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OUR LADY OF UNBELIEVERS: MARY AND MODERN ATHEISM

Peter A. Huff, Ph.D.*

1. Introduction

The Second Vatican Council identified atheism as “one of the most serious problems of our time.”¹ Half a century later, it remains one of the most dynamic forces in our experience. Pope John Paul II, well acquainted with unbelief in all its forms, referred to atheism as “the striking phenomenon” of our historical period.² His successor, Benedict XVI, also a lifelong student of atheism, named “ideological rejection of God” and the “atheism of indifference” the two “chief obstacles” to the establishment of authentic humanism in contemporary culture.³ Today, few would argue with the claim made by Lutheran theologian Gerhard Ebeling that we are living in the “age of atheism.”⁴

Ours is also the age of the New Evangelization. Vatican II, the first ecumenical council to reckon seriously with the modern experience of the “eclipse of God,” encouraged Catholics to enter into “sincere and prudent” dialogue with atheists and to counter modern unbelief with credible presentations of

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¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 19. Quotations from the documents of the Second Vatican Council are taken from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello, 2004).

² Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 56. Papal documents cited can be found on the Vatican website: www.vatican.va/holy_father/index.htm.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 78.

⁴ Quoted in Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 16. See Gerhard Ebeling, “The Message of God to the Age of Atheism,” *Oberlin College Bulletin* (January 1964): 3-14.

Christian truth.⁵ The council's decree on missionary activity, along with Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), reminds us that the Second Vatican Council did not inaugurate a post-missionary chapter in Catholic history. The Church, the council fathers declared, "is by its very nature missionary."⁶ John Paul applied the council's missionary consciousness to the unprecedented situation of a Western culture in the process of de-Christianization. His encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) inscribed "new evangelization" permanently into the rhetoric of papal discourse.⁷ Twenty years later, Pope Benedict gave the new evangelistic impulse concrete structure by creating the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization.⁸

I think we can also describe our moment in history as an age of Mary. First-millennium Christianity gave us the great doctrines of the Virgin Birth and *Theotokos*, not to mention the foundational portraits of Our Lady in Scripture. It is in the Church's second thousand years, however, that we find the full flowering of Marian mysticism, the appearance of classics in Mariological literature, the official declaration of Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assumption, the enthronement of Mary in Western art and music, the "Marian Council" Vatican II,⁹ and an astonishing array of Marian apparitions. Perhaps it is no accident that the pope who encouraged engagement with atheism and initiated the New Evangelization is also known as "Mary's Pope."¹⁰ Trends in theology and popular religion suggest that the modern Marian renaissance is far from over. In the words of John Paul himself, third-millennium Christians—and many non-Christians, too—see the Blessed Virgin "maternally

⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

⁶ *Ad Gentes*, 2.

⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 3. See Avery Dulles, "John Paul II and the New Evangelization: What Does It Mean?" in *John Paul II and the New Evangelization*, ed. Ralph Martin and Peter Williamson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 25-39.

⁸ See Pope Benedict XVI, *Ubicumque et Semper*.

⁹ See William G. Most, *Vatican II: Marian Council* (Athlone, Ireland: St. Paul Publications, 1972).

¹⁰ See Antione Nachev, *Mary's Pope: John Paul II, Mary, and the Church since Vatican II* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2000).

present and sharing in the many complicated problems which today beset the lives of individuals, families and nations."¹¹ Even in the age of incredulity, as Jaroslav Pelikan observed, Mary continues to be "the woman for all seasons—and all reasons."¹²

