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## THEOLOGIES OF FEMININE MEDIATION : HINDU AND CHRISTIAN

When compared with the complexity of the goddess tradition in Hinduism, the Christian treatment of the sacred feminine, as this is epitomized in the portrayals of Sophia and the Virgin Mary, is noticeably restrained and unambiguous. Whereas the images of the latter almost always<sup>1</sup> reflect that aspect of the Ultimate which is playful, creative, nourishing, life-giving, compassionate, pure and wise, the *śakti* or female principle of power in Hinduism embodied, in addition to the qualities just mentioned, other more aggressive and destructive tendencies. For example, Uṣas, the beautiful and youthful Vedic goddess of the dawn was described as being rebellious, destructive, a warrior<sup>2</sup>; and Kālī, the goddess of war, has been pictured from time immemorial as being blood-thirsty, who slays the enemy and sucks his blood. The contrast between the Hindu and Christian traditions can be expressed in symbolic language. The former traditionally has associated the goddess with both the breast and the tooth; the latter has focussed on the breast to almost the total exclusion of the more violent or fierce aspects.

Not all these images were equally popular in every period of Indian history. Nor were all images equally accepted or stressed in the theology of every Hindu sect. It is important to note this because it is precisely this difference which makes a meaningful comparison with Christianity possible. For though there is in general, a divergence between the Hindu and Christian approaches to the sacred feminine, there are also certain areas in which significant parallels do exist.

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1. On the portal of the Notre Dame in Paris, Mary is pictured about to lunge a cross-hilted sword into Satan; C.M. Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex*, NYP Alfred A. Knops, 1976; plate 51, p. 324.
  2. *Rig-Veda* VII. 18. 16.

One such parallel which will be examined here pertains to the presentation of the feminine as Mediator. In both Hinduism and Christianity, the feminine as Intercessor has been conceived of on two different levels which usually remain quite distinct in the mind of the theologian but which tend to overlap and merge in the heart and psyche of the vast majority of the laity.

On one level, the sacred feminine is understood as a principle of divinity located within the Godhead itself and sharing equally in the power of the Almighty one. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this notion of a feminine hypostasis is evident in the Eastern Orthodox Church where the Virgin Mary has been regarded as an incarnation of Sophia as well as a visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The second instance is particularly interesting because it indicates that in certain Eastern circles, the Jewish maiden had not only come to represent 'something' more than herself but had become *the* iconic symbol and personification of God's cosmic wisdom and of the third person of the Trinity as well. At this point, Mary becomes the *Mediatrix par excellence*.

In theistic Hinduism developed by the followers of Śiva (the Śaivites) and the followers of Vishnu (the Vaishnavites), the uncreated feminine aspect of God is known as *śakti* (power) or *Śrī* (the holy). *Śrī* is the dynamic creative will of the Personal Absolute (i.e. God theistically conceived) and, as such she is traditionally referred to as Śiva's consort by Śaivites and as Vishnu's consort by Vaishnavites. It is in this capacity as consort that *Śrī* is looked upon as having the power to effectively mediate between God and the soul in the sense that she herself possesses the power to grant liberation or salvation (*mokṣa*).

On the second level, the sacred feminine participates in the process of redemption primarily as a creature who functions as an instrument of liberation solely through the grace of God on which she herself depends. Here the sacred is truly a woman, yet a woman who has been granted privileged access to the divine. Hence, she becomes the ideal mediator who has intimate knowledge both of the defendant and judge. Since this woman is normative in both the Southern (*Tēṅgalai*) branch of the Sri Vaiṣṇavism\* as well as in the Protestant and Catholic branches of Western Christianity, it would be fruitful to compare how

\* That branch of theistic Hinduism which is devoted to Vishnu and Śrī.

