Introduction: A Vehement Flame

Whether holding her baby in her arms, standing alone near the cross or altar, or appearing in glory crowned with stars in heaven, the image of the Virgin Mary is widespread and immediately recognizable, even by many outside the Christian fold. Mary is invoked with reverence in a host of liturgies, spiritual writings, theological reflections, and literary studies, and her image is the object of devotions in a wide range of places, from private altars to public spaces, from natural grottoes to roadside shrines. Not only is she revered as one of the few women mentioned in the Qur'an, she is also increasingly invoked as a source of inspiration in the spiritual practices of other faiths, including Buddhism, Hinduism and a number of alternative spiritual formations and new religions as well.[1] The parameters that govern the appearances of this figure in world religion are not, however, always very clear, nor is its meaning without problems and paradoxes.

Praised in the gospels as a faithful daughter of Zion, Mary is a highly contentious figure, to say the least, in Judaism, and while shebecomes in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, the symbol par excellence of institutional high-church Christianity, Protestants have until recently largely downplayed her role.[2] She is indeed celebrated in the Qur'an for her purity and her virginal conception of Jesus, yet the very basis on which she is there revered differs profoundly from that in Christianity, and in the history of Islam and its interactions with the West her role has been complex, sometimes unifying and sometimes highly divisive.

Humanists, too, have an ambivalent attitude toward Mary. While they have often found in Mary a universal symbol of sacred motherhood, they have also noted that she has often been deployed to bolster highly repressive regimes and psychologies. On the one hand, the familiar gestalt of a the tender mother cradling her beloved child in her arms is not only immediately recognizable but calls forth in all peoples deep, preverbal levels of response, while Mary's

1. *The Praying Virgin*, Mihail and Eutychios. Fresco by Mihail and Eutychios. Thirteenth century. Monastery Church, Ohrid, Macedonia. Photo credit: Eric Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

intact virginity and heavenly aura, whether regarded as mythic or literal, enable her to constellate not only a sense of sexual purity but a sense of femininity untrammeled by masculine projections and constraints. On the other, her name has been used as a shibboleth in various anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic formations, and her supposed asexual nature and apparent compliance with patriarchy have been used by both sides and in many different periods and

contexts as a weapon in challenges to and defenses of masculine dominance and feminine submission.

Nor are these problems alleviated by returning Mary to her more particular historical and theological context in high church Christian traditions. It is true that great part of her power derives from her role not simply as generic or idealized mother nor even as the mother of the specific person of Jesus but as a major witness to a very particular understanding of his life, death, and resurrection in the theology and ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. As a result of that understanding, Mary has become, among other things, a patron saint of their hierarchies and the hallmark or icon of their particular denomionations or identities. She has also been, however, even within those traditions, a point of repair for those who would open, supplement or break down their strict boundaries and beliefs. The tension between this role and her more universal significance is one of her most compelling aspects, and it takes us directly to the problem of her position in and among the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Mary's witness to the religious significance of her son's death and resurrection is apparent in many Roman Catholic and Orthodox representations of her across the centuries. In these, she is often seen standing near or hovering above the main altar on which the eucharist, or "sacrifice of the mass," is performed. She is sometimes even depicted in what is known as the *orans* position, a gesture of formal celebration and blessing which, though hard to interpret, seems almost hieratical in effect. While this representation, as we shall see, does not usually extend to making of Mary a priestly or even quasi-priestly figure (with important ramifications for later issues) it does suggest a closeness to the significance of the liturgy that the textual tradition does not always as clearly mark but that is of great importance to the understanding of her problematic and paradoxical role.

Thus in a medieval church interior from Ohrid in Macedonia (Figure 1), we see in the apse above the congregation a towering representation of the Virgin, arms raised and hands outstretched, standing alone in cosmic space and gazing out at the viewers below. Beneath her, in a separate zone demarcated by a line, is a quasi-historical scene from the early life of the church in which two apostles under a kind of tabernacle offer what must be the eucharist to lines of communicants. Below that, in yet another carefully defined zone, is a line of seven figures in priestly robes, upholding, as it were, both visually and symbolically, the apostolic precedent and liturgical order depicted above them. Arching around all three realms are medallions of the heads of the prophets and saints of the church universal.

