. 2, 2-11*) according to traditional Christology. The uniqueness of Jesus is in not seeking privileges for himself.

Is it necessarily better to be a **virgin mother** than an ordinary mother? What is bad about being a mother in the normal way, as this is how the Creator has made human nature? Why have we to imagine such manner of divine intervention in the conception and birth of Jesus? Is this theological elaboration not part of a situation in which human sexuality, the human body and woman were considered not so good or honourable for God? In this framework, God had to be born outside of human sexual intercourse. Natural motherhood was downgraded in such a theological perspective.

It will be seen that in this way the very biological constitution and functioning of women were made to seem less good and less holy and hence unbecoming of a relationship to the divine.

The **Protestant Reformers** view of human nature was more negative than that of the Catholics. Hence humanity stands in a purely passive relation to God’s grace. Neither the Church nor Mary as its symbol can be seen as a cooperator in the drama of salvation. Thus though the reformers reaffirmed the goodness of marriage, yet Protestant theology views the symbols of the male and female as divine headship and creaturely subordination.⁴⁹

The **Orthodox Churches** accept the view of Mary as Mother of God – Theotokos – and the Virginité of Mary already accepted at the time of Chalcedon 451. They take objection to the definition of the Immaculate Conception, even though they celebrated Mary’s conception already in the 6th century. They accept her Assumption but did not welcome the definition in 1950 as it was an affirmation of Papal infallibility. They would place the Assumption at the level of a theological opinion – theologoumenon. The Orthodox insist on the mystery of the divine maternity, and do not stress unlike the Latins on detailed analyses and definition.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Rosemary R. Ruether, *op.cit* pp. 60-62.

⁵⁰ Rene Laurenin, “Mary’s Place in the Church”, Burms & Oates, London, 1964, pp. 127-134.

2. Mary – Virgin

The teaching concerning the virginity of Mary is another example of the evolution and widespread internalization within the Catholic Church of a doctrine concerning which there is and can be no convincing evidence, except, again, that it is traditional belief in the Church. It is a doctrine related to the presuppositions concerning Original sin, the ideology of male domination and a generous recourse to theological Imagination.

Since Jesus is presented as the universal saviour from sin including original sin, and divinity was attributed to him, he could not at any moment, be under the dominion of sin and Satan. But as it was held that original sin was communicated by procreation it was necessary that Jesus should be not thus contaminated by original sin. The Immaculate Conception, posited of Mary, ensured his prevention from original sin, from the mother's side. The teaching on the virginal conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary was a convenient way of preserving Jesus from original sin from a human male parent. Thus the teaching on the virginal conception by Mary fitted in well into the other Christological doctrines.

The perpetual virginity of Mary – before the birth of Jesus, in the birth and after birth – also related well to the ideologies that tended to regard human sexuality as less becoming of the holiness of Mary.

The theological imagination was invoked to evolve theories of how the conception of Jesus would take place in the womb of Mary – by the “over shadowing of the Holy Spirit”. In this the male function in conception is attributed to the Divine. The process of birth was also explained miraculously by the Fathers who proposed the virginity in birth – “in partu”.

The Scriptural Evidence for the virginal conception and perpetual virginity of Mary have been the subject of theological discussion from the earliest centuries of Christianity. It was a particular problem in Catholic-Protestant debates. Mary, who alone would have known of such a miraculous divine intervention, is not known to have borne witness to it. The tradition in the Catholic Church has maintained the belief in the virginal conception from about the second century based on the infancy narratives in Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2.

Raymond G. Brown the U.S. Catholic Biblical scholar studies the problem of the Virginal Conception in his book on “The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus (*Paulist Press, New York, 1973*). His conclusion is that while two authors give a basis for the teaching on the virginal conception.

“The general context of the infancy narratives in which the virginal conception is preserved, does nothing to increase our confidence in historicity”. (p. 55)

“If we consider them separately, Mathew's account is redolent of the folkloric and imaginative; e.g. angelic appearances in dreams, guiding birth star, treasures from the East, the machinations of a wicked king, the slaughter of innocent

children. Luke's account has less of the folkloric, even though it reports several angelic appearances and a miraculous punishment of Zechariah". (p. 54)

A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars is made by Raymond G. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer and John Reuman in "Mary in the New Testament" (*sponsored by the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue – Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1978.*) They concluded,