This essay concentrates on the intersection of these three "signs of the times." It seeks to explore the ways in which fresh theological reflection on the person and work of Mary may enhance and energize the New Evangelization in the "age of atheism." In what follows, I will attempt to accomplish three things. First, I will survey the phenomenon of atheism and review the scholarly consensus on its structures and origins. Second, I will mine the portrait of Mary in the New Testament gospels to uncover points of convergence with core themes in the contemporary atheist experience. Third, I will show how Mary embodies what Vatican II called "the witness of a living and mature faith,"¹³ arguably the only apologetic that can hope for success in confrontation with twenty-first-century atheism. Far from an impediment to conversion in the secular city, Mary represents for the atheist mind a unique invitation to reconsider the contested categories of sacred and supernatural and become reacquainted with the "greatness of the Lord" (Luke 1:46).¹⁴

2. Atheism in the World Today

Today, atheism is a highly visible reality on the global stage. In our country alone, organizations such as American Atheists and the Freedom from Religion Foundation give atheism a noticeable institutional presence and a level of acceptance it has never enjoyed before. Publishing houses such as Prometheus Books and blogs such as the "Friendly Atheist" bring a lively skeptical perspective to all aspects of intellectual culture. Bumper stickers work as well for a-theology as they do

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 52.

¹² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 215-223.

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, scriptural quotations are taken from the *New American Bible*.

for theology, and billboards proclaim the “good news” of God’s non-existence in the heart of the American marketplace.¹⁵

Nothing has given atheism more prominence recently than the so-called “new atheism.” In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and a number of other authors injected new militancy and entrepreneurial spirit into atheist polemics and outreach. Their publications—principally *The End of Faith* (2004), *The God Delusion* (2006), *Breaking the Spell* (2006), and *God Is Not Great* (2007)—form an unofficial canon for contemporary critics of religion. In the wake of Hitchens’ recent death, a “kinder, gentler” atheism has already begun to appear. Alain De Botton’s “Atheism 2.0” is an atheism willing to admit that belief in God has yielded at least some positive results in artistic genius, social justice, and the life of the mind.¹⁶ Nevertheless, for many atheists, the “new atheism” remains the form of unbelief best geared to the post-9/11 age.

The demographics of atheism tell us a great deal about the current scene. According to a recent Pew Research Center study, about 20% of all Americans can be classified as “nones” or individuals who are not affiliated with any religious group. Self-described atheists and agnostics constitute nearly 6% of the national population. When we narrow the focus to the traditional college student, the “none” population jumps to 32%. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the atheist percentage in that young adult cohort is steadily, and perhaps rapidly, rising.¹⁷

Much of this evidence is strikingly available when we turn our attention to the academy. The university has long been perceived as a safe haven and even a breeding ground for non-belief. Today it is the site for a new strain of scholarship captivated by atheism and, in some cases, convinced of the

¹⁵ See David Williamson and George A. Yancey, *There Is No God: Atheists in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013).

¹⁶ See Alain De Botton’s 2011 TED lecture: “Atheism 2.0,” www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0.htm. See also his *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation” (2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

normativity of atheism's worldview. With Trinity College's Institute for the Study of Secularism, Pitzer College's interdisciplinary program in Secular Studies, the peer-reviewed journal *Secularism and Nonreligion*, a wave of new courses on atheism, anti-religion "Reason Rallies" on campuses across the country, and secular student organizations popping up seemingly everywhere, we are witnessing the commencement of a new phase in atheism's relationship with higher education.

Internationally, atheist numbers vary dramatically from country to country—from near zero in Iran and Indonesia, to 85% in Sweden and 80% in Denmark. Estimates for the total world atheist population range from 500 to 700 million. Atheism, if we can imagine it as a secular faith, ties with Buddhism for fourth place after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.¹⁸ If we concentrate on the larger category of non-affiliation, unbelief (broadly conceived) emerges as the world's third largest "religion."¹⁹

Given the size of the atheist community, we should not be surprised to find unbelief manifested in diverse types. A virtue of Vatican II's coverage of atheism fifty years ago was its acknowledgement that the word "atheism" is used "to signify things that differ considerably from one another."²⁰ Influenced by the work of Henri de Lubac, Jacques Maritain, and other observers of modern atheism,²¹ the council fathers spoke of a variety of atheisms: systematic and inchoate, rational and intuitive, coerced and chosen, dogmatic and relativist. Former atheist Maritain distinguished between "atheism by conviction of the mind" and "atheism by option of the heart."²² Today we

¹⁸ Phil Zucherman, "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47-65.

