Landas 19:1 (2005) 119-140

MARY AMONG THE GODDESSES

Sabino A. Vengco, Jr.

Mary prophesied in her canticle of praise, "From now on all ages will call me blessed" (Lk. 1:48). And Elizabeth told her, "Most blessed are you among women" (Lk. 1:42). Mary is certainly the most celebrated and honored among all the women who have ever lived, but she may also be the most controversial. For centuries, people have opposed her exaltation. Even now the internet offers 10,841 articles detailing canned and esoteric explanations how and why Mary is a goddess or has been turned into some "domesticated goddess" by the Roman Catholic Church. The feminist Protestant theologian Christa Mulack entitled her book *Maria Die Geheime Göttin im Christentum* (Mary: The Secret Goddess in Christianity).[1] An examination of Mary's relationship with the goddesses of old (at least with a couple of them) may enable one to look with equanimity at the pertinent developments both in Christian life and in Marian piety and devotions. Hopefully all can, in this connection, better appreciate Mary's place in Christian life. How is Mary understood within the definitions of culture? As part of the

[1]Christa Mulack, *Maria Die Geheime Göttin im Christentum* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1985).

series of lectures on Mary under the sponsorship of the Professorial Chair for Philippine Marian Studies of the Loyola School of Theology, this is an opportunity to propose some reflections on the unique phenomenon that is Mary in the light of the history of religions and of cultural anthropology as interpreted by Catholic theology.

Touches of Divinity. A Filipino Catholic somewhere in Talipapa, Novaliches, makes the sign of the cross and devoutly pronounces, *"Sa ngalan ng Ama at ng Anak at ng Ina. Amen"* (In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Mother. Amen). On the foothills of Mount Banahaw, a group of devotees pray before a crowned image of Mary, appealing to her saving love and reminding her that she alone can give the nation the peace and unity the country sorely needs, and begging her, in addition, for the understanding among nations throughout the world that must precede planetary harmony and prosperity. In the meeting hall of the *Dating Daan* group in Longos, Malolos, Bulacan, the *ministro* is hugely enjoying himself as he expounds on the error of the Roman Catholics who for all practical purposes have turned Mary into a goddess.[2] A bank manager, looking for something to share with his fellow community members in their prayer group, pages through a book from the religion shelf of a Makati bookstore entitled *The Return of the Mother* by Andrew Harvey. He is perplexed as he reads a passage from the book:

> "In Mary the Divine Mother comes to earth.... Mary is the bridge between heaven and earth, between the human and the divine worlds.... Mary is the force of the Mother-aspect of God made manifest in time, and as such is one with the Trinity in all its aspects, when they are expanded, as they must be, to include the sacred feminine at every level and in every dimension."[3]

Who is Mary? Why is she such a focal point of religious

---

[2]Armando Ang, *The Dark Side of Catholicism* (Mandaluyong City: SCR Marketing & Advertising, 2002), 19.

[3]Andrew Harvey, *The Return of the Mother* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001), 343-344.

attention? Is she divine? What is behind the apparent ambivalence of transcendental expressions and symbols when speaking to and of her? How did she become classed among the deities of old in the mind of some?

What the Reformers of the sixteenth century voiced in protest as abuse in Catholic Marian devotion and piety seems to be as much an issue today as it was then. The medieval Marian phenomenon, for example, presents a devotion to Mary that has boldly appropriated a language with which to express itself: typology and parallelism in relation to the Godhead.[4] Anselm of Canterbury exemplifies this in his statement "God is the Father of all created things, and Mary is the Mother of all recreated things." Like God the Father, Mary so loved the world that she gave her only Son (Jn. 3:16). Mary was prayed to as "Our Mother who art in heaven" and petitioned to give us each day our daily bread. The familiar psalms became a rich source for handy substitutions, having Mary in place of God as in Psalm 96: "Sing to Our Lady a new song, for she hath done wonderful things. In the sight of the nations she hath revealed her mercy; her name is heard even to the ends of the earth." The *Te Deum* was refashioned in honor of Our Lady:

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

Today many Filipinos would take it for granted that Mary has been gifted not only with omniscience but also with some omnipotence over heaven and earth. "In Jesus is justice, in Mary is mercy," so much so that in effect, as sermonized in the thirteenth century, there is a zone in heaven where the Queen of Mercy has rescued souls from the wrath of

---

[4]Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Mary and the Female Face of God," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 507-510.

