

Mary and our Image of God - Part 2 of 6 - Diana of Ephesus to Mary of Galilee

The Early Centuries

Early Christian history, pre-Constantine, has found similarities between early church cult of Mary and the pervasive cults of the great mother. Readers of Jean Auel's popular *Earth's Children* series would be familiar with the cult in the Mediterranean world into which the church was moving. Little is known about how elements of the Hellenistic cults of female deities gathered around the person of Mary but similarities and differences are simply a matter of historical fact.

The church was not fashioned in a vacuum but absorbed many of the assumptions, verbal and visual imagery, and rituals of the surrounding culture into its own theology and liturgy. This affected not only the presentation of Mary, but also Jesus Christ, the martyrs and saints, and even the sacred mystery of God.

Christian veneration of Mary adapted elements from the popular mystery cults and substituted itself – historically in the fourth century, and psychologically in the human spirit – for cults wherein female deities played an absolutely central role. Church officials allowed this assimilation of pagan elements for two reasons: it was an excellent missionary strategy in a world where female deities were so highly honoured, and it reflected a sacramental view of reality in which, once 'baptised' and purified of its ancient content, any symbol could evoke God revealed in Christ.

But the question remained; among the people was such purification actually accomplished or whether in a form of syncretism the cult of Mary simply continued the veneration of the maternal power of the female deities.

From Diana to Mary

Adaptation took place in numerous ways. Places in nature where female deities had been honoured with pilgrimages and prayer became associated with Mary; grottoes and springs, mountains and lakes, shrines and temples to the goddess were rededicated to Mary the mother of God. Outstanding examples have been found in Rome, Athens, Chartres, and Ephesus (it being no accident that the doctrine of *Theotokos* – Mary, Mother of God was proclaimed enthusiastically in the same city where people in the time of Paul demonstrated in favour of their great goddess Diana [Acts 19:23-41]).

Artistic symbols of the goddess accrued to Mary: her dark blue cloak, many leveled crown, link with the moon and stars, with water and wind. The iconography of Mary seated with her child facing outward on her lap was arguably patterned on the pose of Isis whose attributes were sung in terms many of which applied to Mary – all holy, merciful, wise, universal mother, giver of fertility and blessings of life, protector of pregnant women and children, of sailors at sea, and all who call on her in need.

The Black Madonna

The still-venerated statues of the black Madonna at Le Puy, Montserrat, and Chartres are derived from ancient black stones connected with the fertility power of maternal deities, black being the colour of subterranean and uterine fruitfulness. Adapted into the iconography of classic Gallo-Roman mother goddesses, this symbolism was conserved in the sculpted image of the black virgin.

Another striking example in central Sicily is a church to Mary built over a temple dedicated to Ceres/Demeter and her daughter Persephone. Until Pius IX ordered it removed, an ancient statue of the goddess and her child had been used to represent Mary and the infant Jesus, despite the fact that the sculpted child was female. In the fourth century there was a sect, the Collyridians, made up mostly of women, who worshiped Mary as divine, offering sweet cakes before her throne as had many before them to the great mother. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (d.403) stepped in with "The body of Mary is holy, but she is not God... Let no one adore Mary."

For all the real differences in structure and content between the Christian faith and the mystery cults, the evidence is strong that there was a process of assimilation and adaptation of ideas and verbal and artistic imagery in the case of the emerging cult of Mary. While remaining independent, Christianity used the rich symbols of paganism purified of their ancient content to express its own revelation and capture the hearts of new believers accustomed to the power and good will of the female deities. Marian symbolism incorporates the imagery and language about divine reality flowing from the veneration of the great mother in the pre-Christian Mediterranean world.

On a more orthodox note

Accompanying this development was the voice of the Church Fathers. The earliest Mariology outside the New Testament was found in the citations from the writings of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 112 CE). Mary is mentioned within the texts on Jesus where the reality of Jesus' human nature issues from the human nature of his virgin mother Mary who shows the ordinary stages of motherhood: conception, pregnancy, and birth.

Mary is the human instrument of the completed human nature of Jesus Christ. Justin Martyr (100-165 CE) saw Mary as participating actively as the new Eve in the history of salvation and contrasts Mary/Gabriel and Eve/serpent. The two women as virgins-become-mothers are the foundations of his Marian theology. Irenaeus of Lyons (140-202 CE) was to develop the Eve/Mary parallel, emphasizing the obedience of Mary in contrast to the disobedience of Eve, with Mary as 'untying the knot of Eve's disobedience, loosed by the obedience of Mary'.

Mary is involved with Christ, the restorer and the perfection of the original project of God's creation. Irenaeus was to go beyond the new Eve and saw her as an image of the church, and a special cause in the history of salvation.

Sources

Johnson, E. A. (1989). Reconstructing a Theology of Mary, in Carr, A. *Mary Woman of Nazareth*. Paulist Press: New York.

Buby, B. (1996). *Mary of Nazareth*, Vol.III. Alba House: New York.

Published in the *Marist Messenger*, 29 September 2015.