

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“A Liberally Religious Approach To Appreciating Mary”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 9, 2018

Sermon

How often do you hear about Jesus' mother from this pulpit?

Not much.

Nor will you hear much about Mary from most Protestant pulpits. There are no statues of her here or pictures of her on our walls. The only time she gets an obligatory mention is during the Christmas pageant. And then, we only know about her as very pregnant riding on a donkey, being forced to give birth in a stable, and silently pondering it all in her heart.

This is not the case if you go into a Catholic Church. You'll see both statues of her and pictures of her and her son Jesus; you'll hear prayers to her and songs praising her. Besides the Holy Trinity, Mary gets a great deal of attention all year round, especially on her four feast days, her Conception (12/8), her nativity (9/8), her Annunciation (3/25), and her Assumption (8/15). That list doesn't include Guadalupe Day (12/12). Mary is a big deal in the Catholic Church.

Why doesn't Mary get as much attention from the Protestants? Solo Scriptorium. The Bible alone is the Protestant's guide. Mary isn't discussed much in the Bible. Her alleged Immaculate Conception gets no ink at all. Paul, whose letters are our earliest Christian source material, doesn't discuss her except to say that Jesus was born of a woman. The Gospels do talk about her but as instrumental in Jesus' birth not as a holy person with special agency in her own right.

The Unitarian and Universalist nemesis, theologian John Calvin, was harsh in his rejection of Mary worship. He was concerned that they turned her into an idol and by doing so, diminished the centrality and importance of Jesus. Using his reasoning power, he declared the idea of her perpetual virginity a mockery of her womanhood, especially with the reference to Jesus' brothers in Biblical text. He also rejected calling Mary "Mother of God" which invited her deification. He was especially vehement, as most Protestants are, that salvation only comes through Jesus. Mary has no power to intercede with God.

Dr. Porterfield shared a joke along these lines with me last week. St. Peter approached Jesus with a concerned look on his face. Jesus asked, "What's the problem Peter? You look upset." Peter said, "Lord, did you not call me the Rock of your church?" "Yes, I did."

"Didn't you give me the keys to the gates of heaven?" "Yes, I did."

"And didn't you also give me the power to judge who comes through those gates?" "Yes, I did that too."

Then Peter said, "Will you please have a word with your mother. She keeps letting people I reject in the back door."

Though our Unitarian and Universalist forbears rejected Calvinism, vestiges of it remain in our tradition. William Ellery Channing, in his defining “Unitarian Christianity” sermon, dismisses Mary in one sentence. Joseph Priestly, another Unitarian forbear, groups worship of Mary with worship of the saints. This kind of worship he saw as pagan worship detracting from the worship of the one God—the *only* deity who should be worshipped.

The critique of Mary came on hard in the 20th Century from Feminist scholar Mary Daly in her 1973 Book “*Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation.*” She rejected the need for a virgin in the first place by deconstructing the book of Genesis as an unscientific historical artifact that should be discarded. There was no Garden of Eden and no need for Jesus to be born of a virgin, let alone one who was immaculately conceived.

Daly was inspired by Simone de Beauvoir “who pointed out the contrast between the ancient goddesses and Mary as early as 1949.” She noted that whereas the goddesses commanded autonomous power and utilized men for their own purposes, Mary is wholly the servant of God: “‘I am the handmaid of the Lord.’ For the first time in the history of mankind,” writes Beauvoir, “a mother kneels before her son and acknowledges, of her own free will, her inferiority. The supreme victory of masculinity is consummated in Mariolatry: it signifies the rehabilitation of woman through the completeness of her defeat.”

Daly sharpened this critique saying: Mary is “a remnant of the ancient image of the Mother Goddess, enchained and subordinated in Christianity, as the ‘Mother of God’.”... Mary is a “pale derivative symbol disguising the conquered Goddess,” a “flaunting of the tamed Goddess.” Her role as servant in the Incarnation of God amounts to nothing other than a “rape.” ([source](#))

Strong language!

Daly echoes rhetoric from the nineteenth-century anti-Catholic elitist polemics. They argued the weak minded common people needed a Goddess figure to worship. Another feminist analysis emphasizes Mary's place-holding function: Mary discloses the female attributes of God that have heretofore been suppressed. ... Mary is not an independent personality but something more like a projection screen for archetypal urges that-... really need to be directed toward the image of God. (ibid)

I start with this strong critique to acknowledge the headwinds I’m facing to suggest we reconsider the place of Mary in our UU tradition. No, I’m not interested in putting up a shrine to her in the back of Community Hall. No, I’m not organizing a Unitarian pilgrimage to Lourdes nor am I recommending saying a “Hail Mary” or two should be part of our UU liturgy (although I did read a sermon this past week by a UU minister who used that prayer and invited people to join her in reciting it).

What I’m exploring today is what the Protestant rejection of Mariology has done to Unitarian Universalism. I wonder if it has tilted us away from the wholesome, beneficial parts of the

Mariology we might be wise to incorporate into our tradition to make it more heart-oriented and emotionally satisfying.