"The task force agreed that both infancy narratives, and especially the Lucal, reflect a Christology which finds its earliest expression in such formularies as Rom. 1, 3-4. Both narratives have moved Jesus' being "constituted" Son, of God back from the resurrection, beyond the baptism, to the time of his conception. But such a conclusion does not necessitate a virginal conception, and we had to inquire whence that idea was derived. Although one member favoured derivation from a putative Hellenistic-Jewish tradition about the virginal conception of Isaac, the majority found that suggestion unconvincing, as well as other proposed derivations from Jewish or pagan sources. Family tradition, coming ultimately from Mary, was also deemed an unsatisfactory explanation. It was suggested that the "catalyst" for the notion might have been that Jesus was born prematurely (i.e., too early after Joseph and Mary came to live together – *cf. Matt. 1. 18*), a "fact" which was interpreted by his enemies in terms of his illegitimacy, and by Christians in terms of his having been miraculously conceived. The tenuousness of this hypothesis was acknowledged. The task force agreed that the question of the historicity of the virginal conception could not be settled by historical-critical exegesis, and that one's attitude towards Church tradition on the matter would probably be the decisive force in determining one's view, whether the virginal conception is a theologoumenon or a literal fact.

In respect to the Church tradition of the perpetual virginity of Mary, we agreed that the intention of Matt. 1.25 was to exclude sexual relations between Joseph and Mary before the birth of Jesus, so that the verse does not necessarily indicate what took place afterwards in the marital relationship of Joseph and Mary. The fact that the New Testament speaks of the brothers and sisters of Jesus does not constitute an insuperable barrier to the view that Mary remained a virgin, but there is no convincing argument from the NT against the literal meaning of the words "brother" and "sister" when they are used of Jesus' relatives. Here again, as in the case of the virginal conception, Church tradition will be the determining factor in the view that one takes, with the important difference that while the tradition of the virginal conception is based on NT evidence, the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity goes beyond anything said of her in the Scriptures." (pp. 291, 292)

Throughout the centuries the imagination has been exercised to explain the virgin birth. One interesting example is from the 19th Ode of Solomon (7-9) quoted in above "Mary in the New Testament" (p. 277)

“So the virgin became a mother with great mercies. And she laboured and gave birth to a son without pain... She did not require a midwife, since he caused her to give life. She gave birth of her own will as if she were a man.” (*sic!*)

Our point in referring to these discussions is to underline the considerable attention the Church Fathers have given to these issues of Mariology and their impact on Marian piety and spirituality. While the historicity of the virginity of Mary is an open issue among scholars, we can note several consequences of the Church accent on this teaching.

First of all it has deflected attention from the normal womanhood of Mary. It has presented her life as so extraordinary grace-filled and miraculous as not to be a mother in the ordinary way. It also downplayed the role of Joseph in the life of the holy family – both to have divine paternity for Jesus and to claim a perpetual virginity for his wedded wife. Catholic theology, spirituality and popular piety neglected the reflection on the life of Mary as connected with the redemptive-liberative ministry and death of Jesus. Further this teaching fitted in well with a concept of redemption that was effected almost ontologically – through the very essence of the being of Jesus – without much reference to his teaching, and impact on society and which caused his death.

The doctrine on the Virginity of Mary had also the impact of emphasizing on celibacy as a higher state. The Council of Trent stated,

“If anyone says ... that it is not better or holier to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be joined in marriage, let him be anathema” (D.B.S. 1810)⁵¹

There was in this an anti-sexual bias which has characterized very much traditional Catholic spirituality and Church discipline. Normal sexuality was by passed in the teaching on the birth of Jesus. This meant that a normal family and woman could not find much consolation in the holy family and Mary’s motherhood as she was said to be miraculously exempted from the pangs of birthing – again said to be part of the punishment of Eve and her progeny in the story of original sin.

The virginity of Mary argued by a backward extending theology from the divinity, death – resurrection of Jesus to his conception is further extended to involve Eve. The reference of St. Irenaeus to Eve as a virgin is recalled by the second Vatican Council and repeated by Pope John Paul II in his recent Encyclical. Here we can recall the explanation of St. Jerome “We believe that God was born of a virgin because we read it”.⁵²

Feminist theologians have expressed differing perspectives on such presentations of Mary. Many would argue that it is a downgrading of normal womanhood and motherhood and is in keeping with the patriarchal hierarchical ideology of not recognizing the equal personhood of women. Thus Rosemary Radford

⁵¹ Raymond G. Brown, “The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus”, p. 39, ed. Raymond Brown, “Mary in the New Testament”, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, Pa, 1978.

⁵² Adv. Helvidium 19 (PL 23, 213A) quoted in p. 37, Raymond G. Brown op.cit.

Ruether in “Church, Life and Practice”, Chapter 1 on Feminine Theology and Spirituality. Mary is glorified but presented as an impossible model.