Christ's justice. And her maternal authority as the merciful mediatrix would be explained later by her share in dominion with her Son due to the pain she also suffered on Calvary. So great is this important role of Mary's mercy that medieval theologians ascribed to her what is biblically written of Christ, i.e., that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt corporeally in her (Col. 2:9), that of her fullness we have all received (Jn. 1:16), and that because she had emptied herself, God had highly exalted her, so that at her name every knee should bow (Phil. 2:5-11). Here in the Philippines all this is summarized, e.g., by Mary's title as *Divina Pastora* in Gapan, Nueva Ecija.[5]

There appear indeed to be touches of divinity accompanying the Blessed Mother down the corridor of time. Divine prerogatives have come to be attributed to her. Is she really what is said of her: *Divina Pastora?* Why such language? One needs to accompany Mary in the development of Christianity's special devotion to her, in order to identify the processes that took place and distinguish the acceptable reflections from unwarranted conclusions. This presentation will selectively span three continents in three different periods of history in trying to trace down some patterns that may render comprehensible some startling aspects of devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus and of Christians.

Ephesus

This city is very special for several reasons. As one of the greatest cities of Asia Minor, this Greco-Roman city of commerce once boasted of having one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Along with the Pyramids of Egypt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and the

[5]Not only in Spain does one originally have such designation for Mary, but also in other Catholic countries where folk piety sees in Mary a heavenly queen with the power to influence human destiny in this world, taking over some of the characteristics of her Son. Thus in Austrian Tirol, one sees paintings of Mary sitting among a flock of sheep as the Good Shepherdess.

Colossus of Rhodes was listed the magnificent *Artemision,* the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Artemis was the Greek goddess (Diana to the Romans) of wild nature and fertility, portrayed as draped with eggs or multiple breasts, symbols of fertility, from her waist to her shoulders. This mother goddess was one of the most widely worshipped female deities in the Hellenistic world. The temple, also known as the "Great Marble Temple," was considered the largest such structure of that time (55x109m with 135 pillars) and was the center of very popular pilgrimage in the Mediterranean world of antiquity.

Saint Paul first briefly dropped by Ephesus when he came from Corinth with the couple Priscilla and Aquila on his way to Jerusalem. But it was on his third missionary journey in 57 that he came again to stay for some time and win converts. He was making such inroads converting people to Christianity that a silversmith called Demetrius, afraid for his souvenir business in miniature Artemis shrines, organized a public demonstration by related craftsmen and workers against Paul's activities. The protest turned ugly as he incited the crowd: "The danger grows, not only that our business will be discredited, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be of no account, and that she whom the whole province of Asia and all the world worship will be stripped of her magnificence." "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" repeatedly shouted the furious crowd as they seized two Macedonian traveling companions of Paul. The public disturbance was eventually restrained as reason prevailed in that legal means should be employed and charges, if any, filed in the courts. Paul had to leave town thereafter (cf. Acts 19:23-40).

Vital to this study is a special tradition connected with Ephesus that says, together with John after the dispersal of Jerusalem, Mary came to live in Ephesus. That John lived and died thereabout and was buried in Ephesus is historically verified. John took Mary into his home in accordance with the expressed wish of Jesus on the cross (Jn. 19:27). In 1891 the ruins of what is claimed to be the "House of Mother Mary" (*Meryem Ana Evi*) were discovered by two French Lazarist priests from Izmir (Smyrna) on Bulbul Dagh ("Mount of the Nightingales"), seven kilometers up the hill outside the city of Ephesus.

They were following the directions given in the published visions of German bedridden nun Anna Katharina Emmerich (1774-1824), edited by Clemens Brentano (1854).[6] Archaeological studies by an Austrian team have established that the ruins of the small church were of the Byzantine period (eighth century), built on an older structure dating around the beginning of the fourth century, which in turn was erected on the foundations of a house that, in comparison with other ancient buildings in Ephesus, definitely dates back at the latest to the first half of the first century.

The significance of this discovery and the 1951 restored Byzantine chapel were supported by the Kirkinjotes, descendants of early Christians in the area of Ephesus, who testified that it has been their tradition and that of their ancestors to hike every fifteenth of August to this place they call *Panajia Kapoulu* ("Most Holy Place") to remember Mary's death—long before the Roman dogma of Mary's Assumption! The finding naturally triggered off a debate with the Western tradition that Mary died in Jerusalem on Mount Zion some twelve years after the Ascension. But the main arguments[7] for the Ephesus tradition are: (1) From the fourth century there existed in Ephesus a church dedicated to Mary (the first Marian church in the world) which would even be used for the location of the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431. In those times a church dedicated to a saint could only be built in those places associated with the life or death of the saint. (2) When Saint Helena (336+) built various churches in Jerusalem to memorialize sacred sites, she did not construct any to commemorate the dormition or passing of Mary in Jerusalem because there was no such tradition then. (3) Following the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Council Fathers

---

[6]*The Life of Jesus Christ and Biblical Revelations from the Visions of the Venerable Anne Catherine Emmerich as Recorded in the Journals of Clemens Brentano, Vol. IV,* ed. Carl E. Schmoger (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1986), 450-476.

