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## WORLD RELIGIONS, SYMBOLISM, AND MARIAN THEOLOGY

*Walter Brennan, O.S.M.\**

*Summary:* The study of world religions has much to offer to Catholic exegetes and theologians interested in studying the Virgin Mary. This is especially true in the area of symbolism. Many Catholic scholars are not familiar with these studies, and some of these writings inaccurately describe the central concerns of the world's great religions. I hope to show that these studies can be beneficial to both theologians and exegetes, particularly for enhancing their understanding of symbols in Marian theology.

### **1. World Religions**

Western Christianity developed with little awareness of remote cultures and religions. Centuries after the time of the Roman Empire, both eastern and western Europe had little knowledge of the far-flung peoples which the early imperial Romans had conquered. The migrations of the "barbarians" established a border of knowledge. Europe eventually developed into two cultures—Christendom and Byzantium—which had little awareness of each other. The rise of an aggressive Islam solidified these borders. Even the adventures of sea-crossing crusaders exhibited a siege mentality, one which allowed for very little familiarity with the cultures encountered. Only with the twelfth century did these borders begin to give way. New encounters with other cultures, considered exotic, began with the Mongol invasions from the East and from cultural contact with Arabic Islam from the south. Marco Polo traveled to the

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East, and Moslem culture influenced the development of high scholasticism. The people of Islam, the *gentes* or Gentiles, replaced, for "apologetic" purposes, the *rudes* of earlier catechizing. They were still considered exotic because of their differences. The Mongols, at first considered worse than *barbari*, were seen in a better light once their descendants conquered Constantinople. Commerce and trade motivated the Venetians to go east, the Portuguese to go south, and the Spanish to go west. New lands with new peoples were encountered. That these countries were "discovered" is an indication of the cultural isolation of the West. The increased wealth, the development of banking, inventions imported from these various cultures, and contact with the sources of the classical cultures revealed to Europe its pre-Christian past and prepared the way for the new science.

The new discoveries ushered in the birth of the scientific world. This empiriometric advance developed together with a sense of history. Galileo and Newton accomplished on one side what Vico did on the other. From the start, this historical advance was more a combination of logic and interest in culture than a romantic return to the past associated with the kind of humanism which came from the *Rinascimento*. Discoveries, inventions, and encounters led to an emphasis on "the new." The rise of a humanism which imitated the models of the past led to a dissociation of letters and poetry from the prestige of new "science."

By the fifteenth century, mythology began to develop. It mirrored both tendencies of the beginning modern age: the use of reason (to discover new thinking and to compare past religions with Christianity) and the refinement of the belletristic interest.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>We see both of these tendencies in Giovanni Boccaccio's *De Genalonia Deorum Gentilium* and in Thomas More's *Utopia*. For more on this topic, see Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972, c1953), 224f. For the 17th-century development, see Burton Feldman and Robert Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680-1860* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972). Also, see W. Brennan, O.S.M., "Amos Wilder's *Theopoetic* and Boccaccio's *Theologia Poetica*: A Contribution from the Renaissance to the Contemporary Problem of Hermeneutic in Religion," *Journal of Religious Studies* 13, 2 (1987): 52-65. By

By the mid-seventeenth century these two tendencies—rational criticism and humanism—tended to separate, and this separation would last for over a century. The same data, garnered from the many travel journals and from missionary accounts—the earliest ethnography—fed both tendencies. Philosophers developed critiques of “natural religion,” a term which at times applied to non-biblical religion and at times to all religion.<sup>2</sup> On the literary side, philologists collected folk tales, and scholars of the romantic movement, along with early archaeologists, delighted in the imitation of past models.<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably comparison developed. Biblical religion and Christianity (especially post-reformation Christianity) were compared to the religions from distant or ancient civilizations. In this comparison, “religion” (rather than “theology” or “faith”) was the central topic. Protestant and Catholic scholars spoke instead of “theology”; they objected defensively to comparison with non-Christian religions, and distanced themselves from the philosophic conclusions of these discussions. More data kept coming into Europe—from long ago (as archaeology developed), and from far away (due to colonial expansion).