closely this theme was developed in two such diverse religious traditions with two very different cultural contexts. The first step will be to sketch the intercessory role of *Śrī* as it was formulated by Vaiṣṇava theologians of the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. This will involve a study of the writings of two Vaiṣṇava Hindu theologians, Pillai Lōkācārya (A. D. 1264–1369) and Maṇavāḷa Māmuniḷ (A. D. 1370–1443)<sup>3</sup>. The next step will be to describe the intercessory role of the Virgin Mary as it was portrayed in a roughly comparable time frame (12th–14th centuries). This will be done by examining the representations of Mary as Mediator in Medieval Christian art. A survey of the latter is appropriate for capturing the popular belief because they drew on both canonical and non-canonical or apocryphal texts for their inspiration. The same cannot be done for the Vaiṣṇava tradition because the number of paintings, sculptures and reliefs dealing with the intercessory image of Medieval *Śrī* which have survived are not adequate. Finally, having compared the major features of both religious traditions, I intend to argue that the reason why Christian theologians find the cult of Mediatrix less acceptable than do Hindu theologians is because they restrict themselves to a second level interpretation of the sacred feminine and have tied themselves to a particularly limited (and limiting) view of Christology.

### *Śrī* as Mediator (Puruṣākara)

In early Vaiṣṇava theology, it was accepted that the supreme personal God, Vishnu, was ever accompanied by his divine consort, *Śrī*. *Śrī*'s relationship with individual worshippers was assumed to mirror that of her Lord's. If we examine the Vaiṣṇava understanding of God's relationship with humankind, we find that it was twofold. On the one hand, the Supreme Lord, (Puruṣottama) is related to the world in justice through the working of the law of *Karma* over which He presides. According to this law, individuals reap the fruit of their actions. That is, they can expect to experience (either in this life or the next) the pleasurable or painful consequences of their good and bad

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3. The *Śrī* Vaiṣṇava understanding of the intercessory role of *Śrī* can be culled from the *Śrī Vacana Bhāṣaṇam* (SVB) of Pillai Lokācārya and the commentaries on the latter written by Maṇavāḷa Munikaḷ. In summarizing the position of these works, I will be drawing on an unpublished paper entitled “*Karma* and *Kṛpā*” – Human Bondage and divine Grace: Teṅgalai *Śrī* Vaiṣṇava Position prepared by Vasudhā Nārāyaṇan which provides reliable translations of the relevant sections of the above mentioned works.

actions. On the other hand, God is prepared to intervene on behalf of the individual who is suffering from the cumulative effects of their *Karma* (deeds). In other words, there exists for the individual the possibility of a relationship with God based primarily on law or primarily on Grace.

At an early stage in the development of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava School, the twofold character of the relationship indicated the tension between God's transcendence and his accessibility, but it posited no clear-cut division between the functions of the Supreme Lord and his heavenly consort, Śrī. Although Śrī is more commonly associated with Grace and Mercy, the Supreme Lord is associated with both the Law and Grace, not just the Law. Thus, we find that when the 12th century founder of Śrī Vaiṣṇava theology beseeches Śrī to grant him access to divine grace, he does so without appearing to regard her as some one different from the Lord Himself. That is, he does not seem to regard her as an intercessor in the strict sense but rather as the maternal reflection of the One Lord who is not only just, but is compassionate and merciful to his devotees.

Barely a century after Ramanuja's death, however, the picture appears to have changed significantly in that the Lord and Śrī have become linked with the image of Justice and Mercy, respectively, not unlike the contrast which developed between Jesus as Judge and Mary as the Advocate in Medieval Christian belief. By the 12th century, Śrī Vaiṣṇavism begins to reflect the polarity "between the Divine Justice (an expression of God's supremacy or essential Lordship) and His Mercy (an expression of His accessibility)."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, "this polarity is reflected in the ascription of justice to God Himself, and of mercy to his consort Śrī."<sup>5</sup> It is only at this time that the term *Puruṣākara* meaning 'intercessor' or 'mediatrix' becomes an accepted designation of Śrī.<sup>6</sup>

If we examine Piḷḷai Lōkācārya's understanding of Śrī's role as Mediator, we see that he envisages her task as twofold. It is her goal

4. John Carmen, *The Theology of Rāmānuja*, p. 246.

5. *Ibid.*

6. The 12th century disciple of Rāmānuja, *Tirukkuruḥai Pirāṇ Pillāṇ* appears to have been the first Śrī Vaiṣṇava to apply this term to Śrī. It subsequently came to be regarded as the accepted epithet. J. Carmen, *op. cit.* p. 309. (see footnote 15.)

to bring together the individual and the Lord by weaning the former from his or her erroneous path even as she mitigates the sternness of the latter.<sup>7</sup> As Lākācārya writes in his *Śrī Vachana Bhūṣaṇam* (SVB):

When united (with Viṣṇu), Śrī corrects Him;  
When separated, she corrects the human.

