Mary: Portrait of an Im/Possible Image?

Abstract (English) – Mary: Portrait of an Im/Possible Image? Mary is one of the most intriguing and visible religious figures. She is both the object of perennial theological disputes, feminist critiques and popular devotions and inspires many people all over the world. This article focuses on the question whether this highly complex and paradoxical figure of Mary and Mariology can offer a contribution to overcome the impasse between ‘gender ideology’ and ‘gender justice’. After methodological and hermeneutical considerations, among which a plea to include Marian devotions into systematic reflections, the article focuses on feminist Mariologies, since they are the most outspoken with regard to gender questions. Different approaches and insights of contemporary feminist Mariologies are studied according to their gender transformational potential. Although they are evaluated as strong and challenging alternatives, it is also obvious that there is no simple ‘solution’, nor a univocal new and beyond the gender-dispute interpretation. Marian devotional practices, though far more traditional in outlook, are described from the perspective ‘a sense of presence’, because for many devotees Mary represents divine presence and God’s unconditional love, support or comfort. It is argued that in these transformative processes, images and discourses of a different Mary are intrinsically related with images and discourses of a different God. In fact this interrelatedness of God and Mary functions as the basis of both essentialist gender ideology and non-dualist gender justice. Although an unambiguous answer beyond the gender impasse is not possible, it is the plurivocality in the meaning of Mary and Mariology that in the end opens the road to gender justice.

Keywords: Mary, Feminist Mariology, Sense of Presence, Marian devotions, gender, God-language


Abstract (Français) – Marie : portrait d’une im/possible image ? Marie est une des figures religieuses les plus fascinantes et les plus visibles. Elle est à la fois l’objet de constants débats théologiques, de critiques féministes et de dévotions populaires et une inspiratrice pour beaucoup de monde dans le monde entier. Cet article porte principalement sur la question de savoir si cette figure très complexe et paradoxale de Marie et la mariologie peuvent contribuer à surmonter l’impasse entre l’idéologie du genre et la justice en matière de genre. Après des considérations méthodologiques et herméneutiques, parmi lesquelles on trouve un plaidoyer pour que les dévotions mariales soient intégrées dans des réflexions systématiques, l’article traite des mariologies féministes car elles sont celles qui touchent le plus clairement aux questions du genre. Différentes approches de mariologies féministes contemporaines, avec leurs résultats, dont, en particulier, leur potentiel de transformation du genre, sont décrites. Bien qu’elles soient vues comme des alternatives fortes et stimulantes, la conclusion est qu’il n’existe ni une « solution » simple ni une nouvelle interprétation univoque au-delà du débat sur le genre. Les pratiques dévotionnelles mariales, bien que plus traditionnelles dans leur perspective, sont décrites du point de vue du « sens de la présence » parce que, pour beaucoup de fidèles, Marie représente une présence divine et l’amour inconditionnel de Dieu, un soutien ou un réconfort. Il est montré que dans ces processus de transformation, différentes façons de représenter Marie et d’en parler sont intrinsèquement liées à des images et des discours différents sur Dieu. De fait, cette interrelation entre Dieu et Marie sert de base à la fois à une idéologie essentialiste du genre et à une justice non dualiste du genre. Même si une réponse sans équivoque au-delà de l’impasse du genre n’est pas possible, c’est, finalement, la plurivocité des significations de Marie et de la mariologie qui ouvre la voie à la justice du genre.
Introduction

Mary, The Most Powerful Woman in the World. This was the headline of the National Geographic’s December 2015 issue. In her editorial, editor in chief Susan Goldberg referred to the exceptional successful exhibition Picturing Mary: Woman, Mother, Idea at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC. This fact prompted the editors of the National Geographic – a secular worldwide journal of general interest – to write their cover story, asking the very questions that so many theologians, historians, anthropologists, scholars of religion and many others wonder about: “What is it about Mary? She is the world’s most depicted woman, yet among the most mysterious.” (Goldberg 2015) They wanted to understand why people from all over the world who share little but do believe that Mary stands up for them, approves of them, and watches out for them. The result was a beautifully illustrated article in which the author literally followed the paths of the many faces of Mary, as well of those of her devotees all over the world. There was, of course, no clear and coherent answer to the initial questions. Hence the concluding lines read as follows: “So many souls yearning to be witnesses for hope, so many souls imbued with the belief that the Virgin Mary was lightening their way.” (Orth 2015, 59) However simple this may seem and far from traditional theological discourse, I am convinced that this sentence is not without theological meaning and will return to this later.