Missionaries contributed greatly to providing such data. The comparison of data increased. A method of comparison based on philosophy—no longer that of Hume or Kant or Hegel, but the positivism of Comte—gave a model for historical development, while retaining a naturalist evolutionary outlook. The science of anthropology was born in the search for the origins of religion in the context of culture. The study of comparative religions developed in the nineteenth century. It was a comparative interpretation of data from many religions. Sometimes the interest was “scientific,” sometimes philological. E. B. Tylor, Andrew Lang, J. G. Frazer, Max Mueller, and other famous scholars belong to this movement which looked for the origins of religion. While many confessional theologians reacted ad-

the time of Boccaccio, the *Gentes* (Islam)—as in Aquinas’ *Summa contra Gentiles*—had already become the pre-Christian Greeks and Romans.

<sup>2</sup>See James Daniel Collins, *The Emergence of Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>3</sup>See Alexander H. Krappe, *The Science of Folklore* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964); C. W. Ceram, *Gods, Graves, and Scholars: The Story of Archaeology*, trans. E. B. Gar-side (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

versely to these influential studies—because of their disagreement with positivism, naturalism, and evolutionary theories and their own fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture, some missionaries entered the field and gave an interpretation of the data which was consonant with their faith. The twelve volumes of Wilhelm Schmidt's *Ursprung der Gottesidee* (1912-1955) and the work of other members of the Society of the Divine Word (e.g., Paul Schebesta) were important contributions to the developing study of world religions.

The quest for the origins of religion—from Tylor and Lang to Freud—was not successful. More realistic philosophies of critique had developed, along with, by the 1950s, more advanced methods of social analysis of data. The passage from natural religion to world religions and from narrow philosophic interpretations to a universal methodological approach (which included a hermeneutic that applied to the humanistic or philological approach to data from all religions, as well as to philosophic analysis),<sup>4</sup> focused on "the sacred."<sup>5</sup> Many of the scholars who now contributed to the phenomenology of religion and the history of religions were confessing believers (e.g., Gherardus van der Leeuw, E. O. James, *et al.*) For the most part it was the phenomenological interpretation of symbol and myth which led to a new congruence of philosophic methods, humanistic interests, and even of religious commitment. This congruence is evident in most of the discipline called today the history of religions.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. *Symbolism*

Twentieth-century epistemology has rediscovered the Greek notion of *symbol*. Similar to the word "myth," the word "symbol" had been relegated to the field of letters and poetry,

<sup>4</sup>See Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), 1-72; *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959).

<sup>5</sup>M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), xi.

<sup>6</sup>See *The Study of Religion in Colleges and Universities*, ed. Paul Ramsey and John Frederick Wilson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 256; and W. Brennan, O.S.M., "Myth, Culture, and Catholicism," *Listening* 18, 2 (Spring, 1983): 119-31.

as an imaginative fiction that was not true.<sup>7</sup> That was not its original meaning, nor its meaning in the history of theology.<sup>8</sup> Every reality was a symbol, a multi-faceted expression of meaning within a culture. Unlike abstract concepts, symbols are concrete expressions of thought, images conditioned by matter as the imagination and senses feed the mind. They are discovered, not invented. They are expressions of the somatic-cognitive experience of meaning, *scientia carnalis*, in the person related to a world of real persons and things. Through the influence of Romanticism, the word "symbol" (like "myth," the narrative extension of symbol) was rediscovered in anthropology, in the history of religions, and then in phenomenology and in linguistic philosophies. For centuries, the word "symbol" had been opposed to reality and to history, and had been replaced by the word "sign," although it meant something else. Contact with other cultures and religions revalidated its ancient meaning (*sym-ballo*, put together). Symbols were understood once more as expressions of reality in its truth.<sup>9</sup>

Today, most philosophers, anthropologists, cultural historians, and historians of world religions have adopted this realistic meaning of symbol. That is not always true of psychologists. The words "symbol" and "myth" must be carefully employed, and the use of these words by scholars must be judged critically. Nevertheless, to dismiss something as "only a symbol" or to oppose symbol and truth would show little understanding of the meaning in modern scholarly endeavor. Symbols are literally truths in textual expressions. One cannot oppose the literal meaning to the symbolic meaning of an expression, even in the Bible. Granted that common parlance and journalism lack the intellectual sophistication of the

<sup>7</sup>Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1963), 1-46.

<sup>8</sup>See J. McKenna, "Symbol and Reality: Some Anthropological Considerations," *Worship* 65/1 (January, 1991): 2-26; and Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. P. Madigan (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 110-58.