[7]Franz Anton Passmann, *Das Schicksal der Muttergöttinnen* (Siegburg: Verlag Franz Schmitt, 1994), 125-127. For another assessment of the Ephesus position, see Walter J. Burgardt, *The Testimony of the Patristic Age Concerning Mary's Death* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1957), 35-39.

wrote a letter to the clergy of Constantinople, Nestorius' own priests, informing them that their bishop had been condemned as a heretic in the city "where the theologian John and the Mother of God, the holy Virgin ... [lived]." (4) The Syro-Jacobite (i.e., Nestorian) Church has recognized this Ephesian tradition since the eighth century.

This writer can testify that the *Meryem Ana Evi* in Ephesus is different from many other historical places related to Mary that have been visited personally. One goes there as a tourist, but leaves as a pilgrim. It exudes a different spirit altogether, quite unlike the beautiful but cold Dormition Church on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

The preceding details are necessary in order to understand what really happened at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Books on the history of dogma have focused on the Christological concern of the bishops and on the rivalry between the main personages of Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, and of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople. But the distinctively Marian historico-religious context is often glossed over.[8] This is best symbolized by the Marian church of Ephesus, the first in the world. This church must have been built after Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity a state religion in 391. The church was erected in the heart of the city at the area of the harbor near the East Gymnasium, testifying to the influence and financial power of the young and upcoming Christian community. The church utilized the structures of an older institution, the *Museion,* the higher school of ancient Ephesus, where doctors, philosophers and rhetoricians worked and studied, discussed and lectured. Part of the compound became the bishop's residence.

The symbolic significance of the take-over was foreshadowed by the restoration of the public baths following the earthquakes that hit Ephesus in 358 and 365. A wealthy Christian by the name of Scholastikia spent for the greater part of the repair of the public baths.

---

[8]Theodora Jenny-Kappers, *Muttergöttin und Gottesmutter in Ephesos* (Zurich: Daimon Verlag, 1986), 127-159.

Remarkable is the fact that the building materials used for the repair came from the almost entirely dismantled Shrine of the *Hestia Bouleia,* the temple of the eternal fire for the city of Artemis. The archaeologists made another astounding discovery in 1956. A statue of Artemis lies broken in three pieces but left in place where it fell or was toppled; another statue, two times life-size, was found carefully buried whole and unscathed underneath a side hall. Clearly in the turbulent times of the competition between and transition from paganism to Christianity, some ambivalence prevailed. Fear of the gods still exerted its force on the people, or some of their followers were still strongly resisting.

Emperor Theodosius himself exemplified the complex situation during this period. An enemy of the Arians and of paganism most especially, he ordered the closure of pagan temples in 392, the termination of the Olympic games, and also the placing of crosses on the foreheads of statues, even those of the Roman emperors. Yet when the Temple of Emperor Hadrian in Ephesus was restored, a bas-relief was made depicting the Christian imperial family of Theodosius the Great in the company of Artemis. Was he still seeking the protection of the city's virgin goddess? Or was he obliged to let the public know that he also enjoyed the favors of the goddess of Ephesus?

The devotion of Asia Minor to their mother goddesses (Artemis, Cybel, Atargatis), as in Egypt (Isis), was a real problem for the emperor of the eastern Roman Empire. The bond between the Empire and the Church meant that the doctrinal unity in the Church was vital for the political unity of the *imperium.* This concern for orthodoxy for political ends explains the emperor's direct hand in convening the first ecumenical councils. Why was Ephesus chosen for the third ecumenical council and not Constantinople as in the previous council, where the emperor could be handily on hand and where Nestorius had his episcopal seat? His absence at the council later was a big problem. The choice was not an accident, because there was already in Ephesus a large Marian church and the disputed theological topic was about Mary as the Mother of God, *Dei Genetrix,* and especially because tradition has it that Mary lived in Ephesus. Finally, it was because the cultural context of the persisting, if weakened, cult of goddesses was centered

in Ephesus, which was setting the tone for the rest of Asia Minor up to the fifth century.

Faith in mother Artemis was not yet dead, and in a way the tradition of Paul's confrontation with the adherents of Artemis in Ephesus had to be decided. It is not necessary to go into the familiar debate about the *Theotokos.* Suffice it to note that the triumph of *Theotokos* in Ephesus was the final blow to the pagan cult of fertility and of the mother goddesses in general. The Mother of Jesus had definitively overcome the old goddess of the city. Artemis would be no more and by the seventh century the city itself would be reduced to oblivion, to be resurrected only by the discovery of *Meryem Ana Evi* in the late nineteenth century. The dogma of Mary as the Mother of God would be the last message from the city of Ephesus to the rest of the world that up to today remains in force. Ephesus therefore became, in this regard, the initial spiritual center of the new cult of Mary the Mother of God, as Ephesus was once the world center of the ancient pagan cult of Artemis, the goddess mother, *Magna Mater.*