The impression of the whole architectural and iconographic complex is one of an intersection between real and virtual experience, in which (to reverse the order of exposition just sketched) we approach first, as closest to the viewer, in the first or lowest zone: the duly constituted priesthood, administers of the eucharist available to the faithful in actual churches and present times. Our eye then moves up to another realm, one evoking the long tradition of receiving the "bread of life" stretching back in time. We then look up again, to the cosmic space where Mary floats, presiding over all of this liturgical activity, both real and virtual, her level gaze and arms uplifted in prayer offering a challenge to a full understanding of and participation in this ancient Christian rite linking heaven and earth. Here we have Mary as the high churches often see her, the patroness of their central ritual, the eucharist, which reinvokes the sacrificial death and resurrection of her divine son.

It is a far cry from this hieratic and cosmic figure in her elaborate ecclesiastical setting to the Mary of the gospels, the young girl in first century Palestine, a Israelite woman of small means but – or so it seems – of ancient lineage, who lives out her life on the margins of empire and even of the religious life of her own people, which center on Rome and Jerusalem respectively. Before turning to the long process of formation by which one "Mary" emerges from the other, let us first then call to mind the intense drama and paradox of even a rudimentary summary the story of her life as told in the New Testament. In the gospels, she appears as a young girl, engaged to be married, but a virgin.[3] She is visited by an angel, the angel Gabriel, by whom she is informed that she is destined to bear a son. This son is to be named Jesus, and he will be called "Son of God (Luke 1: 31, 35)." She is bewildered, but after a moment's questioning is able to offer the answer *yes*, to respond, in fact, with her famous fiat: "let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).[4]

The momentous implications of this *yes* are, however, yet to come. When he learns she is pregnant, Mary's fiancé, Joseph, first wishes to renounce her, but having been told in a dream that her child is a child of holiness, he takes her as his wife and places her under his protection (Matthew 1:18–24). A little later, we learn, she travels to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is also pregnant with a son of destiny. That son, who will become John the Baptist, leaps in the womb at Mary's visit, as if recognizing the fellow divinity of the child she carries. Elizabeth, too, hails her and celebrates her divinely inspired maternity. Mary is then described as uttering what has become known as the Magnificat, the poem beginning "My soul magnifies the Lord," a great hymn of faith in the God of her fathers and in a vividly evoked kingdom of justice and salvation – including the exaltation of the lowly, the feminine, and the weak – to be inaugurated in his name (Luke 1:39–56).

Some months later, Jesus, Mary's son, is born, poor and isolated, in a stable, although attended by many portents, human and divine (Matthew 2:1–12; Luke 2:8–13). As the traditions of her people require, she and her husband take him to be dedicated in the temple. On this occasion she hears that his destiny, while vital, will bring division to that people and will cause a "sword" to pierce her heart as well (Luke 2:21–32). Mary ponders this prophecy, but she goes on to raise her child in the faith of her fathers and she lives to see him come to maturity. At this point, she takes him to Jerusalem for the yearly sacrifice, where he impresses his teachers. Later he will, at her request, inaugurate water into wine for a wedding (John 2:11–11), and he will go on to draw crowds, perform miracles of healing and release, announce the imminent presence of something called the kingdom of God, and apparently allow, if not endorse, a number of extraordinary claims to be made on his behalf including perhaps the claims of messiahship and "sonship" of God.