<sup>9</sup>Some theologians today are not aware of this modern rediscovery of the epistemology of symbol. They react to its usage as if it meant an imaginative fiction opposed to truth and history. See W. Brennan, "Theology and Poetry," *Catholic Library World* 52 (December, 1980): 198-200.

world of scholarship, intelligent usage of these words needs no apology today.<sup>10</sup>

Historians of religion speak of the "structure" of symbols in two senses. First, there is the internal structure of symbolic thought and word; secondly, there is the coherence of different symbols with each other to form a "system." The same is true of myth; scholars speak of the internal structure of mythic expression and the "mythology" of a variety of symbols which are related to each other. This structure is based on what the symbols (and myths) reveal, either in themselves or in relationship to other symbols.<sup>11</sup>

For Mircea Eliade, the greatest historian of religion in the second half of the twentieth century, a religious symbol reveals the sacredness of being (*hierophany*) or its power (*kratophany*). This is true in all religions, since religious symbols speak to the basic structure of the human person as incarnate spirit.<sup>12</sup> Two symbols can reveal the sacred meaning of being (*ontophany*) in a way which shows the same meaning from different concrete manifestations of it (*homology*).<sup>13</sup> For example, the birth of a child and the construction of a new house both show that life in all its aspects—beginning and continuance—depends on the gift of life to each person in a community from the Creator.

As one unravels the layers of gift and dependence within the new person and within the meaning of survival, the whole of life is finally seen to depend on the totally sacred Other. Structures of symbolic systems give a distinct "way of life" or culture to different groups of people. When these symbols speak of the

<sup>10</sup>For example, Karol Wojtila, before becoming pope, spoke of the creation stories in Genesis as "myths" (cf. *Towards a Philosophy of Praxis* [New York: Crossroads, 1981], 98, n. 4).

<sup>11</sup>The objectivity or what Eliade calls "the ontology" of symbols is related to the "thing in itself." Phenomenology is an effort to recover objectivity in knowledge in a post-Kantian world. Hedwig Conrad-Martius defined phenomenology as "Die der Ansich strebende Wesenslehre."

<sup>12</sup>See Charles H. Long, "Archaism and Hermeneutics," in *The History of Religions: Essays on the Problem of Understanding*, ed. J. Kitagawa et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967), 67-88.

<sup>13</sup>See W. Brennan, O.S.M., "Homology as a Platonic Device in the Thought of Mircea Eliade," *Listening* 21/1 (Winter, 1986): 79-93.

"whole of reality," they are religious symbols which reveal dependence on the source and contingency of "the totality."<sup>14</sup>

Can the history of religions be of service to theology? Various documents of the Church's magisterium answer in the affirmative: 1) *Gaudium et spes* (no. 62) points out that familiarity with contemporary studies can and should enhance Christian "thought and action" in the world today; 2) *Marialis cultus* (Pope Paul VI) calls for a renewal of Marian thought and devotion which is scriptural, liturgical, ecumenical, and anthropological (in the sense of the contemporary study of anthropology); 3) *Evangelii nuntiandi* (Pope Paul VI) and the many formal letters of Pope John Paul II on topics related to missionary activity of the Church insist on familiarity with cultural symbols in order to have inculturation. Moreover, the writings of Catholics such as Dom Bede Griffiths and the conversion to Catholicism of scholars of the caliber of Victor Turner and R. C. Zaehner show the probability of compatibility among theology, the history of religions, and contemporary anthropology, and confirm that past fears about positivism and rationalism are without ground.

### 3. Marian Theology

When we speak of Marian theology today, a whole history of "theology" in the West is carried on in that name. There was little of what we might identify as theology for the first twelve centuries of the Church. The earliest abstract reflections on the basic symbolic expressions of Christian belief were reflections of relationship. Christian faith was expressed in the symbols and narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures ("according to the Scriptures") to reveal God's faithfulness to promises and the plan of creation. There was also narrative organization of events and words (the Gospels), rhetorical summations of *kerygma* (the Acts of the Apostles), letters, sermons, hymns, logical deductions (the Pauline epistles). After 100 C.E., scholars trained in Greek philosophy reflected on the Scriptures, comparing Plato to Moses, speaking of God in the metaphysi-

<sup>14</sup>See P. Tillich, *What Is Religion?*, trans. J. L. Adams (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 57-61; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

cal ways of the Greeks, and doing this in works considered rhetorical in method. Origen tried a more metaphysical approach. However, most of the Fathers used rhetorical methods to reflect on the narratives of the faith. The Eastern Fathers were more contemplative, often using metaphysics in a contemplative way, usually in sermons.