As the Christian Church overran paganism everywhere in the Mediterranean world, this could not have happened without something of the pagan culture rubbing on Christianity. That is the question: how much of the cult of female deities of the Mediterranean world became attached to Christianity? Interestingly, Pope Sixtus III (432-440) was so overjoyed by the success of the Council of Ephesus, he started renovating the following year the Basilica *Santa Maria Maggiore* in honor of the *Theotokos.* And, on the grand mosaic of the *tympanon* appears Mary for the first time as Queen of Heaven, on the same level as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Was this part of the encounter with the goddess of Asia Minor who was also called "queen of heaven," and virgin, and mother? Admittedly, one hundred years later, in the magnificent mosaic of Saint Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, one finds the Mother of God with the young *Pantokrator.* But what a fundamental difference with the multi-breasted Artemis of old! One feels mercilessly delivered to the *Magna Mater,* but with the *Theotokos* one tingles with compassion and love.

Missionary Creativity. There are evidently morphological

similarities between the post-Constantinian Marian cult and the dominant cults of goddesses in the Mediterranean world that Christianity was then moving into.[9] These similarities are historical facts. The Church issued forth from the Cenacle in the power of the Holy Spirit into countries already with strong religious delineations. Their religious beliefs and practices were not disposable wear that could merely be shed off. The Church obviously did not operate in a vacuum but within the rich cultural background of the Mediterranean world, absorbing a lot of current assumptions, philosophies, linguistic and artistic imageries, and rituals, and assimilating them into its own liturgy and theology.[10] And, this interactivity with the surrounding cultures affected the very mystery of God, the way Christ, the saints and Mary were thought of.

There is a radical difference between the mystery cults of Mediterranean female deities and Christian veneration of Mary.[11] Mary was not a figment of the imagination or merely a psychological projection of primeval urges and needs, or some form of exalting existence or a mythologizing of the wonder of biological life. Instead, Mary originated in a historically unique self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The inculturation that took place meant that the Marian cult freely adapted elements from the mystery cults of goddesses and intentionally substituted itself where female deities especially had a central role. This strategy was necessary if missionary work was to make progress in the fourth century world where goddesses were so highly honored. Also, assimilation of pagan elements was based on the belief that any symbol, once purified and "baptized," could

---

[9]Johnson, "Mary and the Female Face of God," 505-506.

[10]See the interesting special issue of *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20 (1990) on "Mary—Woman of the Mediterranean."

[11]Jean Danielou, "Le culte marial et le paganisme," in *Maria: Etudes sur la sainte Vierge,* ed. du Manoir, D'Hubert (Paris: Beauchesne et ses Fils, 1949), 162, 173-174, 180. See also E. Ann Matter, "The Virgin Mary: A Goddess?" in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present,* ed. Carl Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 80-96.

actually evoke the God of Jesus Christ. Regarding this adaptation of elements from the pagan cult of goddesses apropos Mary, it can be asked whether this needed purification has really been done, or whether in some form of syncretism, devotion to Mary has simply continued the cult of the maternal power of the goddesses. Anyway, Jean Danielou, in his above-mentioned classic study on the subject, explains that in God's providence the unique power of the Marian cult is to be found in its correspondence to the aspirations of the human heart, so that devotion to Mary functions psychologically in parallel ways to the cult of the mother goddesses.

Christianity did not begin in a vacuum but in countries that were, in the religious sense, already occupied. To give way to the Gospel must everything be jettisoned? Henri de Lubac does not think there can be any absolute beginning of any kind in this world; Christ's followers are sent to accomplish and transform, not destroy.[12] Early on the Church found the necessity of using the rich symbols of paganism, cleansed of their ancient content, to express its own revelation and truths. In this way, for instance, she insinuated herself into the hearts of new believers who were, until recently, immersed in the beliefs of the beneficence and maternal power of female deities. Christianity absorbed and transformed the world by penetrating into the very fabric of human history and religiosity, and thus renewed the face of the earth. De Lubac echoes Cardinal Newman in dismissing the objection that pagan customs have been introduced into Christian life: "These things were in heathenism, therefore they are not Christian," and now "these things are in Christianity, therefore they are not heathen."[13] It was not and it is not for the Church *naiveté* nor syncretism nor liberalism, but simply Catholicism, to assimilate with a breadth of vision the good and the true in the others. It is to be noted, points out Elizabeth Johnson,

---

[12]Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism, A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 144-158. See also Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 3-45.

[13]De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 147.

that Marian tradition in particular has therefore become a conduit of imagery and language about divine reality derived from the cult of female deities in the pre-Christian Mediterranean world.[14] There is a universal quest for religious experience through the feminine image not available through the idea of God of other and earlier times and cultures.