This is only one of the many examples that illustrate the ongoing and overwhelming interest in Mary. All over the world most people would recognize her image. She can be found in music and all other forms of art, and the artist is not necessarily a Catholic or a Christian. Marian images and Marian devotional practices belong to the most visible, public, religious and devotional Catholic phenomena, but in contrast to other central Christian images Mary is not a Catholic exclusivity: she is almost of equal importance in Orthodox Christianity. More and more Protestants turn to Mary, and protestant feminist theologians have written about her (Levine 2005). Mary is a source of inspiration in Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and one can find her image even in alternative and present day spiritual practices (Tavard 1996). For that reason Mary is regarded to be one of the most promising subjects of inter-religious dialogue (Smith / Haddad, 1989; Greshake 2014, 569). She is said to have inspired more people than any other woman ever has (Pelikan 1996, 2). Whatever the truth of this statement may be, it is puzzling that the figure of Mary indeed gives rise to continuous, extremely rich and diverse attention, whether in academic discourse or actual devotional practices. There seems to be no end to the continuous stream of publications of books and articles on Mary to which recently appearing websites should now be added.
It is perhaps an even more puzzling question if, why and how the figure of Mary or Mariology can offer a sensible contribution to the question of the role of women in the churches and the tension between ‘gender ideology’ and gender justice. This last aspect will be the leading question of my contribution. Where to start and how to proceed? Instead of presenting a specific Mariology, I hope to find some clues in the Marian puzzle itself: in the many-layered paradoxical ambiguities that these thousands of Marian images and the probably equivalent amount of interpretations represent, and the complex ways in which they are related to all kinds of gender aspects. Therefore the first part of my contribution will consist of preliminary methodological and hermeneutical considerations. From there on I will discuss some feminist Marian proposals dealing with gender. In a third step I will present some theological elements that I derived from Marian devotional practices. I will pay specific attention to the implications of the gendered (inter)relatedness of languages, images and views on Mary and languages, images and views on God. In my conclusion I return to the question whether or not Mary can offer a contribution to overcome the ostensible impasse between ‘gender ideology’ and ‘gender justice’.

1. Methological and hermeneutical considerations

A mere Mariological reflection is not enough to offer a perspective that can open up the sharp and often fruitless discussions on ‘gender ideology’ and ‘gender justice’. This regards especially those Mariological studies that also anchor ‘gender complementarity’ in Mary, as many of them do (e.g. Greshake 2014; Fuchs 2009). However interesting or challenging these studies otherwise may be, they offer – to put it mildly – no inspiration for furthering the dialogue on these gender controversies. Moreover those more strict studies often simply ignore serious feminist or liberation theological questions with regard to Mary. In some cases they do refer to feminist theologians, but without paying serious attention to their arguments or proposals and almost self-evidently accepting as normative the asymmetrical dual anthropology that underlies gender complementarity (Greshake 2014, 23/463; Fuchs 2009, 55 note 201). Nevertheless, I consider Mariology as one of the pieces of the Marian puzzle and therefore a sign of the paradoxes and ambiguities that surround Mary. Since Mariology, as a systematic theological sub discipline, seems to have no high theological standing, and sometimes is even regarded as a ghetto (Logister 1995, 8), Mariology is confronted with questions concerning the relevance of this discipline (Greshake 2014, 15). It is good to realize, as Scheffczyck reminds us, that Mariology as a theological sub discipline in its own right, only came into being during the so-called ‘Marian age’, approximately between 1830-1950. Mariology was rather an effect of both the Marian movements and devotion, and the intense papal
Marian activities during the Marian age, including the proclamation of two (highly disputed) Marian dogmas in 1854 (‘Immaculate conception’) and 1950 (‘Assumption’). Scheffczyck also draws attention to the relative lack of German speaking academic theological interest in developing a serious Mariology. Early Mariology from the 19th century, according to many authors, suffered from exaggeration (Scheffzyck 2002, 193-195; Logister 1995; Greshake 2014, 164-174). After Vatican II, dogmatic Mariology like Marian devotions decreased in Western Europe (Beattie 2002; Greshake 2014). Partly due to the fact that Vatican II effected far-reaching changes in Marian devotions and liturgy, by strengthening the Christological dimensions of Mary (Halkes 1980), and privileging the ecclesiological meaning and relevance of Mary (Logister 1995). This has become visible in the transformation of the names of Marian feasts – Candlemass, for example, became the feast of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple – and in the banning from daily Marian devotions such as hymns and rosary from the ordinary liturgy. Mariology itself gained renewed interests, whether influenced by liberation and feminist theology (Greshake 2014, 24), or by the pontificate of John Paul II. Interestingly, there is no consensus among theologians on its ‘proper place’ within Dogmatics, nor regarding its ‘Fundamentalprinzip’ (Fuchs 2009, 119-120). I consider the entire Mariological ambivalence and complexity, resulting from endless theological debates on Mary’s place, meaning and function, and its extreme uncomfortable relation to Marian devotional practices, an indication of the ‘power’ or ‘mystery’ of the figure of Mary to escape from theological and ecclesiological mastery. There is, in a postmodern way of speaking, always a more and an openness to another perspective. The fact that there is hardly any Biblical evidence or reference to frame Marian interpretations gives leeway to such a relative openness. But there is more: Mary, Marian devotions, and Mariology seem to form one of the most outspoken as well as complex theological junctions where contested interpretations and devotions on how to imagine and reflect the relation between God and human intersect in a very specific and unique way. In this light it is understandable why Logister states that Mariology represents on a micro scale the many problems and questions of contemporary theology (Logister 1995, 8). All this makes Mariology a thrilling subject with regard to the tension between gender ideology and gender justice, especially because Mariology is explicitly and deeply determined by feminine gender images. Just as theological reflection on God is, whether explicitly or self-evident and unreflected but nevertheless fundamentally, determined by images of masculinity. Most contemporary European Mariological studies authored by men, are in favor of, or even vehemently