(Thus) she corrects both through advice. [*Skt. Upadeśa SVB Sūtra 10.*]

Without the advice of Śrī, both the Lord and the individual are dependent on *Karma*. The individual's dependence stems from attachment to his or her deeds, while the Lord's dependence pertains to this strict reckoning of justice in accordance with the Law of *Karma*. As the commentator Maṇavāḷa Māmūnikaḷ explains, on his own the Lord is inclined to throw the sinner into yet another womb and to require yet another birth.

In such a situation, Śrī is to mediate by convincing the Lord to accept the human even as she corrects the human and leads him to seek refuge in the Lord. As an undaunted defender of the human sinner, Śrī reminds Him that the human has no other refuge and further recalls that the relationship between Himself and the human is eternal. She then quotes the lines of a great saint (Āḷvār) Aṅṭal who said, "Even you Govinda (Lord), cannot negate our relationship." When the Lord protests that He will be going against the injunctions of the sacred laws (*śāstras*) if He does not punish the sinner fully, Śrī replies that both the law and grace can be upheld if only the Lord will show grace to those who show even the slightest inclination toward Him, while the full force of his justice can fall upon those who turn from Him.

Māmūnikaḷ then quotes the prayer of Parāsara Bhattar, a disciple of Rāmānuja:

O Mother, your Beloved Husband shows his anger towards those who have sinned. You calm him by asking, 'What is the basis for your anger? Who is there in this world without defect (*dōsa*)?' You, our Mother, accept the human as equal to your own intimate servants... (Commentary on *SVB Sutras* 10-13).

7. In providing the following summary of Pillai Lokācārya's understanding of Śrī's role, I will be drawing mainly on the unpublished paper of Vasudha Narayanan referred to above. (see footnote 2).

Even as Śrī is thus seen pleading on behalf of the human sinner, she is also making use of her finite status and bond with humans as the basis for re-directing the individuals toward their true refuge in the Lord. She does this by helping the soul to distinguish its true nature from its superficial identification with matter. That is, she assists the soul in overcoming the ignorance which leads the individual to trust in himself or herself rather than in the Lord.

Should the more traditional methods of persuading the Lord fail, Śrī is even prepared to: "use her beauty to entice and enslave (the Lord) (And so) she makes eyes at Him, and lets her dress slip down a little". (Commentary on *SVB Sutra* 13).

While this strikes one as a rather bold gesture, it will be seen that a similar disrobing motif is found in the Christian portrayal of Mary in her role as the persistent intercessor. Before commenting further on such parallels, however, one further point needs to be made concerning the conciliatory role of Śrī.

According to the Teṅgalai (Southern) School of Vaiṣṇavism, the Lord accepts the soul not in spite of its defects but because of them—an attitude reminiscent of our Easter 'O Happy fault!':

The greatness of the mediator . . . lies in not merely ignoring the soul's defects and lack of good qualities, but in making this very lack of merit as the very reason for accepting the soul. *SVB Sutra* 15.

This is the heart of the doctrine of *Vātsalya*, i.e. the tender maternal compassion that the Lord has for the soul. As Maṇavaḷa writes, *vātsalya* is the quality which is "seen in the maternal nature of Śrī and which makes the Divine Mother one step ahead of the Lord." This doctrine is necessary because the Teṅgalai stresses that salvation derives from God's initiative. His grace (in Tamil: *aru!*) is not a response to the greatness of the creature but is freely bestowed. The nature of this graciousness is most clearly seen when the Lord seeks the soul that is still immersed in sin (*pāpa*). For it is then that we see that no defect is able to obstruct the saving action of the Lord. To appreciate this aspect of Teṅgalai theology, one should think more along the lines of Protestantism where defect is not a *sin* but a *sinful condition*.