This strong process of assimilation and adaptation of ideas and verbal and artistic imagery from the mystery cults of the Mediterranean world—in the case of the emerging cult of Mary in the fourth century—was the same pattern and attitude in the inception of Christianity in the New World in the sixteenth century and in the Third World in the seventeenth century. Although in the case of one, it was Mary herself who made the creative leap, appropriating and adapting what was indigenous and local, while in the other it could paradoxically be either Solomonic wisdom or pure inadvertence. The presentation now briefly swings to the other two cases and places of this study.

Guadalupe

The origin of the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico has for its background not only the resistance by the vanquished Aztec nation against the European invaders, but also its rejection as a whole of the foreigners' religion, which inspired their degradation and near annihilation as the pagan enemy. Christianity had arrived only over a decade earlier and remained a bitter imposition on the natives.

On the hill of Tepeyac, a site associated with Tonantzin, the ancient goddess of life and the virgin mother of the gods, Mary the Mother of God appeared to claim the Aztec people as her own.[15] Early in the

---

[14]Johnson, "Mary and the Female Face of God," 507.

[15]Consult the following sources: *Congreso Mariologico, 450 Aniversario (1531-1981) Insigne y Nacional Basilica de Sta. Maria de Guadalupe* (Mexico, 1983), 271-530; Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, *A Handbook on Guadalupe* (Waite Park, Minnesota: Park

morning of December 9, 1531, Juan Diego, a lowly Aztec convert and widower, was on his way to the Franciscan church in Tlatelolco in the suburb of the city of Mexico, when he heard the beautiful singing of birds and a woman's voice calling him to climb up the Tepeyac hill he was passing by. On the hilltop, he saw a young woman in magnificent splendor amid a glorious light, who identified herself to him in his Nahuatl language as the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God. Juan Diego was filled with strange happiness as he gazed at her youthful countenance and felt her look of loving kindness. She expressed her desire that a shrine be built here, "where to you and to all inhabitants of the land, but also to all who trustingly call on me, I will show my love, my compassion and my succor. For I am your mother!" Then she instructed him to go to the bishop in Mexico and report to him her wish.

Bishop Juan de Zumarraga, OFM, Mexico's first bishop, evidently did not believe the story of the *indio.* The same day, on his way home, Juan Diego again saw Our Lady at the hill of Tepeyac. He narrated to her his failure and begged her to send somebody else more worthy. But she told him instead to go again to the bishop. He did the following day. This time the bishop requested for a sign from the Lady. Being told of this, she promised to do so the next day. However, Juan Diego was not able to come the following day because Juan Bernardino, his uncle with whom he was staying, suddenly took ill.

Two days later, on December 12, Juan Diego was going to Tlateloclo by way of Tepeyac to fetch a priest for his dying uncle, when Our Lady came down the hill to meet him. She listened to his excuse for not coming the previous day. Then she told him, "Do not be troubled or weighed down with grief. Do not fear any illness.... Am I not your mother? ... Your uncle will not die, be sure he is now well!" He then remembered to ask her for the sign he was to take to

---

Press, 1997); Virgil Elizondo, *Guadalupe Mother of the New Creation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997); Francis Anson, *Guadalupe: What Her Eyes Say* (Makati: Sinag-Tala Publishers, 1994).

the bishop. She sent him up the hill to bring her flowers from there. He found on the stony hilltop a garden of roses not there before. She arranged the flowers he cut in his *tilma,* a poncho-like outer garment made from *magay* fibers, with the instruction to show and give them only to the bishop.

As Juan Diego presented himself for the third time to Bishop Zumarraga and reported his fourth encounter with Our Lady, he opened his mantel to give him the flowers. Then the sign from Mary was revealed. The Virgin Mary's portrait appeared on the coarse fabric of Juan Diego's *tilma,* miraculously painted in exquisite colors just as he had previously described her.

In the morning of the same day, Our Lady also appeared to the sick Juan Bernardino in their village of Tulpetlac, cured him, and told him to report the miracle to the bishop. And, she said that her image would crush the serpent. Later on, when Juan Bernardino was being interrogated by the bishop, he recognized the Lady who appeared to him in the picture on the *tilma* of his nephew in the possession of the bishop. The old man also said that Our Lady would like to be called *Santa Maria Virgen de Guadalupe. Guadalupe,* as in the Arabic word for the place where Our Lady is venerated in Estremadura in southern Spain, was the bishop's interpretation for the unfamiliar Nahuatl word *coatlaxopeuh,* which means "I have crushed the serpent." It is pronounced *quatlasupe* which sounds remarkably like the Spanish word *Guadalupe.*

The dark skin of the woman of the apparition (*La Morenita*), the Indian language she spoke, the attire and colors she was wearing, the flowers, the music, and the celestial symbols surrounding her were all reminiscent of the goddess Tonantzin of the vanquished people. Among the household gods and goddesses worshipped from time immemorial throughout pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, Tonantzin was a principal mother goddess identified with the moon. Her ancient pyramid was in ruins on the Tepeyac hill.