---

1 However, not only men hold this view. There are some women who defend, like men, the complementary thesis and who would regard the quest for gender justice as gender ideology (Schumacher 2004). However, most publications on Mary in this line of thought are by men.
defend the ideas of ‘gender complementarity’ and the fundamentally ontological difference between men and women, as many feminist authors have demonstrated (Adamiak 2008; Beattie 2002). This position in the end undergirds the judgement of ‘gender ideology’ and will therefore not be presented here. This is, by the way, not to say that all of these authors offer a conservative view on Mary or would oppose to a more liberal, liberation Mariology, or would oppose a more democratic church or the ordination of women. I will return to this later. This too, is part of the Marian puzzle.

I will therefore discuss feminist contributions to Mariology but only from the perspective of their contribution to the deconstruction of the traditional gender paradigms. Are they able to think a gender-different Mariology? Can feminist Mariologies offer a constructive contribution to overcome the deadlock between ‘gender ideology’ and ‘gender justice’? Of specific interest is the question if and how the ‘God language’ in feminist Mariologies influences the ‘Mary language’ and vice versa, since Mariology can not be transformative without a corresponding renewed reflection on God.

Before turning to the feminist Mariologies, several other methodological and hermeneutical considerations need to be mentioned. In order to open up a strict, inner-systematic theological discourse that follows a specific European and modern rationality, in particular liberation, political, feminists and postcolonial theologians have pointed out the relevance of context: of the social, cultural, historical, political and economic dimensions that are reflected in ecclesial and theological discourse and practices. They also insist on integrating class, gender, sexuality, race, colonialism in theological analysis and to keep a sharp eye for the interrelatedness or intersectionality of these and other categories (Schüssler Fiorenza 2011), and they emphasize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach. This plea for inclusion of contextual, intersectional and multidisciplinary dimensions applies perhaps even stronger with regard to Mary, Marian devotions and by implication Mariology (Gebara /Bingemer 1987). It enables us to gain more insight in the motives, mechanisms and beliefs of the theologically contested and highly public and devotional character of Mary and Mariology, as well as the (mis)use of Mary in all kind of ecclesiological, political and nationalistic movements, or the gender specific or racial implications of certain aspects of Marian theology. In particular Latin American and Hispanic feminist and liberation theologies explicitly point at the importance of Marian devotions as locus theologicus (Imperatori-Lee 2007). In Mary’s image so many different, though interrelated dimensions are brought together. They are represented in

---

2 For excellent descriptions and analyses of the notions of gender ideology, gender justice and underlying problematic gender anthropology, I refer to the articles of Marianne Heimbach-Steins and Saskia Wendel in this issue.
devotions, art and discourses, demonstrating the highly pluri-vocal, paradoxical, ambiguous and therefore ultimately open character of Mary and, as Gebara and Bingemer state, of different Marian traditions (Gebara /Bingemer 1987, 18).

In this paper I also follow the Latin American and Hispanic insistence on including reflection on Marian devotional practices for methodological and hermeneutical reasons. First of all, as suggested in the introduction to this paper, these devotions are important pieces of the Marian puzzle. But I also emphasize the fact that these expressions of lived religious practices are signs of ‘lived faith’. Research into lived faith, lived religion, as well as other so-called ‘everyday practices’ recently became more important in cultural studies and theological and philosophical reflection, inspired among others by the work of the French Jesuit Michel de Certeau (De Haardt 2004). In the field of religion and theology the approach from everyday life or lived religion is used by – among others – feminists, postcolonial thinkers, liberation and practical theologians as well as post-modern thinkers, as a challenge to certain conventions: first of all it can invoke those persons, practices and insights that are traditionally left out by academic reflection on religion. In this sense the notion of everyday life is “shorthand for voices from below, women, children, migrants and so on” (Highmore 2002, 1). In a feminist-liberationist theological perspective these everyday practices are considered reflections of the hope, desires, resistance and the faith of ordinary people (Isasi-Diaz 1993). Of equal importance is the intellectual and epistemological challenge of this turn to ‘the everyday’ (De Certeau 1984; Isasi-Diaz 1993/2004). In privileging the ‘others’, the theoretical outsiders, De Certeau uses the concept of appropriation as a primary tool in searching for resisting or surviving practices. Feminist and liberation theologians also use this notion.3 De Certeau considers appropriation an important mechanism or process to describe the act of believing, as well as what makes people believe. These are, so he states, the ‘tactics’ with which people, day after day, produce a sense of meaning and freedom in their appropriation of cultural, religious, political, and social instruments as well as images, concepts and attitudes (De Certeau 1984, 29-42). The appropriation of Marian images, concepts and attitudes thus refers both to the actual continuity and simultaneous discontinuity or transformation of Marian images, symbols and interpretations in the actual processes of ‘repeating’, reproducing, re-enacting traditional Marian rituals, prayers, symbols. It is precisely this ‘unpredictable and uncontrollable’ mix of both continuity and discontinuity