¹⁹ Kimberly Winston, "Unbelief Is Now the World's Third-Largest 'Religion,'" *Religion News Service*, December 18, 2012, <http://www.religionnews.com>.

²⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

²¹ See Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Anne Englund Nash, Edith M. Riley, and Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995) and Jacques Maritain, "The Meaning of Contemporary Atheism," in his *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 103-117.

²² Jacques Maritain, *On the Church of Christ: The Person of the Church and Her Personnel*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 261, n.22.

would add to Vatican II's typology at least one expression of this atheism of the heart: what William James might call a "twice-born" atheism of disenchantment. This kind of unbelief, as Thomas Merton said, has nothing in common with the "vaudeville platitudes" of nineteenth-century freethinker Robert Ingersoll—or, we might add, of Harris or Hitchens.²³ On the experiential level, God's non-existence is quite different from his absence. C. S. Lewis once described his early post-atheist self as "the most . . . reluctant convert in all England."²⁴ We can imagine any number of reluctant atheists walking the streets of the post-Christian West, transfixed by what Matthew Arnold called the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the sea of faith in retreat.²⁵

3. Causes of Atheism: Four Basic Problems

Reflection on the types of atheism raises the question of atheism's causes—in the words of Vatican II, "the secret motives" which lead to the denial of God.²⁶ Many atheists today maintain that non-belief is the natural state of the human mind. Antony Flew, during his long reign as chief of the unbelievers, spoke of the "presumption of atheism."²⁷ More recently, *Philosophers' Magazine* editor Julian Baggini has championed atheism as a "positive world view."²⁸

The word "atheism" itself, however, denotes either negation or privation. As Jesuit theologian Michael Buckley put it, "atheism is essentially parasitic."²⁹ More and more individuals are

²³ Thomas Merton, "The Unbelief of Believers," in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 200.

²⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1956), 228-229.

²⁵ Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, ed. Carl E. Bain, Jerome Beaty, and J. Paul Hunter, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 639.

²⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 21.

²⁷ Antony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). See Flew's discussion of his acceptance of theism: *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007).

²⁸ Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

²⁹ Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 15.

raised in a religion-free environment, and many resonate with Weber's notion of the "religiously unmusical." Still, most atheists continue to see their atheism as something they have come to accept after a process of sifting through or struggling with alternatives. The genre of the first-person atheist conversion narrative mimics the vast literature by religious converts. Maritain called modern atheism "an act of faith in reverse gear."³⁰

For our purposes, we can describe atheism as a response to one or more of four basic problems. The problem of God, of course, tops the list. As John Courtney Murray noted, "no man may say that the problem of God is not his problem."³¹ For atheists, God often represents a "failed hypothesis" that cannot be reconciled with science or a cultural fiction that can be dismissed after comparative study of the world's religions.³² The "masters of suspicion"—Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—equated belief in God with self-deception. Many individuals, however, embrace atheism long before they grapple with metaphysics, epistemology, evolution, or psychology. Theism is first made problematic, they say, by morally objectionable portraits of God and intellectually incoherent doctrines of God propagated by religious organizations.³³ Some non-believers, we should also remember, claim to be incapable of belief.

In many cases, the problem is not God but God's people. Some forms of atheism are more anti-religion than anti-theism. Atheist writers have long been expert in exposing pathological tendencies within organized religion: abuse of power, hypocrisy, anti-intellectualism, and sadly many more. Ironically, some criticisms mirror the Bible's appraisals of false teachers and Pharisees. A strong point of Vatican II's analysis of atheism

³⁰ Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, 105.