It was not until the Middle Ages that more sophisticated methods of *specula* and *summae* were used; throughout, the commentary, especially on the Scripture, was more widespread than either of these approaches. In the High Middle Ages, the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas became a model for new commentaries, and the logical organization of individuals such as John of St. Thomas became prevalent in the universities. However, the tradition of what Jean Leclercq has called "monastic theology," including mystical writings and sermons and commentaries, persisted alongside all of these. Even among the scholastics, different organizational philosophies were used to explain the articles of faith (e.g., Bonaventure's Platonic method and Aquinas' Aristotelian method). To read a textbook in theology from the seventeenth or eighteenth century is enlightening. They are patchworks from various authors, some "philosophers" (e.g., Leibniz), some theologians (e.g., Cajetan).

It was not until Leo XIII and the Thomistic revival in the Church that the neo-scholastics attempted to determine a single meaning for "theology." And neo-scholasticism existed together with non-thomistic and non-scholastic theologies (e.g., Franciscan, German Romantic). Ascetical writings were also called "theology," and the liturgy was a theology, or ritual reflection on the faith, too.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the Byzantine understanding of *theologia* as prayer continues to influence Western theologians.

What has been called "Mariology" for the last century or so is a neo-scholastic type of theology. Even if it has been written as a type of historical monograph, the guiding themes and method of reflection have been neo-scholastic.<sup>16</sup> The same is

<sup>15</sup>Aidan Kavanagh on "first theology" in his *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1981), 73ff.

<sup>16</sup>For example, see J.-B. Terrien, S.J., *La Mère de Dieu et la mère des hommes* (4 vols., 5. Ed.; Paris: Lethielleux, 1900), 1:vii, 95; and Emilio Campana, *Maria nel dogma*

true of those reflections we call "articles" in theological journals. This is true not only of Mariology, but of Christology, and all that we today call theology. We presume today that the general arrangement and divisions of theology are those of neo-scholasticism. Some things have changed, but this has remained the same.<sup>17</sup>

Vatican II's call for the renewal of theology involved a movement for integration among the branches of theology, a pastoral orientation which took into account the needs of the people and of the Church, an awareness of formational purposes, and use of the best modern advances in other disciplines.<sup>18</sup> The Church called for a "more profound adaptation" in the theology of the missions, taking into account whatever other religions were present in a culture. All of this was also applicable to the theology of Mary. In *Marialis cultus* (1974), Paul VI called for a theology of Mary as a basis for Marian *cultus*, one which related Mary to the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, and, especially, to Christ, to the Church, and to the needs of the people and the Church, while using the best insights of contemporary anthropological studies.<sup>19</sup> What does this mean? First, let us look at how this was put into practice or not by Mariologists. There was a spate of studies on the significance of Chapter Eight of *Lumen gentium* and on "feminism" in a non-radical way, as well as some study of Mariology with reference to non-Christian religions within a particular culture (e.g., Mexico and Aztec goddesses). But there was no effort to do two things implied by the Council and the needs of today: (1) to renew theology in a unified way, based on Scripture, without being restrained by the neo-scholastic divisions of "theology"; (2) to locate Marian theology in relation to the study of Christ and the

*cattolico* (4. ed.; Rome: Marietti, 1936), 12. The influence of the tract of Cardinal Alexis Lepicier, O.S.M., *De beatissima virgine Maria* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1901), was great; it went through many editions (e.g., Roma, 1926).

<sup>17</sup>The few exceptions prove the rule. M. Scheeben, Charles Journet, and the few others were a minority.

<sup>18</sup>For loci, see *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery, O.P. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), index under "theology."

<sup>19</sup>Karl Rahner called for a change in the methodology of Marian theology, in his *Theological Investigations XIX: Faith and Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 227.

Church. Despite the efforts of the magisterium, Marian devotion continued to decline. While the content of preaching and teaching on Mary improved, it was frequently a return to models from the past, often with an emphasis on apparitions rather than doctrine. This means that the call and need for a renewed theology and for understanding Mary's important role in salvation history have not been met. A new, vivid and vivifying approach to theology has not yet developed. We have a multiplication of studies of various data, but we have no powerful unifying vision for theology. The unity provided by the medieval *summae* and *specula* is no longer operative. Before we say that such a unifying vision is impossible, because of the plethora of new information from Scripture studies and elsewhere, we ought at least to try.