3 Leaving their quite different backgrounds and methods aside, the most explicit use of a specific ‘appropriation’ of religious texts, concepts, and symbols in order to ‘survive’ and, at the same time, express their own religious belief and spirituality of their experiences of God’s presence among them, can be found in the works of the theologians Delores S. Williams, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Mary McClintock Fulkerson.
of meaning of Marian symbols and concepts that makes so called ‘popular religion’ such a worrisome ecclesiastical and theological problem, even for some feminists (Althaus Reid /Isherwood 2007, 63-80).

However, there is another element embedded in this focus on these everyday practices that allow people to ‘stay alive’ (De Certeau e.a. 1998), or ‘survive’ and that as such also reflects their hopes, visions, their desires, relations, their love and their struggles (Isasi-Díaz 1993). In this regard De Certeau speaks of an encounter with ‘the wonder of daily life’, that for him is one of the many forms of the experience of the “Presence that reveals itself as that without which life is impossible” (De Certeau 1966). For Isasi-Díaz these daily practices reflect the experiences of God’s presence in their lives (Isasi Diaz 1993, 166-185). As I will discuss later, I consider Marian practices as specific experiences of this ‘sense of presence’ and expect them to be relevant for our discussion.

2. Feminist Mariologies: im/possible images

There has been much feminist reflection on Mary over the last 40 years, from different perspectives, contexts, and approaches. The critical, constructive work done in this field cannot be underestimated, nor can it be easily summarized or neatly systemized. All of these reflections have in common that they are, first and foremost, aiming at deconstructing the patriarchal idealized Mary. They analyze and criticize the traditional images of the ideal and ‘unique’ feminine, the handmaid, the virgin and the mother and the subsequent implications of these idealized images in disparaging ordinary women. They highlight that the negative implications of Mariology for women’s sexuality, women’s motherhood resulting from the impossible image of the ‘ideal’ feminine or ‘true womanhood’, as well as the religious valorization of obedience, passivity, humility, submission was grounded by an anthropology of submission that has been replaced by an anthropology of complementarity. In short: Feminist theology was extremely clear on the fact that without any critical deconstruction, rethinking, re-imagining and reconstruction, Mary was an impossible image. Therefore Elizabeth Johnson, in her Mariology, can say: “When women begin to analyze Marian heritage, one basis problem undergirds all others, namely, this tradition is just saturated with sexist construals of gender. […] Without these sexist gender constructions, which result inevitable in male social dominance and female subordination, the classic construals of Marian theology would fall apart” (Johnson