As his life comes to a climax in these stories, Mary's son becomes an increasing cause for concern to her and to his family, as well as to both religious and secular authorities. At one point, she and his male relatives actually come to challenge him to pull back a bit. He sends them away rather abruptly, gesturing to his auditors and disciples and saying, according to the gospel of Mark, "*Here* are my mother and my brothers" (Mark:3:34; emphasis added). After a solemn and highly consequential last supper with his close friends and disciples during which he offers them bread and wine, which he refers to as his body and blood (Mark 14:22–24; Matthew 26:26–29; Luke 22:14–2). He is arrested and crucified before his mother's eyes (John 19:25). After three days, however, he rises from the dead, to inspire new disciples, new missions and a set of remarkable new religious practices, including some important and constitutive ones commemorating that last feast. Mary lives on into the initial period of these developments and is last glimpsed in the book of Acts joining in prayer with the disciples as they begin their new lives (Acts 1:14).

Over the centuries, this dramatic story and its complex relationship to the religious life of ancient Israel from which it springs and to Christians the faith and practice to which it leads generates not only the kinds of images for Mary that the Praying Virgin of Ohrid indicates, but many and widely varied devotional observances, ecclesiastical formations and theological debates. Among other things, it leads to a number of Marian doctrinal and typological formulations, unusual to say the least and variously held and debated among different Christian denominations. These include not only the assertion of Mary's virginal conception of Jesus, but an insistence on her own immaculate conception, her direct assumption into heaven, and her motherhood of the church, not to mention, more recently, controversies over her role as co-redemptrix

with her divine son.[5] They also include a huge and ramifying set of titles and typologies, from Daughter of Zion to Mother of God, from New Eve and New Abraham to Ark of the Covenant and Temple of the Temple, from Woman Clothed with the Sun to Queen of Heaven, Not only are these doctrines and typologies controversial within Christianity, where they are at the crux of many interdenominational and ecumenical disputes, but they also point to profound divergences between and among the three monotheistic faiths.[6]

ABRAHAMIC MONOTHEISM

This highly schematic outline of Mary's life and her role in Christian formation helps to set the parameters for a discussion of her significance, but it leaves many questions open and many terms and issues, both historical and analytical, still to be discussed. To take only one example, both the constant reference of christianity Judaism and Islam to Abraham and the term *monotheism* for the set of religions founded in his name are highly problematic. In general, as used here, these terms indicate a religious stance oriented toward a deity regarded as singular and singularly committed to humans, a stance in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as we shall see in more detail in a moment, all claim – often with reference to the Abrahamic precedent – a share.

As Yvonne Sherwood, a leading scholar of figural interpretations of the Bible, has remarked, "this is not to say that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are Abrahamic in any simplistic sense or that labeling these three religions as 'Abrahamic' might be any more helpful than labeling them a 'monotheistic.'" Each comes after Abraham, to be sure, but each traces itself differently back to him, "the autodidact with monotheism welling up inside him before Sinai, before Jesus, before Mumammad and before Torah, Qur'an and Christian Bibles." Each is also more than Abrahamic, however, just as Jesus is more than Abraham (Hebrews 7) and Muhammad takes his cult to a different location and gives it a different focus. Yet even as they exceed Abraham, Sherwood goes on to say, these three religions struggle to claim him as origin, or father, and to claim him, we might go on to note, in terms of reference to one God.[7] Furthermore, at the core of these competing perspectives lies a single important axiom, which is shared by all three faiths: the assumption of the active presence in human life of a singular divinity that not only has created humans but also reached out toward them both within and beyond the boundaries of their official religions or cults. As one ancient proverb has it, *God is a hidden treasure who desires to be known.* Though it is by no means the only paradigm possible for monotheism, and though it raises a host of theoretical and practical problems,

this view of a universal God actively engaged with individuals and peoples, indeed choosing to communicate with them outside of what might be called the usual channels, is a strong motif in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike, even where an attempt is made to avoid its more problematic implications and reductions.