But it was not the goddess Tonantzin who was appearing, but the Virgin Mother of the Christian God. Mary assimilated and replaced

their goddess, providing the suffering people no less than her maternal care and consolation.[16] Mary here is not just a "reincarnation of the ancient Mexican earth mother" or a renamed goddess of some sort, according to certain feminist theologians.[17] On the contrary, though her miraculous image on Blessed Juan Diego's cloak does contain motifs from the world of Aztec deities like sun, moon, stars and serpent, these are so arranged as to turn paganism completely upside down. Hauke writes:

> Mary stands before the sun and is thus more powerful than the feared sun god. She has one foot placed on the half-moon, a symbol of the feared serpent god, to whom thousands upon thousands of humans were sacrificed and whose machinations she has overcome. She is more powerful than all the goddesses and gods, than the stars. And yet Mary is no goddess, for she folds her hands together in prayer and bows her head before one who is greater than she. She wears no mask in order to conceal her godly nature as do the Aztec gods but quite openly displays her human status.[18]

Rising out of the native soil, the ennobling and the enrichment of the ancient Indian traditions transpired in the gentle appearance of Mary as the Mother of God.[19] This adaptation and inculturation on her part powerfully gave impetus and meaning to the Church's winning the Indian people, the singular case in history of the greatest mass conversion of people to Christianity. It was a veritable birth of a nation.

In Latin America, more pronounced than in the Mediterranean, the creative result of the cross-cultural encounter shows Mary combining

---

[16]Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary: Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 144-154.

[17]Mulack, *Maria Die Geheime Göttin im Christentum*, 7.

[18]Manfred Hauke, *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: What is it? Where does it lead?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 203-204.

[19]Virgilio Elizondo, "Our Lady of Guadalupe: A New World Image of the Trinity," *Marian Studies* 51 (2000), 40-51.

an Indian female expression of God, which the Spaniards tried to wipe out as diabolical, with the Spanish male expression of God, which the natives found incomprehensible, since in the Nahuatl cosmovision everything perfect has a male and female component. The Indian heritage and longings are transformed and directed toward the one true God. Mary personifies openness to the genius of the people and, at the same time, its ultimate destination in the self-revealing God. In this new "mestizo" experience of the divine, the very understanding of the selfhood of God becomes enriched, each particular expression being expanded by the other.[20]

Caysasay

The third case study on Mary's coming into creative contact with goddesses took place in the Third World and this time also at the beginning of the Christianization of the natives. The Spaniards had been continuously in the Philippine Islands for about forty years, yet were still a long way from the consolidation of their hold on the people, and much more so from the conversion of the *indios.*

In 1603 a wooden statue of a woman was fished out of Pansipit River, near Caysasay in Batangas, by a local fisherman, Juan Maningcad.[21]

---

[20]Virgil Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 57-66.

[21]For the stories of the discovery of Our Lady of Caysasay, see "Congregantes Marianos de los Colegios de la Compania de Jesus de Manila," in *La Virgen Maria Venerada en sus Emagenes Filipinas* (Manila: Imp. de Santos y Bernal, 1904), 35-40; Pedro Murillo Velarde (1696-1753), *Historia de la provincia de Philipinas de la Compania de Jesus, Libro 1, cap. 4* (Manila: Imprenta de la Compania de Jesus, 1749), and Casimiro Diaz, OSA (1693-1745), *Conquista de las Islas Filipinas, Libro 1, cap. 12* (Villadolid: Imprenta, Libreria de Luis N. Gavira, 1890). A more detailed treatment of the subject was given by Francisco Bencuchillo, OSA (1622-1667) in *Epitome de la historia de la aparicion de Ntra. Sra. De Caysasay y su novena en lengua Tagala* (Manila: Imprenta de la Compania de Jesus, por D. Nicolas de la Cruz Bagai, 1754); Bencuchillo was assigned to various towns in Batangas from 1650 to 1666, and his work was reedited several times in 1844, 1856, 1859 and 1885. See also Ma. Ignazia S. Bunuan, *Gentle Woman, Mary*

The place used to teem with Kingfisher birds locally called *Casay-casay.* That is why the woman figure would later come to be called Our Lady of Caysasay. The river used to flow into the Taal Lake, a large crater created by the explosion of what was once a huge volcano. The present Taal volcano is considered the smallest active volcano in the world, a volcano within a volcano. In 1570, Martin de Goite and Juan de Salcedo sailed the coast of Batangas and entered the river flowing into the lake. They found a Malay settlement at the mouth of the river. It was established a couple of years later as the town of Taal and as the parish of Saint Martin of Tours. The province itself of Bombon (later called Balayan, or Taal, or Batangas, as the capital was moved around) was organized only in 1581 and consisted of what is now Batangas, but including the islands of Mindoro and Marinduque and the southeastern portion of Laguna.