Elizabeth A. Johnson (2003) in Truly Our Sister. A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints, gives a good overview of many authors, positions and proposals in feminist and contemporary male Mariologies, before presenting her own model of Mary.
2003, 22). But it is not only social dominance and subordination that is the problem, and Johnson is well aware of that, too. Theological dominance and subordination are more persistent, even in those cases where Mariology aims at social liberation and equality of women. So the question is whether feminist Marian ‘reconstructions’ are able to break this deeply rooted ‘sex/gender system’ in all its intertwinement with other forms of exclusion and injustice (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995), be it in its ‘old’ form of submission anthropology or in its recent form of anthropology of complementarity. There is no unambiguous positive answer to this question. As far as I can see all feminist theologians reject, at least in theory, an essentialist femininity and womanhood and the same goes for the prescription of certain ‘qualities’ attached to women as typically ‘female’. They all point at the social, cultural, religious construction of these images. There are no easy solutions to counter this essentialism or essentialist symbolism in Mariology, or to escape completely a gendered perspective that is free from hierarchical opposition. Many feminist theologians have offered creative reinterpretations of Marian dogmas and biblical texts in line with political and liberationist perspectives, presenting a for women and all human beings ‘liberating Mary’, who is according to Gebara and Beringer ‘mother of God and mother of the poor’ (Gebara /Beringer 1987). In their view, Mariology, including dogmas, should be re-read again and again, in search for the truth and meaning for actual situations, doing “justice to Mary, women, men and ultimately humankind created in the image and likeness of God” (Gebara /Beringer1987, 6). Nevertheless, their work is not free of gendered ambivalence with respect to, for instance, their description of Mary Mother of God in which the “greatness of the mystery of women is unveiled” (Gebara /Beringer 1987, 100). Others – for example Radford Ruether – follow more directly the biblical and ecclesiological path of Vaticanum II in presenting Mary as ‘the feminine face of the church’, as a free woman, making her own choices and entering in co-creatorship with God. Here again, the portrait of Mary, like that of Gebara and Beringer, as the feminine face of the ‘Church or of the Poor’ as image of the church, and image of the new and liberated humanity, based on the gospel of Luke, feels uncomfortable since it implies a ‘masculine opposite’. In this respect Schüssler Fiorenza questions if these models are able to overcome “the dynamics of the cultural preconstructed sex-gender system and symbolic framing of meaning” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2011, 207). Another route, in the ‘minimalist’ line of the Council, and inspired by Marian interpretations of women suffering from poverty, racism, or ethnic prejudice, starts from the biblical story of Miriam of Nazareth. Both Johnson and Schüssler Fiorenza follow this path of the biblical Mary, although with different emphasis and focus. Johnson anchors Mary, as ‘someone like us’ (Truly Our Sister), in the Communion of Saints and calls her a friend of God and a prophet. She presents her Mariology as a modest proposal “coherent with
elements of biblical, classical and conciliar teaching” (Johnson 2003, 113). Her Mariology is pneumatological, and her re-reading of the biblical Marian stories renders a woman of Spirit, the life-giving power of Sophia-God. Mary “bore a poor women’s life, lived a life with faith in the God of Israel, believed in a gospel for the downtrodden, found a way to bring forth the Messiah, and journeyed into the new community that spearheaded Jesus’ vision to the world” (Johnson 2003, 314). Her Mary is one of the paradigmatic figures, just as other saints are paradigmatic figures. Her ‘distinctiveness’ is being the mother of Jesus and therefore she has a bodily, psychological and social relation with the Messiah and her prayer is the Magnificat. “She kept faith. We remember her. We connect her story with our own amid the searching narrative of the human race in its history of suffering and hope. We thereby find courage to act the critical dream of God for the world” (Johnson 2003, 112). Though this seems to be an inspiring and at first sight ‘unproblematic’ Marian proposal, Schüssler questions the ‘idealistic fashion’ in which a too positive reading of biblical texts has filled the elusiveness of the scriptural historical Mary (Schüssler Fiorenza 2011, 205). Her own proposal aims at the deconstruction of two dualisms, the good/bad women and the male divine/female human, together with a rediscovery of the struggle of the historical Mary and a re-visioning of the divine. Mary, the young single mother seeks the support of another woman, Elizabeth (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995/2011). And Schüssler, too, describes Mary as “filled with the Holy Spirit, who exalts the violated and makes the fruit of illegitimacy holy, the two women rejoice in God’s liberating action” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2011, 209). The Magnificat is the expression of the proclamation of God’s salvation and wellbeing to the humiliated and downtrodden. Like all the other Marian proposals, this future is to be realised here and now, “being born among us today, from our flesh and blood […] It is born as the hope for those who are without hope” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2011, 209). According to Schüssler this dangerous memory of a young woman, though dangerous in the eyes of both ecclesiastical and political authorities, “can subvert the tales of mariological fantasy and cultural femininity. […] It is she who holds out the offer of untold possibilities of a different theology” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2011, 209).

Along this line of feminist liberation Mariology, in which justice and (gender) equality are central, there is a strand of feminist theology in which theologians argue for a sexual difference between the sexes and develop a Mariology from this perspective. The most outspoken representative here is Tina Beattie. Nonetheless, she too wants to avoid an essentialist understanding of ‘woman’ (Beattie 2002, 6). In her work she presents a creative and extremely critical, psycholinguistic, mimetic essentialist reading of masculine essentialism in orthodox and neo-orthodox Marian theology and symbolism. She aims at “creating a symbolic space theology that recognizes the existence of woman as body and not just as
feminine ideal” (Beattie 2002, 7). Her essentialism is strategic, a necessary step in order to develop a gynocentric Marian theological narrative that is “provisional, playful and therefore ultimately non-essential” (Beattie 2002, 7). Luce Irigaray is her leading guide in re-reading the gender difference of the orthodox and neo-orthodox Catholic tradition in a different manner. As far as Beattie is concerned it is only in Mary and Marian theology that women may find resources that subvert the androcentric tradition and enables them “to explore the theological significance of the female body” (Beattie 2002, 8).