Mary Daly in “Beyond God the Father” suggests that the dignity of Mary as the Mother of Jesus is a sort of “compensatory glory” (unconsciously or unwittingly) offered by Catholicism to women. (*p. 81*)

Mary has found a place in the Inner sanctuaries of a male dominated Church in which a male clergy control the privileges of power and intercession based on the maleness of Jesus. The dignity of Mary and devotion to her has given Catholicism a particular human and humane flavour that has been absent in Protestantism. Even if Mary is given a subordinate and derived role in the mystery of redemption – at least she is there in Catholic theology and piety. Her statue in almost every Catholic place of worship brings in a feminine presence alongside the divine. Popular devotion often gives her a very significant role in their prayer life, to the extent that there were traditional Protestant accusations of Mariolatry.

Mary Daly sees in the virginity of Mary a certain autonomy of woman.

“A woman who is defined as virgin is not defined exclusively by her relationships with men ... When this aspect of the symbol is sifted out of the patriarchal setting then Virgin Mother can be heard to say something about female autonomy within the context of sexual and parental relationships. This is a message which, I believe, many women throughout the centuries of Christian culture have managed to take from the overtly sexist Marian doctrines”. (*pp. 84-85*).

We have inquired into this and presented the thinking of scholars alongside the Church magisterium because it is a very sensitive issue. Catholics are particularly sensitive on it as they had to defend Mary’s position in the economy of salvation for many centuries against the attacks of Protestants on their perceptions.

We do not wish to over emphasize this issue but to underline how the teaching on the virginity has deflected attention from the Mary of real life as seen clearly in the Gospels and this has given Catholic spirituality an anti-sexual bias. It has also contributed to the neglect of Mary’s message in the Magnificat and her role as a poor woman engaged in her people’s struggle for integral personal and social liberation alongside Jesus.

We see in this doctrine also the interlocking of Marian and Christological doctrines within the context of a patriarchal theology. There has to be an effort at the reconstruction of Marian theology to bring her out better in the tradition of Biblical prophetism. As Rosemary R. Ruether insists Mary can be a very dynamic figure in the redemption of all from sexism. Jesus and Mary can present inspiring models of mutuality in liberative redemption which must include liberation from sexism with a dynamic inter-connection of the personal and the social.⁵³

⁵³ Rosemary R. Ruether, *op.cit* pp. 20-26.

Unfortunately the rather narrow and rigid approaches in the Church towards male-female relations and sexuality were greatly encouraged by the accent on Mary as a permanent virgin.

As Christian women advance in their consciousness of their rights and of the dignity of motherhood, they are likely to claim Mary as an example and model of normal human motherhood. With a better understanding of the message of a creation spirituality there will be a more positive approach to human sexuality, the body and the relationships between the sexes.

3. Mother of God

Another doctrine deduced theologically is that Mary is the Mother of God. “Theotokos” – related to the teaching of Jesus being God-man, one person with two natures. Thus there is a direct connection between Christology and Mariology. According to a Christology, a Mariology is developed. This is the traditional Christian theology coming down from the Councils of Ephesus 325 and Chalcedon 451.

The traditional teaching, reaffirmed by Vatican II, is that God sought and obtained Mary’s consent to the incarnation of His divine Son. The reflections on the Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel emphasize her active collaboration in the divine plan, or her humble obedient response in her Fiat “behold the handmaid of the Lord” as reported in Luke Chapter 1. The virtues and role of Mary are described according to the interpretations given to this dialogue.

This is the basis of her greatness. The other “privileges” of Mary are also deduced from the divine maternity – viz her virginity, her holiness and immaculate conception, her participation in the redemptive function of Jesus and even her assumption. It is argued that God would have prepared the most perfect person or receptacle for the motherhood of His Son. A line of argument was “Potuit, Decuit, Fecit” – “God could, it behoves that God should, and therefore God did it.”

From the Motherhood of Jesus a further development was that Mary is the mother of the Church, as the Church flows from the side of Jesus – his ministry – and is spoken of as his bride. In popular devotion the love of Mary for all humanity is also derived from this maternal relationship to Jesus – the saviour of all humanity.

The teaching on the divine maternity of Mary is also something which is beyond our human understanding. It is not a doctrine directly revealed in the Scriptures and is consequent on the acceptance of the divinity of Jesus Christ and the nature of the link between the divine and the human in Jesus and in the womb of Mary. It is a doctrine that was contested from the earliest times during many centuries. The Docetists maintained in the Apostolic times that Jesus had only an apparent body and only seemed to suffer and die. Hence Mary was not really the mother of Jesus. Against this view, the Fathers of the Church defended the humanity of Jesus. In the fifth century, Nestorius patriarch of Constantinople, held there were two persons in Christ. Mary gave birth to the human person, Jesus of Nazareth, in whom the divine person dwelt. Mary therefore, was the mother of Christ, (*Christotokos*), but not the mother of God (*theotokos*). Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria opposed Nestorius vigorously. The Council

of Ephesus 431 condemned the view of Nestorius, and declared Mary the Mother of God – amidst the enthusiastic jubilation of the people of the city of Ephesus.