One of the first questions we need to encounter when exploring the Marian traditions is how to relate to her. The Protestant critique is of Mary *worship*. They are thinking of the definition of worship as it is traditionally framed: the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity. If Mary is not God, then it is not appropriate to worship her, they would say. Unitarian Universalist would probably be cautious about such language too.

Thankfully, there are *other* words besides worship that *avoid* this problem. To revere her stresses deference and tenderness of feeling. To adore her implies love and the feeling of personal attachment. To venerate her, the most popular term with some Mary friendly non-Catholics, implies holding her as holy or sacrosanct because of her character and associations. These are all loving terms of admiration that do not assert a divine status. These are terms we also offer to human beings.

What I found interesting studying Mary this week was noticing how her cult status *increases* in step with surges of patriarchal oppression in the history of the Holy Roman Empire. It also tracks the movement of Catholic theology to be more sacrificially oriented, postponing the new realm of God Jesus proclaimed here on earth unfolding in the present moment. The promise of salvation for the Crusaders risking their lives in the Holy Land and the terrors of the plagues in the Middle Ages had a terrible warping effect on Christian theology. It drained out the good news of new life and replaced it with sacrificial atonement to be realized after death.

The other feature I think the feminist theologians under appreciate is the source of the energy that drives the devotion to Mary. No question, the church strives in every way to do exactly what they say, but that isn't the lived experience of Mary's devotees. The church didn't create the movement focused on Mary, they have only tried to subdue and control it. And they have succeeded in separating many women from her power. Yet the resistance lives on, especially among women religious, the nuns and their orders.

Mary's power is in her love, compassion, and devotion to humanity. Traditionally she is thought of as the mother of the Church. Her focus is not some abstract theological fight with evil or vanquishing sin. She just plain loves us and wants what is best for us. She exemplifies the ideal of unconditional love, the love mothers cannot help but have for their children, the celebration of a female biological imperative.

That interest in our well-being is backed up by the sightings of her apparition that happen on a regular basis through the years bringing healing in her wings. She isn't sitting on some cloud casually watching us. She is into our lives up to her armpits wanting to help us be successful. Yes, maybe Jesus offers us unconditional love in Christian theology, but Mary is the one ready to deliver even before we know to ask. That is the kind of love we are talking about with Mary.

Framed this way, it is easier to understand why Catholics suffering oppression around the world look to Mary, especially among the poor. We see this with the devotion to our Lady of Guadeloupe, an apparition in Mexico in 1531, ten years after European conquest. It is through her Fiat, her active cooperation and her Magnificat (that is, through protest and struggle against injustice), she calls her followers into participation in the process of redemption of her people. Marian C. Gray senses in the Mary tradition a call. “She calls us to energize and bring to birth our powers; she calls us to rediscover our affinity and connectedness with nature and createdness as women.”

The contrast here with Jesus is important. Both Jesus and Mary care about the poor, marginalized and oppressed. Jesus comes to it as a prophet. He judges the power structures and systems of oppression of the Roman Empire and the Jewish collusion with those powers. He walks into the temple and overturns the tables of the money changers. Jesus is a *disruptor* in today’s lingo.

Mary has a different approach. She sees the same suffering but she comes to it with a loving heart to heal the wounded and bind up the broken. We need both the prophet and the healer, we need both Jesus and Mary working together to save the world.

Yet Mary is not just a model for women—just as Jesus shouldn’t be viewed as the model for men. Mary can be a model for *both* men and women; for teachings of love and compassion; for how to build community, peace and harmony; for how to model loving-kindness that is a needed and necessary lubricant in human relations. Perhaps she can be a symbol for what is needed to build the world community we lift up in our sixth principle. Rather than saving people through conversion and conquest, a better approach could be using a fierce kind of love and kindness.

So, can we venerate Mary here? I believe we can. So many of us are hungry for a source of loving-kindness, compassion, joy and bliss that a rational analysis of theology or philosophy or politics or war or international relations just cannot provide.

Many of us know an experience of being held by a love that is greater than us. The problems of the world are not going to get resolved with more hate or more violence. Only more love and justice can bring people together across their differences. Most of us reject the vision of a warrior God who demands blood sacrifice to prove our submission. Almost all of us reject a God image that requires the sacrifice of his Son to appease the offense of Adam and Eve’s Original Sin.

The Mary tradition provides a bridge for us into a more holistic version of Christianity that is more compatible with contemporary Unitarian Universalist values. We can put aside the patriarchal additions of Immaculate Conception and Perpetual Virginity that de-humanizes Mary just as we put aside the deification of Jesus. When Mary and Jesus are two *venerable* human champions seeking freedom and liberation from suffering, we can join them in the struggle for peace and justice in this world ... *right now*.

How can that happen? That is part of the mystery of how Mary can work in our hearts even before we ask for her help.