The problem she highlights is that, despite the early church's performative use of a non-sexed gender symbolism, in the end women are excluded from representing God in their bodies. The creatures’ ‘godlikeness’ was represented by mimetic masculinity and the creatures ‘vulnerability of the flesh’ was represented by mimetic femaleness, but only the actual male body was perfect enough to represent God (Beattie 2002, 57 f.). She therefore is in search of a refiguration of Marian symbolism by considering Mary’s role in the incarnation and the emphasis on Mary as the new Eve in patristic literature. Beattie regards that as an indication of the centrality of the stories of the creation and the fall in Genesis as the central key to the interpretation of Marian symbolism. The virgin birth and Mary’s motherhood are central to challenging the fatherhood of God as the ultimate source of life in neo-orthodox defences of the essential masculinity of priesthood and these symbols are also in need of revitalization for contemporary women (Beattie 2002, 146). Mary’s role in the incarnation, her freely chosen acceptation of her motherhood, affirms the goodness of creation and joy of birth and new life, and indicates that her motherhood is the core of her priesthood. Women are prohibited to perform this maternal priesthood role, so that the maternal symbol in fact represses the body’s significance instead of expressing it (Beattie 2002, 78). Again, Beattie asserts she is not arguing for an essentialised male or female priesthood, in which only men can represent the sacrificial priesthood and women the maternal one. On the contrary, both men and women should be able to represent both types of priesthood. Her point is that a maternal priesthood that includes women would reflect the active and redemptive role of the female body (Beattie 2002, 205). With this highly sacramental and symbolic gynocentric Mariology, Beattie aims to counter both Catholic neo-orthodoxy, as for instance became manifest in the Papal documents on women in the church or women’s ordination, and liberal feminist theology. She identifies the problems with the latter as the definition of ‘full humanity of women’ in Western liberal terms in which egalitarianism, autonomy and democracy are central (Beattie 2002, 2). Quoting Nancy Dallavalle she states “Catholicity […] cannot simply be about justice. Rather it is primarily about sacramentality” (Beattie 2002, 3). Motivated by Dallavalle’s view that the contribution of feminist theology lies in her ability to demonstrate that Catholic theology is not
unjust but ‘theologically impoverished’, Beattie wants to re-read the rich tradi-
tion, sometimes against itself, and acknowledge its androcentric character, in
order to identify liberating dimensions in Catholic symbolic narrative.

Even if we think Beattie succeeded in her work, and I think she did reach her
own goals, I do have problems with her approach. With her ‘high church’ French
postmodern feminist and psycho-analytical approach, she is able to criticize the
violence and absurdity of the highly influential vision of von Balthasar on male
and female sexuality, on masculinity and femininity (Beattie 2006). The same
goes for detecting the open, ambivalent, gender bending and therefore potentially
liberating dimensions of patristic reflection on the virgin mother, before these
images became implicated in the fourth century state-sanctioned Christian patri-
archy. So she opens up a new way of interpreting central and deeply embedded
symbols of the maternal and the feminine. However, this Mariology is not an
easy read and far more abstract then she probably intends, considering her cri-
tique on the abstractness of Irigaray. Her conviction that these symbols need to
be divested of male fantasy and idealization before they can be an expression of
the realities and hope of women’s lives, in my view is not only a gross overesti-
mation of the power of theory/theology, but also ignores actual women’s
devotional appropriation of Marian symbols. Religious symbols, for better or for
worse, are free and are not the ‘property’ of theologians or church authorities.

Does she restrict herself, in her choice to be both critical and faithful to the
Catholic tradition, and in applying a method that emphasizes the relations
between language and power, in a strange way by giving too much honour to the
‘sexual authorities’ of this tradition? Is demonstrating the theological impover-
ishment of the tradition partly a re-inscription of the a-symmetrical dualisms,
considering the cultural and political power of the dominating sex/gender system?

Do we need to rethink sexual difference in the framework of this highly andro-
centric and hierarchical presetting of the Catholic symbolic and sacramental tra-
dition in order to claim, as Beattie does, gender justice? But other and more
important questions arise: Are there other ways to rethink sexual difference, with-
out making it the central symbol of a theology framed by an anthropology of
complementarity in which male and female ‘together’ form her renewed nuptial
model of her new sacramentality? Is she making too much of it, as many femi-
nists would argue? Too much of the relative and ambiguous ‘sexual’ difference,
by making this difference the most fundamental without further reflection on the
meaning and constructiveness of this seemingly complementary ‘gendered sex-
ual’? Furthermore, her opposition between justice/liberal – read secular – on the
one hand and sacramentality on the other hand seems to deny that it is also a
good Catholic tradition to consider them fundamentally and intrinsically related
(Ross 1998/2006). Besides, there is more sacramentality than Catholic orthodoxy
would like to admit, as can be seen in its reaction to popular Marian devotion.
Whether or not we are theologically convinced and/or inspired by these or other feminist Marian proposals, they demonstrate the power and strength critical feminist reflection brings to the reconstruction and transformation of a, for many women and men (Logister 1995), impossible and humiliating image to a possibly empowering one. This is not to deny the great diversity in positions, or the contradictory approaches, nor to neglect the theological controversies that also surround Mary in feminist theology (Althaus-Reid/Isherwood 2007, 63-80). But it makes visible that Mary, like all other central theological themes, is not imprisoned by ancient nor contemporary androcentric and submissive interpretations. In that sense these feminist proposals all subvert and contradict the asymmetrical model of gender complementarity, as well as the with this model intrinsically intertwined images, concepts and symbols of God, Jesus Christ, Church and human beings. Both Schüssler and Beattie are quite right to emphasize the untold, not yet reflected upon possibilities for transformation the image of Mary indeed offers: Mary as an image of the impossible?

