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978-0-521-87156-3 - The Virgin Mary, Monotheism, and Sacrifice

Cleo McNelly Kearns

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THE VIRGIN MARY, MONOTHEISM, AND SACRIFICE

The Virgin Mary plays a major role in the sacrificial discourse of Christianity, exemplified by the incarnation and crucifixion, the eucharist, and the emerging ecclesiastical structure of the early church. Her place in this discourse is shaped not only by the particulars of her story but also by gender, motherhood, and the religious patrimony of ancient Israel as retrospectively understood by Christians. In this patrimony, the theme of sacrifice, especially that of a favored son, is a frequently occurring motif, a motif in which mothers play an ambivalent and emotionally fraught role. The Virgin Mary stands among these mothers as both exemplary and in some ways exceptional. Her relationship to sacrifice has profound implications not only for Christian theology but also for the later development of many monotheistic traditions, the institution of a masculine priesthood in some of them, and the role of gender and orthodoxy in creating and sustaining religious identities.

Cleo McNelly Kearns writes, teaches, and lectures in theology, critical theory, and the history and philosophy of religion. She is the author of *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: A Study in Poetry and Belief* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), as well as essays and articles in continental philosophy and literary criticism.

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For Christopher Kearns
Son after the order of Melchizedek



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Preface

This book had its genesis in a trip my husband and I took to Turkey several years ago. We went to Ephesus, where St. Paul had his troubles in the arena, and while we were there, during a ravishing spring filled with birdsong and blossoming trees, we visited a small shrine in the hills above the city said to have once been the home of the Virgin Mary. As legend has it, John, the Beloved Disciple, had taken her here to live after the events chronicled in the gospels, and here she stayed, receiving pilgrims and giving spiritual counsel, until her own passage from this life to rejoin her son in heaven. On the walls of the little house were written verses about Mary from the Qur'an, as well as prayers and devotions of the Christian faithful, together with the personal testaments of many anonymous devotees to healing and consolation.

It was at Ephesus that I first became conscious of the extent and depth of reverence for Mary beyond as well as within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, of the huge quantity of legendary and apocryphal material about her, and of her power and appeal across a range of religious and cultural formations, Christian and non-Christian alike.¹ Since then I have learned a great deal more about this complex figure, the widespread devotion she occasions, and her place in world religious culture, but I have not forgotten the initial impact of that small shrine, the inspiration many found there, and the numerous questions it raised.

Among those questions, three have been especially important motivations for this study: first, given the Biblical terms on which the Christian understanding of Mary is based, how is she able to serve on the one hand as an icon of orthodox high church traditions and on the other as devotional points of reference for so many outside the Christian fold? Second, how has she – a woman and a mother – become in some quarters the patroness par excellence of a masculine and hierarchical understanding of priesthood and at the same time a special source of consolation for women and outsiders to that

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order? Finally, how do the differing understandings of her in and among the three monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, help to divide or bring together these faith traditions?

I cannot fully answer these questions even now, because, as their terms already testify, the figure of Mary is something of a paradox. Not only does she mean different things to different people, but she also operates at times quite apart from the formal observances and theologies of the contexts in which she is found. Even in the most defined of her institutional and ecclesiastical frameworks, Mary is a puzzle, for she is both a central and consolidating figure in Christianity and a magnetic force on its margins, destabilizing its established meanings and opening its various paradigms to revision and change.

I have, however, come to understand some of the motivations and concerns that shape this multivalent figure and set the parameters for her role, both in the New Testament and in later times. This role, I hope to make clear, arises foremost from her ambivalent relationship to a discourse of sacrifice, both the “once for all” sacrifice of her son on the cross and the further sacrifices sometimes authorized – or not – in his name. Mary both underwrites this discourse of sacrifice and challenges its terms, offering a potential for transcendence as well as understanding. Ephesus gives a glimpse of this potential, and I hope readers may sense it at work here as well.

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A study of this kind requires that the writer be constantly admonished to stay grounded in body and spirit. I am specially thankful here for the wisdom of

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David la Chappelle, for the practice of yoga as taught by Joanne Carter and Jimmy Richardson, and for the welcoming community of fellow travelers at Our Lady, Joy of All Who Sorrow (Orthodox Church of America). Our family dogs, Roshi and Troy, have contributed a saving animal presence and a constant demand for exercise, a demand not always welcome but always of benefit. My greatest debt, however, is indicated in the dedication.