Another version of the beginnings of Our Lady of Caysasay speaks of the 1611 discovery of the Lady in a cave by the local inhabitants. Miracles would be attributed to the Lady, including her repeated disappearance, as well as the many healings that took place in connection with her image and the spring of water that was later found near the church built in her honor. When the statue was first seen by the Spanish Augustinian parish priest of Taal, the friar identified it as the Blessed Virgin Mary. Whether the good friar noticed or not—that the statue could not be of Christian provenance—he *de facto* appropriated it for Christianity and adopted it when he identified it as that of Our Blessed Mother Mary. Actually, upon closer inspection, the statue—hardly ten inches high—is indeed of a willowy woman, but an Asian, a Chinese, slit-eyed, and standing in a small boat on wavy waters and the whole on a base of a lotus flower. A traditional voluminous royal gown had been wrapped around the figurine, and a wig of long hair plus a crown placed on its head, thus transforming it into a Catholic Marian

---

to the Filipinos (Pasay: Paulines Publishing House, 1997), 120-123. Incidentally, this year the Shrine of Our Lady of Caysasay in Taal, Batangas is celebrating the 400th anniversary of Our Lady of Caysasay.

image. A more equable pedestal was added and some metal braces have been constructed to hold up all the additions. But underneath it all, the lady stands, according to the revealing description of Father Antonio Serra, a staff member of the Archbishop of Manila,

> Esta de pie sobre un casco de embarcacion (mas bien parece una corteza de un cuarto de melon), y el casco esta flotando sobre olas. Todo junto tiene 15 pulgadas y reposa sobre un pequeno pedestal de plata; carece de media luna y de serpente.[22]

For Buddhists, the hull or boat on which the figurine stands, the waves, and the lotus base (which Father Serra missed), all speak of their *Kuan-yin* ("the jewel in the lotus") or *Ma-cho* in the setting of sea travel where her protection is traditionally most sought. Father Serra unabashedly tried to downplay the Chinese motifs by parenthetically suggesting instead "a quarter rind of a melon" for the boat, and by noting paradoxically the absence of the regular items like the half moon and the serpent in the Catholic portrayal of the Immaculate Conception. It is an unmistakable statue of Kuan-yin, the goddess of compassion and mercy, the protectress at sea, in classical Chinese Buddhism.

Some forty years ago, as a seminarian doing volunteer summer work in the parish of San Nicolas, Batangas (the second site of the town of Taal buried by the volcano and whence it was transferred even farther up to its present location), this writer was enthralled by the story of an old parish priest in Balayan who narrated how even non-Catholic Chinese hold Our Lady of Caysasay close to their hearts. These would make pilgrimages to Taal and hold vigils at her shrine in the basilica. No explanation was given then. The reason would come only later when, on a trip up north in San Fernando, La Union, there was a strange claim on a billboard outside the towering Chinese temple overlooking the bay that the goddess Ma-cho inside is also Our Lady of Caysasay! The Chinese, the *Sangleyes,* already in the early eighteenth

---

[22]"Congregantes Marianos," 40.

century, were recorded as among the devotees of the Virgin, according to the Jesuit historian Pedro Murillo Velarde. Father Antonio Serra wrote that *"Los chinos creen que la imagen fue traida de china."*[23] Indeed, the Chinese in Luzon must have recognized early on that the so-called *Nuestra Senora de Caysasay* is definitely one of their own.

The Taoist Buddhists identify Our Lady of Caysasay in particular with their Ma-cho. And so every year, on the first day of the tenth lunar month of the Chinese calendar, the feast of Ma-cho (or Ma Zhou and Matzu), they bring the statue of their goddess from San Fernando, La Union, to Taal, Batangas, to reunite with Our Lady of Caysasay. According to Chinese divinations, Ma-cho wants her devotees to venerate her in Our Lady of Caysasay in Taal for her devotees to receive her blessings. Chinese in Batangas City have also built their temple in honor of Ma-cho, who is Our Lady of Caysasay. Very much like Kuan-yin, Ma-cho is a goddess of the sea, protecting and helping those who call upon her in any predicament especially at sea or while traveling. Ma-cho in fact is supposed to be a manifestation of Kuan-yin, after she swallowed a flower offered her by the compassionate *bodhisattva.*

Kuan-yin is the most popular *bodhisattva* for the general Buddhist population, as an immediate savoir/savioress.[24] In Mahayana Buddhism

---

[23]"Congregantes Marianos," 40. See also Josephine Darang, "Purely Personal: La Union Chinese venerate Taal's Casaysay Lady," *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (October 12, 2003), G3.