3. Popular devotion and a Marian sense of presence

I now turn to Marian devotional practices in order to find out if a theological reading of these practices can lead to different or additional insights.5 I shall focus on and restrict myself to what I earlier called a “Sense of Presence”.

Present-day Marian devotions are hardly focused on Mary as a dangerous memory, first of the believers, nor on Mary as the image of the Church or the image of maternal priesthood. In popular devotions we recognize in particular the traditional images, the classical Marian icons. Images of the Mother of God, the Virgin, the image of the suffering mother, the Mother of Mercy, Mother of Perpetual Help, and the image of the divine/cosmic mother, they are all there and often simultaneously. Gebara and Bingemer observe that “the formulation of institutional dogmatics is ‘not much of a problem’ for the poor” (Gebara/Beringer 1987, 127).

In popular devotions people turn to Mary, despite or because of (church) political conflicts, repression, or alienation (Samson 2012). People turn to Mary for support, comfort, help, or in order to experience something of her ‘presence’, as individuals or as a group (Hermkens 2009). However undefined and unreflected this presence may be, people pray and go to Mary, confident that it will be worth their while: witness millions of people worldwide in their dealings with and images of Mary. This type of experience is mentioned by people who turn

5 The general lines of this paragraph are derived from an earlier article I wrote (De Haardt 2011).
to Mary during pilgrimages, when they light candles or pray in holy places (Zimdars-Swartz 1991; Post/Schuurmans 2006, 29-31/109-127) Following De Certau and Isasi Diaz, I call this experiences of presence; they are expressions of hope and desire, and as such experiences of a sense of ‘divine presence’ in its touch, nearness, comfort, sympathy, empowerment. And, equally important in light of the earlier Mariological discussions, here the divine presence is represented in female form, in a self-evident way and without any further comment or problem. In that sense Mary is God, for many of the devotees.

Maybe it is the unconditional aspect of this love, comfort, support and protection that characterizes these devotions and the sense of presence they generate: any one can turn to Mary, no matter who you are or what you do or believe or whether you believe. Even people for whom visiting a place of pilgrimage is just a Sunday-afternoon outing – which is often the case in Western Europe – feel ‘touched’, no matter how vague that may be. In this light Mary represents a specific dimension of divine presence: it is unconditional. According to Orsi it is precisely this presence in/through the images which makes that iconoclasts, religious or political, want to cut off the power of this presence in ‘things’, or to limit the access to this power of/in the presence of individuals or groups (Orsi 2005, 51). As in textual interpretations, devotions have prescribed meanings and can and have been manipulated by the powers that be, but these powers never have been capable of completely controlling them. For people do appropriate the images and interpretations of Mary. They turn to her out of desire, need, love, fear, desperation or anger. Her relational, divine presence; the compassion, mercy, protection, support, comfort and unconditional love they experience in and because of her presence, can indeed be dangerous for those powers. Consequently, in this relational presence a critical, social and ecclesiastical subversive power is hidden. Feminist liberation Mariologies also emphasize this subversive power, albeit seldom in relation to these devotions. The exceptions here are the Finnish Lutheran feminist liberation theologian Elina Vuola who did anthropological research on Mary and Marian devotions in Latin America (Vuola 2006/2012) and Hispanic feminist theologian Natalia Imperatori-Lee (2007). They too value the importance of lived religion and Marian devotions for systematic reflection. Nevertheless, it is important not to deny the dangers of nostalgic traditionalism and the re-inscription of the (gendered) status quo that can also be part of devotional practices.

Can this divine presence, which is represented in and through the woman Mary, be characterized still further? Two elements spring to mind: the meaning of physicality and materiality of Creation and the principle of sacramentality, both of which are represented in Mary in their own way.

Whether it concerns the pregnant Mary or the suffering mother, to the extent that Mary represents the divine, a strong physical component emerges. Life, also
in its religious or spiritual dimensions, is physical, embodied: giving birth and
nursing, feeding and caring, suffering and dying. Divine presence is not situated
outside this vulnerable and finite everyday life, which probably nowhere becomes
more explicitly clear than in the Marian images and devotions. Mary lived
through it all. Artists are the ones who portray this in impressive and moving
ways. Popular devotions immediately recognize and experience this as support
and comfort. In popular devotions and in feminist liberation Mariologies it is
precisely this concrete Mary who sustains women and men all over the world in
their suffering, powerlessness, anger and resistance. In that sense, a stark demys-
tifying and strictly biblical, and thus ‘sober’ Mariology, like that of Johnson or
Schüssler, has too little regard for the ambiguity in the image of the suffering
mother or other mother-images. Mary is more than the paradigmatic historical
mother who lost her special son, as Johnson would like to present her. Maybe
it is in the highly physical image of the Mater Dolorosa that the ambiguity and
the strength of the meaning of Mary show themselves in a very special way:
Mary is just like us and at the same time much more (Vuola 2006, 49). In my
opinion, the symbolic power of these Marian images can only be this strong and
universal if and when the support, involvement and presence of the divine is
experienced and/or experienced. And this, in my view and contra Beattie, is not
about mystification or symbolization of Marian motherhood but about the mys-
tery of God’s presence in the actual complex, vulnerable, embodied messiness of
life, here represented in female images.