³¹ John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 4.

³² See Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

³³ The essays in S.T. Joshi's anthology *Atheism: A Reader* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), e.g., reveal a wide range of motivations for denial of God. See also Joshi's *The Unbelievers: The Evolution of Modern Atheism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011).

was its confession that religion too easily contributes to the rise of its opposite:

For atheism, taken as a whole, is not present in the mind of man from the start (*Atheismus, integre consideratus, non est quid originarium*). It springs from various causes, among which must be included a critical reaction against religions, and, in some places, against the Christian religion in particular. Believers can thus have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion.³⁴

Since the council, numerous theologians, including Hans Kung, Karl Rahner, and Joseph Ratzinger, have offered guarded appreciation for atheism's near-prophetic ability to reinforce Christianity's built-in principle of self-criticism.³⁵

Another major problem arises from common experience. As Bible translator J. B. Phillips observed, "The problem of human suffering is . . . the biggest serious obstacle to faith in a God of love today."³⁶ Here we realize that atheism is not simply a set of syllogisms but a way of life. The literature of unbelief reveals many cases in which cognitive assessments of the alleged irrationality or incomprehensibility of classical doctrines of God actually originate in experiences of injustice, tragedy, and cruelty—again, too often perpetrated or palliated by religious institutions and their authority figures. Encounters with illness, old age, and death led Siddhartha Gautama to abandon the religions of his day. Those same realities—plus racism, sexism, economic oppression, and many others—eat away at biblical faith in our day. Natural evil and animal pain also call into question divine providence and benevolence.

³⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

³⁵ See Hans Kung, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980); Karl Rahner, "Atheism and Implicit Christianity," in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Graham Harrison, vol. 9 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 145-164; and Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

³⁶ J. B. Phillips, *The Price of Success: An Autobiography* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1984), 37.

Atheism spawned by suffering (one's own or others') is not so much disbelief in God as refusal to acknowledge a God unworthy of belief.

A closely related problem is human freedom. Humanist atheists, such as Nietzsche and Sartre, before the rise of the narrowly scientific "new atheism," rejected Christianity as a "slave morality" hostile to life and the Christian God as the ultimate threat to meaningful human existence. Historian of religion Mircea Eliade summarized their viewpoint in his classic *The Sacred and the Profane*:

Modern non-religious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations. Man makes himself, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.³⁷

Here, too, we discover an atheism not of abstract proofs and propositions but of Promethean protest.

4. Mary's Personal Witness

From one perspective, Catholic doctrine about and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary seem far removed from this complex and vibrant world of atheism—a world that is, as Gavin Hyman maintains, "inextricably linked" to modernity.³⁸ Mariology is just the sort of thing that adds fuel to atheist convictions regarding Christianity's faults and falsehood. In his classic *History of Western Philosophy*, for example, Bertrand Russell saw Mariology as essentially derivative, drawing a straight line from pagan earth goddesses to *Theotokos*. He paid Erasmus a back-handed compliment for his criticism of Mariolatry in medieval

³⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 203.

³⁸ Gavin Hyman, "Atheism in Modern History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, 28.

piety.³⁹ Similarly, in Christopher Hitchens' anthology *The Portable Atheist*, several authors mention Mary but only for the purpose of unmasking supposed contradictions in the Bible and the Qur'an, establishing the cultural relativity of Christian beliefs, or consigning Jesus to the realm of legend and myth.⁴⁰ *Ad Jesum per Mariam* can be used for anti-Christian as well as Christian purposes.

From another perspective, Mary appears in her own curious way to be inextricably linked to atheists and their experience. In fact, points of convergence between Mary and the world of atheism begin to emerge when we examine her person and work in light of the four basic problems driving contemporary unbelief. Such an approach, I believe, is in line with Pope John Paul's admonition to examine Mary "from the point of view of man's spiritual history, understood in the widest possible sense."⁴¹ Any contact is especially important given modern theology's relative failure to engage the atheist mind and Christianity's apparent inability to reverse the trend toward secularism.