#### **4. Putting the Three Together**

Let me begin with a personal story. In 1965, after studying theology and scripture at Stonebridge Priory and philosophy in the graduate school of De Paul University, I attended the University of Chicago. There, rather than enter a department, I chose a committee so that I could do interdisciplinary studies. The committee was that on the History of Ideas and Analysis of Methods, under the guidance of Richard McKeon. I studied the History of Ideas to analyze methods in what was called "historical semantics," and I studied the History of Religions under Mircea Eliade. Eventually, I put these together with further philosophic studies, using my studies of theology and scripture, under Professor Wilhelm Dupre at De Paul University (now at Nijmegen).

At the University of Chicago I attended the public lectures given by Mircea Eliade and Paul Tillich in October, 1965, entitled "The Alumni Conference on the History of Religions." These two scholars had been working together for several years. Tillich's lecture, the last one he delivered before he died, was entitled "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian."<sup>20</sup> In those days, Tillich was popular

<sup>20</sup>The lecture is published in *The History of Religions: Essays on the Problem of Understanding* (cited in n. 12 above), 241-55.

with students of theology, including Catholics, even though he held a somewhat disparaging attitude towards Catholicism. Certainly his interpretation of the symbol of the virgin birth and his understanding of "religion" were far from Catholic theology,<sup>21</sup> but in that last lecture he reversed many of his positions. He said that working with Eliade in the area of the history of religions had shown him the value of sacraments in the widest sense of tangible relation as expressions of the Unconditioned Holy. His purely "Protestant" and abstract view, even of symbolism, had changed. Apart from the wise content of his lecture (five principles and five steps), this personal change in theology was remarkable. The history of religions belongs very much in the Catholic tradition that repeats with Tertullian "*caro est cardo salutis*," and which teaches that there is some truth in every religion (e.g., the Declaration *Nostra aetate* [October, 1965], 2). The works of Jean Danielou, Hugo Rahner, and Louis Bouyer demonstrate this dimension.

### **5. Three Benefits to Marian Theology**

Let me now point out three specific contributions to Marian theology which can come from the study of the History of Religions.

#### **1. Unified Vision of Theology**

The History of Religions tells us that the central belief in every religion is belief in creation. Around the story of creation, all the myths and symbols of religions cluster. This is even true, in a negative way, in Buddhism. The ritual reenactment of the creation belief renews contact with the divine, either on a grand scale—for all the people (as in a New Year ritual)—or on smaller scales (as in the birth of a baby, construction of a house).

In the formation of classical speculative theology, as in the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and in the *Summa* of St. Thomas, it is the vision of creation which provides the frame-

<sup>21</sup>On "religion," see his *What Is Religion?* (cited in n. 14 above), 127; on Mary and the virgin birth, see *The Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 66.

work for all theological reflection: the *exitus* and *reditus* of creatures from and to God, the Alpha and Omega of existence.<sup>22</sup> The framework of creation, the "economy of salvation," like all religious beliefs, was expressed in symbols and narratives—the language of religion.

This framework of creation was present in the earliest reflections of Christians on their faith. But, as Christianity became distinct from Judaism, and understood itself as the fulfillment of Judaism, it recognized that its creation story was different from that of the First Testament. Christianity has its own creation story, the New Creation in and by Christ the Lord<sup>23</sup>—not Adam and Eve, but the New Adam!

This new creation framework was overshadowed in theology when Greek philosophy was used by converted scholars who compared Moses to Plato. The way to Trinitarian conceptual theology, in which creation was attributed by accommodation to the Father, led to the medieval theology in which the "one God" was emphasized as creator, and to the neo-scholastic tracts *De Deo uno* and *De Deo creatore*. The new creation was never forgotten. It was essential to the faith, retained in the creeds and in the tracts *De Deo creante et elevante* and *De Christo salvatore*. But it was the creation story of Genesis which had become very important in theology, because of the comparison of the One God to Plato's "God" and Aristotle's "Prime Mover." Only in the Liturgy and in some theological movements (e.g., that of Scotus) was the primacy of Christ retained in creation.<sup>24</sup>

Here the history of religions is helpful for theology. We must base our theology on the New Creation story, the creation story proper to Christians. This can supply a unifying vision to all Theology, including Marian Theology. Christ the Lord is then

<sup>22</sup>See A. M. Henry, O.P., "La théologie, science de la foi," in *Initiation théologique* (4 vols.; Paris: Cerf, 1957), 1:264–302, esp. p. 280. Also see the remarks on the value of the history of religions for theology, *ibid.*, 293. See, too, M. D. Chenu, *Faith and Theology*, trans. D. Hickey, O.S.M. (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 28.