The argument of Nestorius was that the eternal Word of God could not be born as a baby on Christmas night. This would make Mary a Goddess, as worshipped by the heathens.

This debate shows the room there is for theological rational argument and imagination in the evolution of doctrine. It also indicates the role of political power and popular devotion in the decision making in the Councils of the Church.

In the Asian context, the doctrine of the motherhood of God raises questions according to the sense in which we understand (if understanding were ever possible) the divinity of Jesus Christ, and the level at which it is considered. For popular religiosity the divine maternity is not much of an issue. On the contrary it can fit into the people's concept of various gods and goddesses or deities. In the Hindu-Buddhist context of popular religiosity people have a concept of several deities and Mary is or can be accepted as such. In fact Catholicism enters more into the people's religious culture with its festivals and processions of Our Lady and the saints than does Protestantism which in our countries is more austere in its celebrations.

The problem is more complicated at the more philosophical levels of the religions. Hinduism can accept several manifestations of the divine, and there could be an acceptance of Jesus as one of the manifestations or avatars of the Supreme Being. In that case Mary's motherhood of God would be understood within that framework. But that is not the Christian concept of Jesus as God-man as determined by the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. If we insist on the divinity of Jesus as the exclusive and ultimate manifestation of God – and further regard other manifestations as inferior, subordinate or even untrue, the dialogue with Hinduism will be rather difficult. The situation would be worse with Islam which considers the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of Jesus a dilution of the monotheism which they hold fast to.

In the relationship with Buddhism as a philosophy the questions would be on the very existence of a God and concerning the Christian view of the origins of the human race, the 'fall' and original sin. Buddhism does not accept the need of an outside redeemer – much less of a divine redeemer. Thus the "privileges" claimed for Mary would be obstacles to an understanding between Christians and Buddhists at the level of intellectual dialogue. Both religions have different interpretations of the human predicament and liberation or Moksha. They begin with different presuppositions or assumptions which are taken for granted. The dialogue has therefore to be at the level of the assumptions and their compatibility or even their critique.

The presence of secularists in our societies in South Asia can indicate to us the need to turn our attention in inter-religious dialogue and in the rethinking of Christian theology and Mariology to the assumed presuppositions and theoretical constructs of the religious doctrines.

At this level the reflection on Mariology is a continuation of our views on Christology. This is very important in our part of the world because of the presence of the followers of other religions. Latin American liberation theologians discuss these issues to some extent but their context does not push them to further issues as our does. Feminist theologians also contribute valuable insights from the perspective of women. But those of us who are from countries in which there are other religions, other founders of religions, and other sacred texts have to think further on these issues. We have to rethink deeper. We have to question the assumptions of traditional theology.

Latin American theologians have developed a Christology from the texts and social context of the times. They try to maintain the descending theology of tradition, including the Chalcedon formulation alongside their own “ascending Christology” from the experience of Jesus in the scriptures. We have however to go further.

We have questions concerning the nature of the **humanity of Jesus**.

If Jesus was so God, so divine, that from the beginning he had the fullness of knowledge including the beatific vision (as some theologians including St. Thomas Aquinas do) then what is the relationship between Jesus and Mary? Mary would have had very little to do in the formation of Jesus. Jesus could have known everything from his birth. Mary would have had to learn from the infant prodigy. Here again is a question of the nature of the presence of the divine in Jesus. It is related to the theological assumption of the hypostatic union.

The Marian doctrines are linked to the concepts of the divinity of Christ. What is the nature of the divinity of Jesus? It is one thing to say Jesus is divine; another to claim to be able to understand, clarify and even theologially define the way and extent to which Jesus is divine. Divinity is something which the human mind cannot comprehend or express in language, even though theology often claims to do so.

The traditional theology has defined Jesus as one person having two natures; the divine and the human. This is the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon 451. Who is able to know these things with any degree of acceptable certitude? The Council of Chalcedon would have had its reasons for making this definition and using such language at the time. But today we ask questions such as, what is the nature of the divinity linked to the human Jesus? Can we contain the divine in our human formulations?