For the Śr Vaiṣṇavas, the saving gesture manifested through Śrī teaches the individual reliance on the Lord. The task of the human is not to obstruct. This is clearly stressed in the earthly manifestations of Śrī which are celebrated in the Indian epics of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. In the latter we find strong female figures such as Sita and Draupadi, who are regarded as manifestations of Śrī. The greatness of these individuals who are able to withstand great physical and mental trials is ultimately shown to lie in their capacity not to resist the will of God. They exemplify the non-resisting soul. In this way Śrī is not only Mediator between the human and the divine, but is herself the perfect exemplar of the human's response to that mediation. In the final analysis, the union of the Lord with the soul is not effected by *puṇya* but rather by God's maternal compassion (*vātsalya*) and grace. As the chief recipient and instrument of this graciousness, Śrī serves as the Exemplary-Mediator.

### Mary as Mediator

While the Hindu tradition commonly viewed the goddess Śrī as the consort of the Lord, the Christian tradition adopted bridal imagery primarily to express the intimate relationship which existed between Christ and His spouse, the Church. (Paul, Eph. 5:27). From the Christian perspective, this bond established the Church as the instrument of God's redemptive plan. Insofar as the Lord was joined to his Church, the latter could look upon itself as the repository of his saving merits. Obtaining the merits of Jesus' death was crucial because the Father, who had sent his Son out of love, still had not abandoned his role as Judge. Since a favourable verdict depended on God, who was both merciful and just, it came to be believed that the sinner who was immersed in the merits of the Son was the one who would be welcomed by the Judge who was first and foremost the Father of Jesus Christ. As the Spouse of Christ, the Church saw herself as the mediator of the meritorious grace of Christ. Here we see the traditional Christian approach to the tension between the justice and mercy of God.

Now a cursory examination of Scripture (Jn. 19:26; Rev. 21:2) and the Church Fathers, reveals the fact that by the 1st century Mary had become *the* symbol or figure of the Church. Like the Church, she would not only come to be viewed as woman, Virgin-Mother and spouse, but it would be her task both to 1) intercede with God on

behalf of sinners for tempering His justice and 2) redirect the sinner to seek His mercy. The distinctive character of this intercessory role was not theologically fixed at the outset but took shape gradually in response to variety of religious and political factors.

By following the development of this theme in Christian art it can be shown that initially there was a basic congruence in the artistic presentation of Jesus and Mary. Early reliefs and paintings bring out the parallels between the life of Jesus and the life of Mary with the accent being placed on the former. Just as Jesus was the beloved Son, Mary was the favoured daughter of Father (Annunciation); just as Jesus submitted to the will of the Father, Mary becomes the true handmaiden; just as Jesus forms the corner-stone of the Church, Mary becomes the symbol of the Church (Jn. 19:26). Art historian Gertrud Schiller points out that until the 5th century Mary was presented in relation to Jesus; she was given no independent existence in art.<sup>8</sup>

Such congruence between mother and son does not continue indefinitely, however. By the 12th century, when the intercessory role of Mary predominates, it is the figure of the Virgin-Mother, more than the Son, that is stressed in both Christian art and architecture.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, the explanation for this shift lies in the alienation of the people from the figure of Christ which, from the time of Constantine onward, had increasingly taken on the appearance of a ruler-king who was a stern judge and dispenser of punishment.<sup>10</sup> Confronted by this overwhelming and largely threatening figure of Jesus, popular faith turned to the Mother to intercede with her angry Son. This signals an important shift in thinking with regard to Mary. Prior to the 10th century, Mary had been celebrated as Mother of Jesus, but from the 10th century onwards she comes to be celebrated as our mother

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8. From the beginning of the 5th century onward, the Annunciation was celebrated on March 25, but was known then as the *Conceptio Domini*. Only in the 7th century, when the feast was introduced in Rome, did it acquire the character of a Marian feast. Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, Vol. I, (NY: Graphic Society Ltd. 1966; English Translation, 1971) p. 34.

9. Fifty per cent of all Churches built during the 12th century in Europe were dedicated to the Virgin, Mother of God, including *Nôtre Dame* in Paris.