<sup>23</sup>See W. Brennan, O.S.M., "Rethinking Marian Theology: The New Creation," *Milton Studies* 35 (1995): 113–29.

<sup>24</sup>See J.-F. Bonnefoy, *Christ and the Cosmos*, trans. M. Meilach (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965).

recognized as the revealer of God and the economy of salvation for the whole world, intended from the absolute beginning. This should be tried. It could integrate speculative, moral, and kerygmatic theologies and the disparate tracts of neoscholasticism. It could be the pastoral response to the needs of the Church and her people in various cultures. Indeed, for an inculturated theology, the framework of the new creation and all it signifies, especially in the writings of Paul and John, is a practical necessity.

## ***2. Awareness of the "Sea Change"***

The Western World has changed drastically in the last century and a half. The changes built up slowly, but now our familiarity with nature, even with our own bodies, and our appreciation of language have drastically changed. Forests have given way to farms, and farms to gardens and parks—a change begun long ago in Babylon's royal gardens. Villages have given way to urban cultures. Language has moved from oral to textual to cybernetic mode, with corresponding changes in popular speech patterns in which symbols of nature have been lost and replaced by technological symbols (e.g., the contemporary use of "turn on" and "turn off"). The last personal symbol of the body to remain is the face (as in "what's her face" for identity). The rhythms of planting have given way to the rhythms of the international stock market. Community songs have given way to radio music. As grass has been covered over with tar and concrete, the cultural attitudes of Puritanism, Jansenism, and Victorianism have covered over the appreciation of the human body and of sexuality. Only in dreams and depth psychology and the "slip of the tongue" do symbols reappear in our psychic lives. Science, technology, urbanization, and mechanics have taken over our pictures of nature, person, body, reproduction, and marriage. Concepts and what Aquinas called "human measurement of truth" have replaced "symbols" and the truth measured out by the creator within things—the truth which symbols have always expressed in the "book of nature." The study of the History of Religions helps us to notice these great changes in culture.

When first-world missionaries enter areas that have not yet changed, they encounter symbols and religions that are esoteric to them. The same is true of anthropologists and students of cultures and religions. In this encounter, there is a complex process at work. First of all, the "strange" has to be understood by "strangers." Conceptual culture encounters symbolic cultures which often seem exotic. This is a very difficult process.<sup>25</sup> The documents of the magisterium on "evangelization of other cultures" speak of this difficulty and the need for slow inculturation. There are two important currents that come from the "sea change" which pose difficulties for first-world people. First, the sea carries one along with it. There is a danger of "going native," of becoming esoteric or losing oneself in a romantic escapism, when encountering simplicity in a strange world. Secondly, the sea returns. The encounter with symbolism causes a reaction in first-world persons. We return to our world and try to see its symbolic pre-contemporary culture. We have difficulty recognizing the meaning of past symbols in various societies and the Bible, but we try through various studies. Moreover, cultural currents begin which seek to find once more the sacredness in matter and in sacraments, in comparison with the symbolic understanding of the past. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a return to the appreciation of matter and concrete symbols in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, Planete, and Parabola, among others.<sup>26</sup> There was also a return culturally to "the body," in a societal reaction against Victorianism.<sup>27</sup> However, this frequently occurred in the totally secular spirit of the already desacralized culture of the West, so that the original meanings of the material and body symbols were not understood. Part of this "return of the sea" within the great sea change was the movement to recapture symbolism in anthropology, the history of religions, and philosophy. Even within

<sup>25</sup>See G. Parrinder, *Encountering World Religions* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); and E. Benz, "On Understanding Non-Christian Religions," *Midway* 3 (1960): 27-45.

<sup>26</sup>See M. Eliade, "Cultural Fashions and the History of Religions," in *The History of Religions*, ed. J. Kitagawa et al. (cited in n. 12 above), 21-38.