Along with a rethinking of Christology that see Jesus as a full conscious human being capable of suffering, being angry and even tempted, we have to rethink Mariology. **Mary’s full humanity has to be recognized and as it were restored to her in theology and spirituality.**

In the case of Jesus because Jesus had to die (according to the theory of redemption) theology brought up the thesis of two natures with one divine person and two wills (against Monothelism). The human will of Jesus though distinct from the divine will, was said to be always in keeping with the divine will as defined in the Third Council of Constantinople 680-681. In the case of Mary there was no such

necessity for suffering and the hypothesis of the Immaculate Conception was adequate to meet the needs of the situation.

4. The Assumption of Mary

There is no reference to the birth or death of Mary in the Scriptures. The Assumption of Mary was defined by Pope Pius XII principally on the basis of tradition in the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950).

“At the end of her earthly life, Mary ever Virgin, the Immaculate Mother of God, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”

The Assumption implies a connection in Catholic thinking among sin, sex and death following the “fall” of Adam and Eve. Since Mary was immaculately conceived she was sinless; as a Virgin her body was considered intact and due to both these death and conception were said to have no sway over her. Pope Pius XII left open the question whether Mary died.

We are once again before a privilege of Mary about which we cannot have certain empirical knowledge to affirm or deny it. It is connected to the presuppositions concerning original sin and its consequences, to the assumptions concerning Jesus Christ role and identity and the exercise of the theological imagination concerning what might have happened to Mary at the end of her life. There are also immunerable legends and apocryphal stories concerning her death or assumption to heaven. The tradition in the Church is itself not unrelated to these stories which popular religiosity gave rise to and handed down from generation to generation.

As in the case of the Immaculate Conception, there are comments by feminist theologians as to the implications of the Assumption for sexism. Her assumption is due to God’s grace and due to her son’s merits, and therefore said to be dependent on a male. On the other hand it is also argued that with the Assumption a woman enters bodily the heavenly company of the Trinity. This is regarded as an affirmation of the goodness of woman including her body. Mary Daly comments in her own fashion,

“The extreme dichotomy between quasi-prophetic symbolic exaltation and social degradation of women by the Roman Catholic Church can of course be analysed in terms or compensation mechanisms – compensation for the women being held down and compensation for a celibate all male clergy seeking ‘the spiritual essence’ of their undiscovered other halves. However, I think the most important aspect of the phenomenon has to do with the harnessing of women’s power by this quintessentially hierarchical and sexist institution.”⁵⁴

The Assumption of Mary is said to foreshadow the ultimate resurrection of the body of all human beings – which is the Christian belief. This is an act of faith in the revelation. Here too the other Asian religions have different perceptions such as the Buddhist view of the flux of matter and life, linked to rebirth till the end of the **samsaric** process of life, death and life. This is a different life and world view.

⁵⁴ Mary Daly, “Beyond God the Father”, pp. 90-91.

Neither one nor the other can be proved intellectually by humans whose experience is limited to one life.

Mary as Co-Redemptrix & Mediatrix

These two functions are somewhat distinct from but closely related to each other. They are both consequential on the doctrine of redemption by Jesus Christ, which in turn is dependent on the interpretation of the human condition that is the “fall” and original sin.

If the doctrine of original sin and its consequences are questioned, then the concept of redemption is also questioned. If we do not understand human nature as essentially fallen and incapable of doing good on its own as God is not alienated from the whole of humanity by original sin, (i.e. God’s grace is available to all in so far as it is necessary) then there is no need of an ontological redemption by Jesus Christ. In which case Mary is not co-redemptrix in an ontological sense of participating with Jesus in atoning to the Father and restoring human nature to a position of friendship with God.

If by co-redemptrix is meant a sharing with Jesus in his mission of showing the path of salvation – liberation, in being a model of witness to his teaching and the values of the kingdom of God and in founding the Christian community of his disciples, it is quite presentable in our Asian context. In this case we have to try to understand more realistically what Mary’s part would have been in the life work of Jesus.

The traditional understanding of redemption in which Jesus Christ is considered the unique, universal and necessary redeemer in an ontological sense that transforms fallen human nature, is one which is not presentable in our multi-religious context as well as to secular(ist) persons. The acceptance of Mary as co-redemptrix would thus depend on the interpretation of Christology. This question is once again an issue hardly raised in European and North American theology or in Latin American liberation theology – or at least it is not so acutely felt as in our context.

Consequently there would be a similar assessment on the teaching concerning Mary’s mediation. Mediation may be understood in the sense of atoning and reconciling humanity and persons with God, or as a channel of divine grace i.e. mediatrix of graces. Here too popular religiosity will readily accept Mary as one such mediator and channel of divine favours. But if this is linked to the view that Jesus Christ is the unique reconciler and mediator, we have a situation in which dialogue with other religions becomes difficult if not impossible, at the level of doctrine.