10. This image drawn from Revelation Continued until 1200 A.D. when the tamer image described in Matt: "They will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud", comes to be preferred. Cf. Heather Child and Dorothy Colles, *Christian Symbols*, Charles Scribners, 1971.



too. It is as Mother that Mary is related to the Father, to the Son and to humanity. Like Śrī, her Hindu counterpart, the Viragin was portrayed as one who would reconcile God and humanity.

When approaching her Son, Mary was generally presented as the Queen-Mother. Whereas a Queen would be expected to be subservient to her husband, a Queen-Mother was held to be worthy of her Son's respect.<sup>11</sup> While the implications of this popular belief are evidently disquieting for the theologian, the common folk found this image quite comforting, for it reassured them that they could turn to Mary with complete confidence. Given Mary's nearness to God, a prayer to her was as good as a prayer to God Himself. And given her bias toward the sinner, it was perhaps even more effective.

Belief in the adage: "Ad Jesum per Mariam" (To Jesus through Mary) is exemplified in the well-known painting of our Lady of Perpetual Help. The figure of a woman is dominant in this portrayal. Jesus is a child. In addition, his hand is placed palm down in hers. This signifies that he has turned over his merits and graces to her. In a very real sense, the sinner's salvation has been placed in her hands. Popular acceptance of this medieval belief is attested to in the hundreds of madonnas which were produced and reproduced during the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries.

As mother, Mary nurses the child who is thereby nourished on her milk of mercy. This conception is preserved in a 14th century painting which shows the child Jesus on the lap of his mother. With his left hand he grasps his mother's breast to his mouth. With his right hand, meanwhile, he is writing a response to a petitioner who is shown on the lower left hand of the tryptich. Similarly, when Mary approaches the Father she does not hesitate to bare her breast which gave suck to His beloved Son as she pleads on behalf of the sinner<sup>12</sup>.

So biased is the Virgin-Mother on the side of the sinner that medieval miracle plays describe the devil's indignation over the Virgin's

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11. Contrast I Kings 1:31 and 2:19. When David enters the room, Bathsheba would rise in deference, but when Solomon, Bathsheba's son, entered the room he would bow at his mother's feet.

12. In some paintings, Mary is joined by the adult Jesus who exposes His wounded side, recalling the pain he suffered to free sinners. But at the same time he gestures toward the breast of his mother. Marina Warner *Alone of All Her Sex*.

practices which he sees as disturbing the course of justice. The Virgin's eagerness to 'cheat' the devil of his due is shown in paintings depicting the Last Judgement where Mary remains close to the soul tipping the scales held by St. Michael.<sup>13</sup> This concern for the sinner is powerfully captured in the impressive painting of our Lady of Mercy. In this painting, sinners who desire to hide from the wrath of Christ take shelter under the immense mantle of Our Lady. This symbol of refuge withstood the proscription of the Council of Trent which banned further such iconography, because of suggestion that the Virgin possessed autonomous sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> From adulterers, liars, and thieves etc., Mary asks two things. First, that they recite the 'Ave Maria' and secondly, that they respect the miracle of the incarnation which was wrought in her. These minimum gestures of docility are sufficient to permit the Virgin to defend the individual. Thus, if one shows even the slightest inclination to return to God, she intercedes with Jesus for him as in the reliefs which recall how Our Lady redeemed Theophilis, who had sold his soul to Satan. Other apocryphal stories of Our Lady which were to make their way into Medieval iconography were those dealing with the death of sinner. Should a person die before an initial conversion it was not uncommon than the latter would be resuscitated by the Virgin in order to provide that individual with another opportunity to seek God's mercy.

For the Medieval Church, theologian and common folk alike, Mary was the ideal intercessor not only because she had access to Jesus, to the Father and to themselves, but because she exemplified in her own life the ideal relationship between the human and the divine. Free from the spiritual pride that stems from self-conscious religious striving, she remains creatively empty (i.e. virgin) and receptive to the divine initiative (i.e. mother). Recalling how this capacity to 'let it (the divine will) be' is also stressed as *the* outstanding quality of the earthly manifestation of Śrī, we find yet another significant point on which medieval Vaishnavas and Catholics agree.