<sup>27</sup>This is evident not only in studies of the phenomenology of the body (Merleau-Ponty et al.), but also in popular plays and music, such as "Hair" and "Oh, Calcutta."

this movement, the student must undertake difficult critical evaluations of symbols in cultures other than his own. This is what "evangelization and inculturation" involve in a re-evangelization of the West.

This means that biblical symbols from ancient cultures (Hebrew and other) present us with a new world—one which forms our present culture, but which contains elements "strange" to us. We find this especially true in our attempts to grasp the meaning of symbols of reproduction, of creation, and of femininity.

### **3. *Insights into "Virgin and Mother"***

The titles of Mary as "virgin" and "mother" are symbolic. What they mean in the history of religions can give added richness to Marian theology. We must first be willing to see that Mary's virginal motherhood, often treated as a *theologoumenon* by Catholic theologians today, speaks to us from a strange world. When we enter the world of its meaning in world religions, we enter a strange world. Both symbols—virginity and maternity—speak a truth which is not the conceptual measurement of biology, but is the somatic state of personal existence of Mary, described in a way that is difficult to understand. Sometimes one reads that "virginity was looked upon with askance by the Jews." From the study of the symbol of virginity (and virginal motherhood) in world religions, there is an indication that this was not the case. This indication is fortified by the use of the word "virgin" to describe the people of Israel's relationship with God. Ancient Hebrew culture retained the symbolic meaning of virginity seen in other religions.

The importance of motherhood for the Jews is not denigrated by seeing the positive value they placed on virginity. The polyvalent symbolism of virginity speaks more of consecration, of dedication to a mission from God, of youthful strength in attaining this purpose, and of adoring submission to the power of God through abstention from sexual acts. In the case of Israel, virginity is linked with "daughter" and is one example of the different symbols used to express the relationship of the people with God and of God's love for them. It is a symbol about a young girl. Youth and femininity and special love are

some of the meanings it manifests. In the context, special mission, election, and hoped-for covenantal dedication are added meanings. Israel is set aside by God, chosen, consecrated, for a dedication which has as its mission the purpose of the creator, and is related to God as a relative (Redeemer, *Go'el*). God chooses a people to be "my" people. God is "with" the people—his Daughter—protecting them (her) in a familial way. Her "body"—in a collective sense common in ancient times—belongs solely to God, so that her spirit can develop according to the wishes of God, her relative and lover and creator. She (Israel) gives God her life, as God gave life to her. Life is always in context: social, sexual, economic, and so forth. God promises a life filled with joy and prosperity, if Israel will dedicate her life to God and follow steadfastly in the way of the covenant, despite the temptation to apostasize: either a virgin or a prostitute.<sup>28</sup>

This value of virginity in the Hebrew Scriptures remains in the New Testament in the depiction of Mary, whose mission is to be Mother of the Beloved Disciples, loving servants, faithful images of Jesus the Servant. Mary's mission demands a dedication, a perseverance, in a life tested by the sword of discrimination, which can only come from a power and strength of the Creator-Spirit. She models what is needed in the disciples, those whom Paul would present to God as "virgin" (2 Cor. 11:2). But this is a somatic symbol, seen first in the individual and only then in the collectivity. Virginity is a symbol only in the body and in the actions of the body. It is performative language bespeaking a motivation in a female person. Once offered, as in Luke, as a way of life, as a gift of the creative Spirit, when virginity is agreed to and followed, it becomes a model for the Church.

This is no *theologoumenon*. It is a meaning within a symbol: No bodily virginity, no symbol. It is not, in Mary's case, a

<sup>28</sup>The concepts of wife, of daughter, of prostitute are relational role symbols corresponding to God as Father, as husband, as forgiver. There is no contradiction nor perversion among the symbols "Father," "Lover," and "husband." This is a classic case of the *coincidentia oppositorum* used to express God's totality. Above all, it speaks of the people's relation to their Creator. See M. Eliade, *Il mito della reintegrazione* (Milano: Jaca, 1989), 11–44.

metaphor nor an application solely of christological symbolism, nor an importation from Gentile sources. Mary's mission is somatic, and so her virginity is somatic. The symbol would not apply otherwise. And it could not be extended to spiritual maternity as in John 19 without a basis in concrete reality. The significance of the symbol for Christ, for the Church, and for the New Creation—all of which are intended in the New Testament—would not apply.