As Jacob Milgrom, a major authority on sacrificial and legal traditions in the Hebrew Bible, has argued, the first principle of this understanding of divinity in Judaism is that God loves his people and lives among them. In this respect, he differs from many if not most divinities, who dwell in inaccessible places, on mountains, in the sky, or in remote lands and zones of existence. This God comes down from the mountain to speak with Abraham and others, and to live in a tabernacle among the children of Israel, a remarkable sign of divine favour but also a challenge and a problem, because of the potential blasphemy of intimacy with a God who comes so near.[8]

This sense of inrushing divinity is widely shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Most mainstream believers in these traditions today would affirm that it is the same God to whom their founding affirmations refer, from the touchstone for Jewish faith, the *shema* ("Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One God") through the first words of the Latin creed (*credo in unum deum*) to the Muslim prayer, the *shahada* ("there is no God but God"). Hence these religious formations have often had no choice but to embark on some kind of engagement with one another, whether violent or irenic. They are in a sense at times almost literal, "in one line of descent," as the Qur'an puts it (Surah 3:34), bound together by this direct engagement of Abraham and others with this God; and like all kinfolk, they belong to a common paradigm from which it is difficult, if not impossible, simply to opt out.[9]

The theologies that have crystallized around this common point of reference have taken many shapes and many centuries to form. Nevertheless, at their heart lies an increasingly clear and governing premise, the premise that a unique, omnipotent deity is not only alive and well but fully desiring of communication with human beings.[10] Furthermore, this deity seems to seek this communication across the whole domain formed by human signifying and social practices, not simply in the context of a private spiritual revelation, a ritual, or a particular cult.[11] In this view, deity seeks humanity in the actual unfolding of life and not simply in the context of formal practices or in the heavenly realm.[12]

This passionate desire for an opening between divine and human, for real conversation between God and people, is deeply constitutive of the religious life of the Abrahamic faiths. As God pays a call on Abraham and Sarah, wrestles with Jacob in the form of an angel, writes words on stone for Moses,

"overshadows" Mary to beget a son in Christianity and speaks directly to humans in the language of the Qur'an, he or she seems to behave at times more like a lover, husband, father, guest and/or friend than like a holy and remote form of pure Otherness. Indeed at times, though never without scandal and ambivalence, this intimate way of imagining God tends to define the zone in which the quest for divine contact takes place as an erotic and multivalent force field, rather than neutral or cult space separated from the secular and bodily realms.

In some cases – though decidedly not all – the charge of this force field becomes so strong that it is akin to speaking of a kind of direct, quasi-sexual and generative encounter between God and humans. In this paradigm, God becomes not only the universal creator of the cosmos but the Father, even the Spouse, of his people. As Biblical scholar Jon Levenson has shown, the Hebrew Bible even makes of him, in a way both metaphorical and at times seemingly more than metaphorical, the masculine progenitor of a particular line of humans. The New Testament compounds this move by making of him the progenitor of a particular son as well.[13] These initiatives, however, create as much dismay for humans as they do jubilation, a danger of which the Qur'an repeatedly warns. They risk blasphemy and compromise of the divine otherness and singularity, raising the specter of duality in the form of gender and implying, if not absolutely requiring, the role of women and mothers in their regard.

For if, as it seems, the unique and singular God of Israel is in some sense in direct contact with humans and is perhaps their interlocutor – in some theologies at least even their "father" – what prevents that divine holiness and separateness, that perfect "word," from undergoing profanation and decay? What protects the divine communication from those who would prostitute or trade on that proximity and willingness to engage? What would stand between God and impurity, the "corruptions" of language, and a sullying contact with sexuality, mortality, and death? Seen from this point of view, the problem of embracing a God who desires contact with humans is far greater than the issue of a mere metaphysical reduction or of affronting a powerful force. It entrains the possibility of widespread sacrilege and violence, and as a religious stance, it offers not only high potentials for humans but also high risks.