There remain, however, some basic differences between the Christian and the Hindu account of the sacred feminine. Here we will refer to the two major differences. First, the Hindu does not limit the number of earthly manifestations of Śrī. Secondly, although the God

13. 14th century French manuscript. (M. Warner, *op. cit.* plate 21).

14. M. Warner, *op. cit.* p. 328.

Viṣṇu (Kṛṣṇa) is described as having descended (incarnated) and been born of a woman, Devaki, the latter is not given any special importance in the Hindu tradition. Other figures such as Sita, the wife of Rama and Draupadi, the wife of Paṇḍavas, receive far more attention than does Kṛṣṇa's biological mother. These differences help to explain why Mary's role as mother of the saviour takes on a significance for her mediation that finds no true parallel in the Vaiṣṇava tradition. In Christianity, Mary's role as Mediator is not separated from her role as mother of Jesus and thus it is seen as historically unique and unrepeatable. Such linkage does not occur in Śrī Vaiṣṇava theology. Rather, for the latter, it is significant that Śrī's creative act brings forth the knowledge of the Lord by removing the veils of illusion (*māyā*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) which obstruct that knowledge.

Taking into consideration these important points of contrast as well as the striking number of parallels described previously, we are now in a position to ask why the cult of the mediatrix is more problematic in the Catholic tradition than it is in the Vaiṣṇava branch of Hinduism. This question is particularly relevant today:

(a) because of the diminished emphasis on Mary following Vatican II's decision to stress a more Christ-centred spirituality and

(b) because of women's groups challenging the Church to consider whether feminine imagery is any less suitable than masculine imagery for the purpose of elucidating the Christological mystery. As I see it, both these issues are very closely related. I would even venture to suggest that readiness to accept the Council's decision to subdue the cult of the Virgin coincides with a reticence regarding the use of feminine Christological imagery, while enthusiasm for incorporating the latter is more likely to be correlated with reservations about the Council's approach to Mary. That is, I would argue that the theological assumptions which justify the blanket subordination of Mariology to Christology are similar to those which play a decisive role in determining the adequacy or inadequacy of feminine images for representing the Ultimate. Let me explain.

When the Council Fathers decided to work statements on Mary into the document on the Church, they were attempting to deal with a theological anomaly inherited from the Medieval period which we have discussed in the first part of this paper. In particular, they were

confronting a popular spirituality that was based on the Medieval adage "ad Jesum per Mariam", an adage which expressed a belief that the Mother was more accessible and more merciful than her Son.<sup>15</sup>

From both a biblical and theological perspective, this piety was clearly unsound. If the Mother was loving, loyal and compassionate towards the sinner it was because she reflected the forgiving and faithful love of her Son, Jesus. Certainly this understanding needed to replace the distorted notion which tended to exalt the Mother at the expense of the Son. In seeking to correct this faulty notion, I would ask whether the Council did not also assume that a Marian-centred spirituality *per se* was not a Christ-centred spirituality and therefore must always be checked by and made *subordinate to the latter*. This assumption is evident in the Council's move to explicitly distinguish between the role of Mary and the role of Christ with regard to salvation. In *Lumen Gentium* we see how the bishops carefully qualify the tradition's use of the terms "mediatrix". Chapter III begins by stating "We have but one Mediator" and then goes on to underscore this point :

The maternal duty of Mary towards men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. For all the saving influences of the Blessed Virgin on men originate, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. They flow forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rest on his mediation, depend entirely on it, and drawn all their power from it. In no way do they impede the immediate union of the faithful with Christ. Rather, they foster this union. (section 60)

In section 62 the bishops reiterate the same points with particular reference to specific intercessory titles such as 'Advocate', 'Auxiliatrix', 'Adjutrix' and 'Mediatrix'. According to the document, these titles "are to be so understood that they neither *take away from nor add anything to* the dignity and efficacy of Christ, the one Mediator." Section 62 then concludes with the declaration that the Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary."

The thrust of these unequivocal remarks indicates that the Council was deliberately seeking to correct excesses in Medieval Mariology.

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15. The impact of this belief was evident in the religious practices of the people. In the 1950s there was no denying the fact that Marian devotions attracted larger followings than did the Eucharistic liturgies.