These same meanings are shared in other religions in their own way. In Greek religion, Athene was described as virgin. This was a polyvalent religious symbol which indicated, among other meanings, her strong persevering protection of the people, even in war.<sup>29</sup> This was "youth," "strength," "dedication" of a woman. It was applied in its protective meaning to the Virgin Mary in Byzantine religious prosody.<sup>30</sup> Wisdom was associated with virginity, too. The Hebrew wisdom of the covenant and Torah is present in the covenanting Virgin Mary who "ponders" (*symballousa*, Lk. 2:19) and observes the Law. Athene, too, is wise and chaste in her virginal person.<sup>31</sup> Her virginal state allows her to give time to help others. The same symbolic meanings are present in the Gnostic "virgins of light."<sup>32</sup>

Mary in the New Testament is not only virgin, but also mother. This was not such a strange symbol in the ancient Near East, where sexuality was always linked with the divine power of creation and life.<sup>33</sup> Sexual reproduction always spoke of cre-

<sup>29</sup>See Felix Guirand, *Greek Mythology*, trans. D. Ames (London: P. Hamlyn, Ltd., 1963), 34.

<sup>30</sup>After the rebellion of Nika, 532 C.E., Romanos Melodos in a *kontakion* calls Mary "defending general." See *The Homeric Hymns*, ed. Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 99, n. 11.

<sup>31</sup>See Guirand, *Greek Mythology*, 32-33.

<sup>32</sup>See Max Pulver, "The Experience of Light in the Gospel of St. John, in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in Gnosticism, and in the Eastern Church," in *Spiritual Disciplines: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, Bollinger Series, 30, 4 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 258.

<sup>33</sup>See examples in E. O. James, *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study* (Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1960), 163-208. M. Ellade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (New York: World Publishing Co., 1968), 354-61, 420-28.

ation: creation of new children, new crops, even life after death. In the structures of the thought of symbolism, a *coincidentia oppositorum* often appears to bring forth a special meaning.

The virgin, dedicated to the purposes of one god or all the gods or the fates, brings forth the life given by the creating divine power. Sometimes there is sexual union or some miraculous process in order to give birth. The meaning remains behind these symbols of the manner in which it happens. The creator is at work. Often, symbols of water (indicating the water of the womb or sperm) and breast milk and nudity are used in the complex of symbols.<sup>34</sup> With Mary, the creative power of the Holy Spirit comes into play—the Spirit who “overshadows” and creates the people in the time of Moses, the Spirit who moves over the waters in Genesis, bringing forth new life from chaos, victory over evil.<sup>35</sup> The virginal conception of Mary is a ritual kind of state,<sup>36</sup> allowing her to become the Mother of the Lord in the New Creation, the Christ victorious over all evil.

In the virginal conception of Jesus, Mary is the *locus* where time and eternity meet. Cosmic cycles of time are ended. The end planned at the beginning comes about in time. She *is* the place and time, the “new earth” (as Irenaeus called her), not in a perpetual cycle of renewal and re-integrating reproductive symbols and rituals, but in the birth of Christian sacrament. And, in sacrament, the Church models her virginal motherhood, bringing Christ to birth always in the baptismal womb.<sup>37</sup> According to John 19, this virginal motherhood of the Church

<sup>34</sup>See examples of these in the not-so-distant past in agricultural symbols, in M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 334ff. Also, see P. Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from Goddess to Saint* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), esp. chap. 6, for medieval European integration of this symbol with Mary.

<sup>35</sup>See R. J. Clifford, S.J., *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Harvard University Press, 1972), 149–55, and his “The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation,” *Theological Studies* 46, 3 (September 1985): 510.

<sup>36</sup>Virginité is often seen, like abstinence from sexual intercourse, as a ritual purification. Probably the most familiar example of this would be the Vestal Virgins.

<sup>37</sup>See H. Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. S. Bullough (Chicago: Regnery, 1965), 22–32, for examples of patristic expressions of this comparison.

begins with Mary as symbol of the Church through the gift of the Spirit.

Finally, it can be seen that a theology of the New Creation—of Christ, the Church, and the sacraments—can only be energized and vitalized from the rich symbolic truth of the “great things” God did for Mary, and that this symbolism, as it reaches into historical religion, exemplifies concretely the gift of life (John’s Gospel) given and revealed by Jesus the Lord.