Michael Buckley's two groundbreaking studies on the history of unbelief, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987) and *Denying and Disclosing God* (2004), trace the roots of modern atheism back to an over-emphasis on philosophical inference and a neglect of religious experience in late medieval and early modern Christian theology. "The most compelling witness to a personal God," he concludes, "must itself be personal."⁴² Framed in terms of the four main concerns behind modern atheism, the concrete faith experience of Mary offers a captivating personal witness that the New Evangelization desperately needs. Her connections with the problems of God, religion, suffering, and freedom reveal not only the universality

³⁹ See Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 5, 369, 514.

⁴⁰ See essays by Chapman Cohen, Carl Sagan, Ibn Warraq, Sam Harris, and A. C. Grayling in *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*, ed. Christopher Hitchens (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 3.

⁴² Michael Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xvi.

of these challenges but the impressive scope of her experience and empathy. Mary's acquaintance with the world of unbelief makes her an intriguing bridge-figure between faith and incredulity that "nones" and non-believers of our day may be able to understand and appreciate.

5. Mary and the Problems of God and Religion

Again, at first blush, Marian doctrine shows little promise of clearing even the first hurdle: showing some relationship to the problem of God. Mary's story as recorded in the New Testament gospels presupposes the existence of a God who rules history, governs nature, communicates with human beings, and accomplishes universal salvation through the individuals and institutions of one of the world's smallest nations—just the sort of claims that atheists find so unacceptable. In addition, the Bible itself is innocent of the idea of atheism in the modern sense. Scripture knows the fool who says, "There is no God" (Psalms 14:1, 53:1), and "godless" men and "godless" myths (see Isa. 9:17, 1 Tim. 4:7, RSV), but denial of the existence of God or gods is alien to the biblical worldview.

On closer inspection, we find that the setting for Mary's story is a climate of doubt and uncertainty not too different from the world of atheism and agnosticism today. Mary's Son was "amazed" at his neighbors' lack of faith (Mark 6:6) and apparently hampered in his mission by their unbelief (Matt. 13:58). Even his brothers "did not believe in him" (John 7:5). A recurring motif in his preaching was the problem of "little faith" (see Matt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:17, 20), and doubt lingered in the apostolic community after the Resurrection (see Matt. 28:17; Mark 16:11-14; Luke 24:11, 41; John 20:24-29).

In this context, Mary herself knew intellectual insecurity for years. She was "greatly troubled" at the words of Gabriel and unsettled enough to warrant the angelic "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:29, 30) and pose her own "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34). We can only wonder how her ideas about God evolved during what Balthasar called her "nine-month Advent."⁴³ She

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, trans. Robert Nowell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 23.

was “amazed” at Simeon’s words in the temple (Luke 2:33) and “astonished” twelve years later at the sight of Jesus in the same place (Luke 4:48). Too often we read right over the evangelist’s poignant conclusion to the story of Mary and Joseph: “They did not understand” (Luke 2:50). Many agnostics would use exactly the same language. As Balthasar comments, Mary “is continually involved in mysteries the sense and meaning of which tower over her.”⁴⁴