It is also clear that, in formulating their position, the bishops were being particularly sensitive to the ecumenical implications of their work. When the bishops boldly assert that "the Church does not hesitate to profess the subordinate role of Mary" they no doubt intended it to be read as a statement about the theological relationship of Jesus and his Mother, Mary. But it is not difficult to see why women's groups would feel uneasy about this kind of wording. The feminist remains aware that the word becomes flesh in various ways and so she not only considers what the authors intended but also what is the likely interpretation of a statement, given the religio-social context in which it will be heard. Judged from this perspective, the feminist sees the very real possibility that theological subordination will be mistranslated into a further justification for the sociological subordination of woman to man and the psychological subordination of feminine images to masculine ones. In a basically patriarchal society the very real possibility of such leaps (and they are leaps) occurring cannot be ignored.<sup>16</sup>

Focusing on this concern from a woman's perspective, I would suggest that it is not sufficient to set the theological record straight without, at the same time, setting the historical record straight. By this I mean it seems important to call attention to the remarkable historical fact that there was a significant period of time during which the figure of a woman not only captured the devotion of the entire Church, but was able to communicate the reality of God's compassion and love in a way that the Romanesque masculine figure of Jesus could not. In other words, I am suggesting that it is important for the Church to acknowledge that there was a time when it was the *Virgin* who presented the human face of Christ the Judge. This is no minor accomplishment and it certainly deserves further reflection and commentary.

To adequately appreciate the implications of this artistically achieved coup, however, it will be necessary to move beyond the structures which strive to maintain a strict separation of second level interpretations of the feminine (Mary as subject) from first level interpretations (Mary as Sophia incarnate).<sup>17</sup> For the Catholic tradition to be able to

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16. One need only consider the 1976 Vatican statement which opposed the ordination of women on the ground that there must be a natural resemblance between the minister and Christ, namely, maleness.

17. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 316.

acknowledge the Marian image as an adequate expression of God him (her) self, it will be necessary to see that, at a point, the image of Mary the Jewish Maiden, can be transformed in the mind and heart of the devotee to a point where it could be said "She lives, no longer here, but God lives in her." As was noted at the outset of this paper, these two levels of interpretation can be theoretically distinguished, but in the mind of the simple believer it is more likely that the distinction blurs to the point where the Virgin actually functions as God. Commenting on this phenomenon, Marina Warner explains :

*In theology*, the intercession of the Virgin with her almighty Son brings about this salvation. She never works on her own, but only through Christ; in practice . . . this qualification is forgotten. In the folktales and miracle stories that chronicle the Virgin's unfailing assistance to her devotees she undeniably usurps the unique privilege of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Alternately, I would suggest that Mary's role as intercessor need not be viewed as usurping the role of Christ, but could be seen as providing a feminine imaging of Christ's intercessory role. In other words, it is not a matter of choosing between competing mediators but of working with alternate images of the One Mediator whom the mystic Julian of Norwich prayerfully addressed as "Our Heavenly Mother Jesus."<sup>19</sup>

In Mariology, devotion and imagination seem to have redemptively transcended the artificial boundaries circumscribed by theology. What began as devotion to the Mother of God (level two) gradually and periodically becomes transformed into a relationship with God as Mother (level one). To do justice to this bi-level experience, it will be helpful to reflect on the capacity of feminine imagery to mediate our understanding of God, and this will require paying greater attention to the first level interpretation of the sacred feminine. In Vaiṣṇava tradition the Teṅgalai's (Southern School) emphasis on Śrī as creature is balanced by the Vadagalai's (Northern School) stress on her cosmic nature. So, too, Christianity in general and the Catholic tradition in particular, would do well to explore not only Marian

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18. *Op. cit.*, p. 323.

19. Quoted in *Women and Religion*, ed. by E. Claire, O.H. Richardson. (NY: Harper & Row, 1977). p. 111.

imagery in more cosmic terms which are in keeping with our own Judeo-Christian heritage, but to consider ways of integrating non-canonical imagery and even imagery drawn from other cultures. All this becomes less problematic when one realizes that we are not simply multiplying Mediators but varying the images utilized to unfold and explicate the Christological mystery.