Evidently we should not dilute doctrine for the sake of dialogue; but our question is that this doctrine itself is the result of a previous adjustment to another context and is not necessarily from Jesus Christ or God or even directly and clearly from the Bible. In fact our having to dialogue with persons of other religions and other world views can be an occasion for reassessing our own traditional theological assumptions and their conclusions.

These are not issues directly of Mariology, but are consequences of the Christology of the Churches and the linking of Mariology to such Christological interpretations. Otherwise Mary as seen in the Gospels is a loving and lovable personality who is presentable and acceptable in our context as one of the mediators between humans and God. Her example is also eloquent in its silent but courageous participation in the life witness of her extraordinary Son. It is this Mary that must be known, loved and invoked in our context as well as the universal Church.

Similar perspectives can be expressed about the other attributes or privileges of Mary such as: **Queen of Heaven, Mother of Humanity, Queen of the Universe**. It is understandable that popular Catholic devotion and even Popes in their doctrinal teachings lavish such honours and responsibilities on Mary. But once again in our context they cannot be presented in an exclusive sense, as if there were no other such persons in human history or in eternal life. This is a claim to a uniqueness concerning which we have no evidence except in terms of our presuppositions, ideology and theological elaborations into which a considerable amount of imagination has entered. While we cannot grudge Catholics such convictions, we can ask what objective validity do they possess? How much are they obstacles to the very harmony and understanding among religions and persons of different persuasions. Such presentations of Mary would be precisely obstacles to the acceptance of Mary as a universal mother.

In so far as she is a mother of all she would be understanding of other religions and cultures. She would not then want to be merely the mother goddess of the European tradition that does not give a fair chance to the persons of other religious and contexts.

She would also be a mother that is concerned about a chance of life for all her children, as the “Mirror of Justice” that would want a fair sharing of the world’s resources among all.

Some Consequences of Traditional Mariology

Marian theology and spirituality have had an enormous impact on the lives of Catholic and Orthodox Christians throughout the centuries. Some Protestant Christians too are now developing their Marian thinking and devotions. Mary as understood in tradition has brought to Catholicism the warmth and affectivity that the veneration of a woman and mother very close to divinity can engender. It has given a popular and populist flavour to Catholic piety. This has helped Catholics to relate to the pre-Christian cults such as those of a mother goddess or of various female deities in different Countries. In Sri Lanka the Marian Shrines are popular places to which persons of different religious come in large numbers.

Marian spirituality has inspired millions of persons to seek holiness in a faithful response to God as understood by them. Mary is the model of very many women specially women religious. She is the source of solace and consolation to Catholics in their times of anxiety and difficulty.

The acknowledgement of Mary as the mother of each one and of the Church brings a certain family spirit and togetherness which can be experienced powerfully in places of pilgrimage. This shared love of the common mother can also be part of the explanation of the worldwide solidarity of Catholics persisting through many centuries.

While recognizing these innumerable positive contributions of traditional Mariology, we have also to note some of its less desirable influences. This presentation of Mary as the obedient, docile faithful virgin mother has also had the impact of rendering Marian spirituality rather pietistic somewhat passive and even individualistic. This is not necessary according to the Gospel presentation of Mary, but is the consequence of the interpretation of Mary given by traditional theology.

Marian spirituality, associated closely with the generally accepted theology of humanity's helpless situation after the fall, has encouraged a certain sense of weakness, dependency and powerlessness among humans, particularly women. She is presented as the refuge, the consoler, the mediatrix who intercedes for us with God. It is true human beings are finite, fallible and mortal; but it is also important that our own strengths and potentialities be recognized, encouraged and developed. As the prayers and hymns indicate this positive aspect of human capabilities are not so encouraged in the Marian devotions as the attitude of dependence based on a helplessness.

This attitude has been significant in the background of **feudal society** which prevailed in Europe (and the rest of the world) during the better part of the Christian era. This type of Marian spirituality fitted into the feudal concepts of stratified social relations. It helped to legitimize the class and status distinctions between Lord and serf. Lady and ordinary woman. This Marian spirituality did not foster a transforming social consciousness that can be discerned in the Magnificat and in the teaching of Jesus.