Ambivalent relationships with religious institutions only aggravated Mary’s “anxiety” (Luke 2:48). The Jerusalem temple, according to tradition the childhood residence of the Virgin, was also the place where her kinsman Zechariah the priest was “troubled” by a bizarre experience and shockingly disabled because he “did not believe” (Luke 1:12, 20). That same institution, where Mary stood “wondering” at Simeon’s strange remarks (Luke 2:33, *Jerusalem Bible*), was both (1) the crowning renovation project of King Herod, the mass-murderer of the Bethlehem innocents and the father of the man who would murder her relative John and conspire in the murder of her Son, and (2) the place where her Son’s eccentric behavior first manifested itself in public (Luke 2:41-50). Even in Nazareth, scene of the “hidden life” of the Holy Family, the local synagogue was the site of an ugly religious riot that escalated into the first attempt on her adult Son’s life (Luke 4:29). Less than three years later, the chief leaders of the Jewish priesthood, descendants of Aaron the brother of her namesake Miriam and colleagues of the once-mute Zechariah, not only plotted her Son’s arrest (Matt. 26:3-4) and incited the crowd demanding blood (Matt. 27:12, 20), but publicly derided her Son during his death agony (Matt. 27:41)—just hours before the veil of their institution’s most sacred sanctuary was mysteriously “rent in two” (Matt. 27:51, Douay-Rheims).

6. Mary and the Problems of Suffering and Freedom

All of which reminds us that Mary, like her Son, was “acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3, RSVCE). No one, believer or non-believer, can deny she deserves the title “Mother of Sorrows.”

⁴⁴ Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 36.

Tradition quantifies her suffering sevenfold: (1) Simeon's prophecy of the sword, (2) the flight into Egypt, (3) the loss of Jesus in the temple, (4) meeting Jesus on the way to Calvary, (5) standing beneath the Cross, (6) receiving the body of Jesus after crucifixion, and (7) placing the body of Jesus in the tomb.⁴⁵ Scripture goes even further. We do not know if Mary knew about Joseph's plan to "divorce her informally" (Matt. 1:19, *Jerusalem Bible*), but we do know she gave birth to her Son in primitive conditions and could afford nothing in the temple but the offering of the poor (Luke 2:24).

Her experience with her adult Son must have been a three-year Lent, an experience that would tempt almost anyone to question the benevolence of God. Aside from the mounting opposition and the trauma of the arrest, trial, and execution, Mary had to endure family members who believed Jesus was "out of his mind" (Mark 3:21) and the baffling conduct that led them to that plausible conclusion. Two evangelists record his curious "Who is my mother?" (Matt. 12:48, Mark 3:33), and a third recounts the well-known rebuffing incident without quoting the question that makes even the most devout Christian cringe (Luke 8:19-21). No inspired writer records Mary's reaction. In fact, she disappears from the gospel narrative at that point, only to return at the Crucifixion. The image of Madonna and Child has long been the textbook illustration of tranquility. "But who," Balthasar asks, "has painted for us the lonely woman spending endless days in anxiety and fear, who without doubt did not understand what was really going on?"⁴⁶

It would be inaccurate, however, to picture Mary as self-absorbed with her own troubles. The evangelists make it quite clear that she was keenly aware of the needs of others. Her simple comment about the wedding hosts at Cana—"They have no wine" (John 2:3)—inaugurated the revelation of her Son's glory (2:11) but also saved a poor family from disgrace. Her presence with John beneath the Cross implies a concern for the only faithful male disciple that must have preceded Jesus'

⁴⁵ See Joel Giallanza, *The Seven Sorrows of Mary* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2008).

⁴⁶ Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 16.

invitation to adopt each other (John 19:26-27). Her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), now almost too blithely read by critics as a manifesto of utopianism or political revenge, communicates uncommon compassion for the hungry and the lowly.

When we turn to the final problem contributing to modern atheism, human freedom, we see in Mary a remarkable example of a person determined to pursue her chosen course in life despite the obstacles and the risks. Twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr gave us the so-called Serenity Prayer, but nineteen centuries earlier Mary knew what it meant to approach life in this finite realm with serenity, courage, and wisdom, conscious of what can be changed and what cannot. Numerous dimensions of her experience were beyond her control: her status as a woman, as a poor woman, as an unconventional wife and mother, as a member of a minority group ruled by a corrupt religious establishment and a cruel political machine, and as a mother of a challenging Child. What any reader, theist or atheist, has to notice in the gospel narrative is the extraordinary character of the woman who daringly and creatively exercised her freedom in these unfavorable circumstances.