Not only concrete physicality, but also, in a much broader sense, the impor-
tance of matter, and with it the sacramentality of Creation, becomes manifest
in Marian devotions and iconography. This can, for example, be inferred from
the many titles and the extensive cosmological and nature symbolism assigned
to Mary: Star of the Sea, Queen of Heaven, Mystical Rose, Seat of Wisdom.
Epithets, notable as in the Queen of Heaven title of the Theotokos refer to the
Mary as cosmic matrix, as matrix of incarnation and redemption (Sprednak
2004). As many scholars of religion have demonstrated, these titles and symbols
also refer to much older wisdom traditions in which the Creatrix Goddess or
Goddesses are prominent (Benko 1993). Marian titles and symbolism also res-
sonate with references to the divine that can be known in and through the nat-
ural world and of which, in principle, the entire creation can be a witness: Mary
of the forest, Our Lady of the Rivers, of the blackberries, etc. In Mary, through
the many symbols and names connected with her, the sacramentality of creation
is succinctly confirmed and celebrated. Not for nothing did countless devotional
Marian places originate at pre-Christian holy places such as crossroads or wells.
Both the meaning of the body and the materiality of divine presence, theologi-
cally translated into the age-old Catholic principle of sacramentality, in these
cases represented by Mary, offer a practical and experiential sense of and insight
in the ‘excess’ of the Divine and the abundance of Divine images and language. This too can be seen as opening up traditional, one-sided masculine and transcendent images of God, emphasizing as in the other Marian images, the unsayable presence, or if you prefer, the immanence of God.

By way of conclusion

Does this ‘via practica’ of Marian devotions, perhaps more convincingly than the Mariological discourses, manifest at least the possibility of a ‘different’ Mary and a ‘different’ God than classical Mariology presents? My reading concurs with that of Vuola who states that these devotions do offer an alternative thinking about incarnation (Vuola 2012). And thus, by implication, offer at least a beginning of an alternative thinking on God, creation and sacramentality. And could it be that this is the case because of and in spite of the power as well as the instability of traditional meanings and qualities Catholic Christianity attributed to Mary? For some people this ‘different’ Mary and ‘different’ God will simply be inspiring, others may have different sentiments, depending on place, time, and context related dimensions. My optimistic view does not deny that Marian devotional practices and places are sites of continuing struggle between and intertwining of the traditional submissive Mary and a more subversive Mary.

With regard to the central question of my paper, I now conclude that Marian devotional practices suffer from the same ambivalences, paradoxes and competing interpretations as contemporary Mariologies, whether feminist or not. They can and have been used to re-inscribe a traditional, women humiliating anthropology, supporting all kinds of actions against demonic gender ideologies, and at the same time Mary can empower women to resist and oppose this asymmetrical gender complementarity (Hermkens 2009 etc.). In my interpretation of these Marian devotional practices, Mary’s gender is relevant only in her representation of God. The above presented feminist theologians emphasize the necessity of this female representation in order to break the androcentric patriarchal ban. Mary’s motherhood however is not theologically relevant in her historical motherhood but in the ‘more’ that she reflects and represents. I do not see any reason to derive from Mary or attribute to her a sex/gender specific anthropology.

What is important in this sampling of diverse feminist Mariologies, is that it reveals that they are all engaged to contradict on theological grounds, the theological and scientific arguments made by ecclesial and especially papal authorities in their proclamation of an asymmetrical dualistic anthropology based on essentialist gender differences and their demonization of gender theory. According to Judith Butler this is a necessary and important task. Papal proclamations are too important in the social and political domain to be neglected. Therefore, in her
view: “let a thousand conflicts of interpretation bloom, I say! And I say this not because pluralism alone will ease our minds but because the proliferation of possible interpretations may well lead to the subversions of an authority that grounds itself in what may not be questioned” (Butler 2006, 289). With a variation on Catherine Keller’s recent work on God and her playful use of Cusanus’ possible and impossible “nicknames” for God (Keller 2015): in such a world Mary just might be an image of the Im/Possible.

**Literature**


Haardt, M. de (2004): Changing the subject, changing the method? Systematic implications of a turn to everyday practices”. In: Annali di Studi Religiosi 5, Edizioni Dehoniani Bolognina, 357-367.


**Author**

Maaike de Haardt, Nijmegen 1954, is professor of Religion and Gender at the Radboud University Nijmegen. She publishes on religion and culture, theology and everyday life, and public theology. She has a special interest in systematic theological reflections on God, sacramentality, anthropology and spirituality from the perspective of lived religion in a globalised and postcolonial urban context. Address: Postbus 9103, 6500 HD Nijmegen, Netherlands. Email: m.dehaardt@ftr.ru.nl.