The presentation of Mary as docile and obedient to God was rather conveniently interpreted as the path of holiness for Christians. They had to obey the clergy as representatives of God. This was the sure path of holiness. There was thus a mutually supporting correlation between obedience to the feudal Lord of the manor and the leaders or Lords of the Church. This was specially effective in subordinating women to the clergy who were men, and who claimed to represent God for them. Much of traditional spirituality was based on the view that obedience was the most important virtue for holiness as well as for social harmony. The rules of religious institutes were built on the foundation of an unquestioning, almost unthinking, obedience to the will of God expressed through the superiors. Mary's "Ecce ancilla Domini", "behold the handmaid of the Lord" served well to buttress this perception.

In capitalist and colonial situations Marian devotions can have a domesticating influence by inducing Christians to accept the hard reality as the will of God. Throughout the centuries of European colonialism. Catholic missionaries had no worry about propagating their cult of Mary. They had no fear that it would have a revolutionary impact on the working class or the colonized peoples.

Mariology and Male Domination

Mary thought of in this way fitted in well with the traditional domination of women by men. It was quite prevalent in Jewish society in which the Jewish male thanked God for not being a female. The holiness of Mary is shown to be one of complete dependence on obedience and filial loyalty towards God – of course understood as a male, a Father.

In addition to this the particular privileges of Mary are warranted because of the special relationship between her and her more important son, Jesus. She is born immaculate because of the foreseen merits of Jesus (*praevisa merita*). This was the traditional argument that was given following Duns Scotus viz a preservative redemption of Mary from original sin. All her glories are due to her being the mother of Jesus. She is mediatrix of grace because of her relationship to the life and passion of Jesus. God and Jesus are the active agents in her being so graced and privileged.

There have been different reactions to this relationship of Mary to Jesus. General Protestant response has been that Catholics give too much of a place to her – almost worship her. Catholics were charged with being guilty of Mariolatry – giving to Mary the worship due only to God. Another reaction in the same trend was that the conception of Mary as an Immaculate Virgin Mother downgraded ordinary women who are the children of Eve and cannot be virgin mothers.

Catholic Mariology was proposing Mary as an **imitable model**, whereas ordinarily women were more akin to the proposed image of Eve after her fall (It might be remarked that according to the hypothesis of original justice, Eve was also born immaculate – even if from the side of Adam. Eve had no original sin until she herself contributed to originating it) Mary Daly explains this position.

“total identification of women with evil would be dysfunctional. Catholicism has offered women compensatory and reflected glory through identification with Mary. The inimitability of the Virgin-Mother model (literally understood) has left all women essentially identified with Eve. At the same time, it has served to separate the “feminine” ideal of good from the active role attributed to Jesus.⁵⁵

Mary Daly sees a positive aspect in Catholic Mariology – one unintended by its male originators. Mary Daly, though far from sympathetic to traditional Catholic theology, suggests that this perception of Mary has been able to contribute to the emergence of some strong independent women within Catholicism.

“Aided by such screening mechanisms, some women have managed to absorb from the Mary image a vision of the free and independent woman who stands alone”.

She sees in the Immaculate Conception the possibility of the “negation of the myth of feminine evil. a rejection of religion’s fall into servitude to patriarchy”. (p. 86)

⁵⁵ Mary Daly, *op.cit* p. 81.

The doctrine of the Assumption could also have the effect of placing a woman in heaven alongside the Divine and thus helping to overcome the perception in which “symbolically and socially, women have been identified with matter, sex and evil”. (p. 87)

In Marian theology there is a strong aspect of openness and receptivity to God’s grace and an auxiliary role in Christ’s redemptive mission. If receptivity implies subordination and a lack of an autonomous existence and fulfillment for women, then it is subordinating woman to the other – the male humanity in general or a concept or the divine.

“Mariology becomes a liberating symbol for women only when it is seen as a radical symbol or a new humanity freed from hierarchical power relations; and not when “femininity” is seen as the complementary underside of masculine domination”.⁵⁶

Mary can thus be either a symbol of women’s subordination and submission, or of a new humanity in which woman is not subordinate to the subjugation of patriarchy and hierarchy. She is freed from the curse which is said to be on Eve and her progeny. She is able to bring the qualities of love, mercy and forgiveness to the theological perspective of God and Christ presented as judge and justice. The fully human is the combination of these aspects which all need.

Neglect of the Social Dimension

In the evolution of doctrine what is not said or not done is sometimes as important as what is actually proposed as theology or spirituality. Since Marian devotion is vitally important in the Catholic Church and in a country like Sri Lanka, what is omitted can have serious consequences on the life of the believers.

In Mariology throughout the centuries there has been an accent on Mary as a help of Christians and refuge of all those in need. This has been understood in relation to individual personal needs, to eternal salvation and sometimes to community needs such as overcoming one’s enemies in a war as of Christians against the Turks in 1470 at Lepanto.