Mary's impressive level of intellectual engagement (there is no reason to call it anything else) demonstrates an inner independence rarely seen in any other gospel figure and certainly no other New Testament woman. Three times Saint Luke mentions her practice of treasuring things or pondering or "reflecting on" them in her heart (Luke 1:29; 2:19, 51), making her arguably the model of the critical evangelist he aspired to be (1:3). Mary's role as co-founder of the "new religious movement" at Pentecost (Acts 1:14) would set her apart in world history even if she had no singular relationship to Jesus. It is her behavior in the Annunciation event, however, that makes Mary truly the champion of human freedom—the "most perfect image of freedom," as Pope John Paul said.⁴⁷

Another John Paul—Jean Paul Sartre—famously identified human nature with freedom. "The essence of the human

⁴⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 37.

being," he maintained, "is suspended in his freedom."⁴⁸ Christian critics, perhaps overly committed to classical anthropology, have missed the evangelical orientation of Sartre's insight. Mary's *fiat* (Luke 1:38) mirrors God's creation of the universe through the power of the Word (see Gen. 1:3-27 in the Vulgate). Her supreme act of free choice leads not to the restoration of a lost primordial essence but to the creation of a "New Man" (Eph. 2:15, *Jerusalem Bible*). Far from a parody of human history in which men are pawns of a manipulative divine will, the gospel account of Mary presents a vision of reality in which a member of the "second sex" freely chooses redemption for the entire race. Theism permeates the New Testament, but it is not the theism of philosophers—or even most theologians. New Testament theism hinges on the decision of a virgin from "a town of Galilee called Nazareth" (Luke 1:26), a virgin "condemned to be free," as Sartre would say,⁴⁹ and free to be a blessing. Through Mary, the Gospel transforms the problem of human freedom into a problem of divine self-emptying. As John Paul the pope said, God "entrusted himself" to a woman.⁵⁰

7. Conclusion

Above all, of course, Mary is "she who believed" (Luke 1:45). She was the original Christian believer. No one can deny that. The modern conversation about Mary concentrates on this aspect of her person and work: the "key word of Mariology" in Ratzinger's view.⁵¹ At Vatican II, Pope Paul VI called Mary "Mother of the Church," and the theme of the Virgin's "pilgrimage of faith" dominates John Paul's Marian masterpiece *Redemptoris Mater*.⁵² Pope Benedict XVI ended his first encyclical with a tribute to Mary, "Mother of all believers."⁵³

⁴⁸ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 1956), 25.

⁴⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 415.

⁵⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 46.

⁵¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 49.

⁵² See Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 5-6, 12-19.

⁵³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 42.

Mary's earthly pilgrimage of faith, however, was first and foremost a pilgrimage—a journey that, as John Paul noted, entailed not only travel by “the dim light of faith” but even travail in the dark “night of faith.”⁵⁴ Perhaps for these reasons, he also highlighted Mary's “exceptional link” with the “whole human family,”⁵⁵ her significance for every Christian and “for every human being” as the “spiritual mother of humanity.”⁵⁶

Today, the age of atheism calls us to explore Mary's maternal relationship to a growing segment of our global family: those who will not believe, cannot believe, and say they have nothing to believe. No stranger to unbelief, Mary knew what it meant to contend with doubt and a disappointing religious culture. She also knew the full extent of human suffering and the challenge of freedom in an ever-changing world. Still, in imitation of her Creator, she seemed to elicit faith *ex nihilo*. Her adopted son John remembered that it was only after the feast at Cana that the disciples “began to believe” (John 2:11). We suspect this genesis of faith had something to do with what Mary said or did. At the dawn of the New Evangelization, we pray that Our Lady will once again awaken faith—only this time in her children who have lost their taste for “good wine” (John 2:10).

⁵⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 14, 17.

⁵⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 2.

⁵⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 46, 47.