[24]Cf. Martin Palmer and Jay Ramsay with Man-ho Kwok, *Kuan Yin, Myths and Prophecies of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion* (London: Thorsons, 1995), 1-53; Diana Paul, "Kuan-Yin: Savior and Savioress in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism," in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present*, 161-175. See also Maria Reis-Habito, "Maria-Kannon: The Mother of God in Buddhist Guise," *Marian Studies* 47 (1996), 50-64. "Kuan-shih-yin" can be translated as "the one who listens to the cries of the world" and is also written as "Kanzeon" or "Kannon." In Sanskrit, it is Avalokitesvara. Bodhisattava Avalokitesvara is part of the entourage of the Buddha Sakamuni. Interestingly, in Tacloban City's Madonna of Japan Park, there is a statue of "Maria-Kannon" intended as a sign of friendship between Catholic Philippines and Buddhist Japan.

a *bodhisattva* is a compassionate enlightened being who vows to postpone his/her entrance into final Nirvana in order to help first all suffering, living beings. The cult of this compassionate savior *bodhisattva* Kuan-yin captures the hearts of the majority of the Chinese. Her statue in various poses used to accompany any traveler for protection and for warding off any calamity or misfortune. Having miraculous powers to change circumstances in this world, Kuan-yin is considered close to the people's concerns and needs. Chinese travelers must have lost their statue of Kuan-yin in the mud of the river leading into the Taal Lake, which was frequented before the coming of the Spaniards by both Chinese traders and pirates. Was it a volcanic eruption or a violent encounter with the natives or a pure accident that caused the dropping of the statue into the waters?

Kuan-yin, or Ma-cho, baptized into Our Blessed Virgin Mary when found by the Christians, was effectively appropriated into Catholic iconography and piety. For the Filipinos, it was a miraculous appearance and discovery, deepening their devotion to Our Blessed Mother. For the Chinese, Kuan-yin as Mary is but another transformation and assumption of their goddess of mercy and compassion. Sharing her with Filipino Catholics can provide everyone another instance of commonality. But the syncretism of the Chinese, who now magnanimously say that their Kuan-yin is Mary, cannot be matched by the Catholics, who would insist that the statue is (now) *Nuestra Senora de Caysasay,* or a statue of the Immaculate Conception even, *a la* Murillo, *La Purisima de Caysasay.* This much was asserted above by Father Antonio Serra, who tried to explain the discovery:

> Yo creo que algunos navegantes, de los que acompanaron a Juan de Salcedo en 1570 rio arriba del Pansipit hasta la laguna de Bombon, perderian dicha imagen en el rio o en la laguna. Era costumbre de los marinos espanoles llevar imagines.

Symbolic of the Filipino people, ever inclusive and oft defined by what outsiders variously bring into their land, Kuan-yin was adopted as an image of the Virgin Mary, and Caysasay served as the stage for the exchange, an inchoate interreligious dialogue. Our Lady of Caysasay

is one of the earliest "local" images of Mary that helped facilitate the conversion of the Filipinos who find in her a mother always needed.

Conclusion. Mary evidently fits neatly into the protective and sustaining role of goddesses whether in the Near East, in the Americas or in the Far East. Trappings and motifs, so to say, were borrowed from the pagan deities to clothe Our Blessed Mother for the better understanding of the people. The intersection of Christian and pagan cultures called for some amount of eclecticism to aid the spread of Christianity. And the witness of one religion to the Absolute or the Transcendental is never really lost, for actually it survives in its successors or kindred phenomena.[25] The resulting imagery that particularly surrounds Mary underlines her as the woman who leads us to God. She is not a goddess herself, but the Mother of God Incarnate, who reveals the feminine side, the anima, of the otherwise exclusively male God of Christianity. Corresponding to a primordial human need, according to Andrew Greeley's understanding of the Sacramental Imagination of Catholics, Mary's role in Christianity is as the symbol of the eternal feminine, who reveals the true God as an inclusive, androgynous deity so capable of motherly love.[26] The anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner, stressing the importance of icons in religious traditions that accept symbolic representations of the divine, see Marian devotion as the epitome of iconicity. Woman is the eternal feminine, the good mother, and Mary is the most powerful and ultimate symbol of the symbolic feminine.[27]

In Caysasay of Batangas, Mary has encircled the earth from

---

[25]George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 232-233.

[26]Andrew M. Greeley, *The Mary Myth on the Femininity of God* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 216-217. See also Greeley's book *The Catholic Myth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 252-254.

[27]Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 236.

Ephesus in the Near East through Mexico in the Americas to the Philippines in the Far East, as if in one big, maternal embrace of a woman with a thousand faces, ready to be modeled, if need be, on representations of local goddesses. In each place and time, she reached out to identify with the people in their own situation and religiosity. In Ephesus, she replaced the goddess Artemis; in Mexico, she appeared like Tonantzin; in the Philippines, she borrowed a statue of Kuan-yin. In each case, Mary displayed the creativity of a mother trying to get the attention of her children for a dialogue of life, in the manner they understand and in response to their own *Sitz im Leben.* In each case, she availed herself of the goddess cult but without wanting to be, or ending as, one. In Ephesus, Mexico and Caysasay, Mary was among goddesses and was more than they.