But Mariology has lacked a clear and systematic relationship to social transformation by bringing about justice within communities, in nations and internationally. There is hardly any shrine of Mary or any popular prayer or hymn addressed to her that stresses the sharing of material goods “so that no one is in need”. There is no analysis in Marian theology of the conditions in society which prevent the realization of effective social justice, love and peace.

On the contrary the effect of Marian devotions, at least indirectly, would seem to be to bring about a greater conformity to the prevailing social system. The virtues emphasized in Marian Spirituality are faith, love of God, obedience, docility,

⁵⁶ Rosemary R. Ruether, “New Woman New Earth”, Seabury, N.Y., 1975, p. 58.

humility, contemplation. These are de facto interpreted without bringing out their social implications of justice and sharing.

The devotions that have been evolved around the traditional Mariology do not adequately focus the attention of Christians on issues of justice. On the contrary Christians are among the world's worst exploiters, and this type of Marian devotion may even deflect them from considering their responsibilities towards the poor, the needy and the oppressed. In that sense the traditional Mariology with all its popular flavour can be harmful for genuine holiness that must include justice and effective love in our context of criminal injustices within countries and among countries.

This need not be so as Mary is regarded as Mother of humanity. A genuine Mother's concern would be to see that all her children are cared for and provided for. She would be very sad if some of her children exploit the others and deprive them of the means of subsistence. She would struggle with all her might to change a situation in which millions of her children die due to starvation because some of the others take too much out of the common stock. A universal Mother would want peace among her children. She would regret the building up of armaments by different groups of her children to destroy each other. She would oppose local and international corruption that leads to the resources of the poor people being deposited in banks by persons and companies that exploit and rob them.

These would be the implications of the Magnificat of Mary. But throughout centuries Marian spirituality has hardly been developed in any significant manner to oppose the evils, and injustices of feudal society, of capitalism, of imperialist colonialism and male domination. Where there has been a coincidence of interests between a whole people and the Christian leaderships, Marian shrines have been places where the oppressed peoples met and prayed for their liberation – as in Sri Lanka during the Dutch persecution of Catholics in the 17th and 18th centuries, in Ireland under the British, and in Eastern Europe under Communist rule.

This dimension of Mariology as socially liberating is emerging only in recent times with the growth of overall consciousness of the inter-relation between social justice and Christian holiness. Holiness in the Marian spirituality has missed this dimension as seen from its absence in almost all the **religious congregations** that have had a Marian spirituality during the past few centuries. They have had social service and charity towards the neighbour as one of their objectives. But social justice that critically analysed social relations and wanted a radical transformation of mentalities and social structures has not been part of their Marian spirituality.

Why this Neglect?

Why has this been so? Directly we may say that it has been due to the type of emphases given in Marian spirituality. The accent has been on the special privileges of Mary that have been proposed in the dogmatic teachings and their interpretation in an individualistic and other worldly sense. The immaculate conception, perpetual virginity, the divine motherhood, the assumption into heaven have been praised in writings and sermons and related to her intercessory power with God for the personal

sanctification and eternal salvation of souls. But they have not been seen and shown as having a dimension of social transformation.

Even the Vatican II Statement on Mary in Chapter 8 of the Constitution the social dimension of Mariology is not brought out. In the 50 page 100 column articles on Mary in the New Catholic Encyclopaedia, edited by the Catholic University of America, Washington DC 1967, this dimension is not dealt with as *it* has not been important In Mariology.

The emphasis on the themes of the dogmatic proclamations combined with the priority given to Christological dogmas made for a neglect of the data that is available concerning Jesus and Mary in the Gospels. A further question would be why were the dogmatic positions stressed.

Why has theology and spirituality accentuated these Christological and Mariological dogmas? It is perhaps because they were important for the claims of the Church which considered itself the unique means or vehicle of salvation for all humanity. Further they helped to establish and legitimize the authority of the clergy and the theologians, and did not upset the ruling social and political establishments of the day.

The influence of tradition on Catholic theology and spiritual life also explains the long continued and almost exclusive centrality of these dogmas. The corresponding attitudes of dependence and passivity were both the consequence of the interpretations of the dogmas and in turn a cause for their continuing dominant influence on Catholic life and thought.

Tradition is particularly strong on these issues as Catholics have had to defend them against their denial or minimization by Protestants in recent centuries. In the 4th and 5th centuries they were issues at the Council of Ephesus (432) against Nestorius and by implication at Chalcedon in 451 where the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ was defined. Catholics are particularly sensitive about the privileges and position of Mary and this makes theological discussion even more difficult. The reactions to the issues are often of an emotional nature that do not brook quiet rational inquiry.