This understanding of a singular deity as a desiring agency, even when carefully qualified, has thus always been frightening as well as compelling for the peoples of the book. Adam and Eve, we are told, experienced that fear in the garden, as did Job when he trembled before the voice in the maelstrom and the Prophet when he was commanded by Gabriel to listen and recite. As has already been noted, the Qur'an warns repeatedly of the judgment that

attends a false approach to the divine in these terms. In *God's Phallus*, a study of gender in Biblical texts, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz observes that Israelite religion persistently imagined contact with the deity as a *terrifying* experience, a devastation, "resulting in death and disorder."[14] Even for Christians, with their strong sense of mediation, that fear is often present. As Robert W. Jensen notes, the most platitudinous of Sunday-school lessons, "Jesus loves me / this I know" contains enough "cognitive explosives" to create dismay as well as consolation.[15]

Hence, the sacred books of all three of the monotheisms are fraught with intimations of the drastic consequences of seeking and finding intimate contact with the divine, consequences ranging from paralysis and incarceration through internal divisions and rivalries to wholesale persecution, execution, war, and damnation. Shame, separation, wandering, blindness, stammering, broken speech, death, and exile attend those who are too close to the divine desire, and among its side effects are the exile of Adam and Eve, the murder of Cain, the tension between Ishmael and Isaac, the destruction of Babel, the wanderings of the Israelites, the split between the followers of Jesus and those they came to call the Jews, and the separation of the righteous from the unjust, the faithful from the unfaithful, the pure believer from the unclean infidel in Islam.[16]

A brief look at a particularly striking instance of conceiving of the divine desire as reaching out toward humans may more clearly make this point about the ambivalence it entails. In the Hebrew Bible's Song of Songs, a pair of divine and human lovers are mutually figured and refigured as courtier, king, and consort on the one hand and courted, queen, and servant on the other, with both sublime and terrifying consequences. Caught up in this volatile and charged field of discourse, lover and beloved sing back and forth to each other in an exchange where speaker and addressee constantly change places, separate, merge, and separate again. The poetry of their interplay is particularly well captured in the King James version:

> I sleep but my heart is awake.
> I hear my love knocking.
> "Open to me, my sister my beloved,
> my dove, my perfect one,
> for my head is wet with dew,
> my hair with the drops of night"
> (Song of Solomon, 5:2)

At various points, the Song of Songs records this collapse of spousal rapture, intercourse, and interchange into open conflict and dismay. At one point, the

speaker, constantly seeking contact with the beloved in the spring air, finds himself or herself catapulted into conflict:

> I went down to the nut orchard
> to see if the vines were budding
> and the pomegranate trees in flower
> before I knew, my desire had hurled me
> On to the chariots of Amminadib
> For love is a vehement flame (6:11 KJV).

In the effort to stabilize this charged discourse, some way must clearly be found to cool this "vehement flame." There are many efforts toward such a stabilization in the monotheisms, from the Qur'anic insistence that God is in no way a father and begetter to the establishment of specific times, places, cult circumstances, and specially designated persons for courting and mediating his incursions into human hearts and affairs.[17] Whether affirmed or resisted, however, these tensions and consequences are often an important underlying factor in the religions constructed around the Holy One of Israel; and they are at the heart of what one scholar has eloquently called the "double bind of monotheism," which I would define as the insistence among other things on a transcendent and entirely other divinity who is at the same time in conversation with particular humans and particular spiritual lineages and understandings.[18]

Although literally thinking of the God of Abraham as a speaker, as a lover, and perhaps even as a father who "begets" children is absurd, if not blasphemous, to abstract this speaking, loving, fathering, and begetting completely from the human realm, or to think of God's desire for communication as *merely* symbolic, risks limiting the deep and ramifying engagement of divine and human this deity seems to mandate. Furthermore, singular and problematic as it is, without this radical, exclusive, and sometimes highly gendered desire on the part of the divine to love and be loved, to know and be known, there would be little at all remarkable in any of the three Abrahamic faiths, and their religious insights would have probably remained at the level of a perennial philosophy or a minor cult on the margins of the empire of Rome.

GOD, GENDER AND SACRIFICE

Positing a single, all-powerful, and universal God as the lover and father of humans and individuals thus raises multifarious issues and problems, where affirmed and where questioned or resisted. As theologian Sarah Coakley has pointed out, to gender God, or indeed any of the three persons of the Trinity, and to valorize the resulting difference, is not only to reduce the divine to