Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary

Review Number:
820
Publish date:
Saturday, 31 October, 2009
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ISBN:
9780300105001
Date of Publication:
2009
Price:
£30.00
Pages:
533pp.
Publisher:
Yale University Press
Place of Publication:
New Haven, CT
Reviewer:
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At the conclusion of her history of Marian devotion, *Mother of God,* Miri Rubin states, ?For in woman?s capacity to act as a generous host, to contain a body in her body, there is an act of tremendous hospitality? (p. 424). In many ways, this statement encapsulates the focal point of both Rubin?s book and of the mystery and fascination that so many people have found in the person of the Virgin Mary. Mary represents at one level every woman?s ability to conceive and nurture human life, but in her, that ability has been exalted to a participation in the Christian mystery of redemption through her willingness to welcome into her own body the God made flesh.

Rubin?s book seeks to explore the myriad expressions of interest in Mary by presenting a complete history of Marian beliefs and devotion from its early roots in the Biblical texts until the close of the 16th century. As such, it is a brave and ambitious work. Aside from the many more narrowly focused studies concerning Mary that appear each year, perhaps the most daunting prospect in such a task is the fact that there is no area of Christian life and thought, from at least the 2nd century on, that is not related in some way, whether devotionally or theologically to Mary. Because of this, Rubin?s sources necessarily come from a wide spectrum of materials, formal theological treatises, miracle stories and plays, sermons, music and architecture and the visual arts.

There is no one overarching thesis in Rubin?s book, and its length combined with the immense amount of

factual material included makes it difficult to do more than summarize the general structure of the book in a review. The first five chapters of the book explore the early development of devotion to Mary and largely concern the Church in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire as the most fertile ground for producing new growth in Christian theological concepts of all kinds. Rubin also includes here a short discussion of the contributions made by the Latin Doctors, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome and St. Augustine, as well as by the controversial North African writer, Tertullian. Rubin describes the growing importance of the Virgin Mary as a regal symbol of Constantinople, rising to prominence as the chief citadel of Roman power in the east. As Constantinople was the locus of concentrated power in the Christian Roman Empire, so Mary as Theotokos (The God-Bearer) was crucial to the history of salvation and had shown her favor to the imperial city through the presence of her relics in its churches and shrines. Also discussed in this first part of the book is the creation of early Jewish literature which sought to oppose the Christian narrative of Jesus? conception and birth. Indeed the interplay between the lavish displays of Marian piety permeating Christian Europe and Jewish resistance to Christian anti-Semitism and to absorption by that culture is a recurring theme throughout the book.

Perhaps the most significant omission in this section of the book concerns Rubin?s discussion of contributions made by the first couple of centuries of Christian literature to the development of Marian doctrine and belief. Rubin rightly points out the fact that an early interest in Mary?s life resulted in the creation of the apocryphal *Protevangelium of James*, but she concludes regarding more orthodox writers that ?Mary drew little attention from the formative thinkers engaged in imaging and writing a Christian universe (p. 16)?. While there is a brief mention of the early Christian apologist, St. Justin Martyr, and his defense of Mary?s virginity at the time of conceiving Christ, there is no discussion of his importance as the first Christian writer to articulate Mary?s role in salvation history as the Second Eve. In his *Dialog with Trypho*, Justin argues that as the virgin Eve, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought death into the world, so the Virgin Mary conceived Christ through obedience to the word of the angel Gabriel. Even more surprising is the fact that Rubin omits the significance of St. Irenaeus altogether. Irenaeus, whose work, *Against Heresies*, might be considered the Church?s first systematic theological treatise, took Justin?s brief discussion of Mary as Second Eve and made it an integral part of his doctrine of recapitulation. Based on St. Paul?s discussion of Jesus as the Second Adam, Irenaeus argues that all aspects of a fallen humanity have been taken up, relived, and remade in Christ. This naturally led to a discussion of the ways in which Mary?s life had likewise recapitulated, in a positive manner, the experience of Eve. It is a far more involved treatment of the issue than that found in Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus didn?t hesitate to describe Mary as having become the advocate of Eve through her obedience to the will of God. There are few titles accorded to Mary with a greater theological significance than that of Second Eve. Cardinal Newman even suggested that this title already implied the notion of the Immaculate Conception since the original Eve, mother of all those living in the old creation, was created originally sinless by God.

One of the more unusual chapters of the book, chapter six, ?Beyond the Greek World?, sees the new 7th-century religion of Islam and its ideas of Mary placed in a rather uneasy juxtaposition beside the cultivation of Marian devotion by popes and clergy in the Western Roman Empire from its fall in the 6th century until the early 8th century. Apart from chronology, the reason for combining these two topics in one chapter is not altogether clear, and the continuity between the period of the Latin Doctors of the 4th and early 5th centuries and the work of the later Latin bishops and theologians is broken in this arrangement. Nevertheless, the major theme that begins to take shape here is that the Virgin Mary is linked to the fact that, following Rome?s collapse, bishops of Rome begin to emerge in Western Europe as powerful ecclesiastical and political figures and as guardians of orthodoxy. In this process, Mary is incorporated into the increase of papal power in much the same way as she had with imperial power in Constantinople. Successive bishops of Rome, beginning with Popes Celestine I and Sixtus III in the 5th century, build and dedicate churches to Mary, who even acquires by the 7th century the title, *salus populi Romani (salvation of the Roman people).*

Because Rubin is a medievalist, and also because the Middle Ages witnessed the spectacular explosion of devotion to Mary, it is not surprising that most of the book?s remaining chapters deal with the various manifestations of medieval Marian piety in all areas of life from cloistered monasticism to new expressions

of Christian lay devotion that emerged in the later Middle Ages. In chapter seven, Rubin begins to look at Mary in the context of the early Middle Ages. As one would expect, she opens with adiscussion of the crucial part played by the Carolingians in establishing Marian piety throughout the empire. This was accomplished principally by promoting the celebration of Marian feast days and through the dedication of churches in her honor. A fairly lengthy section follows dealing with the importance of Mary in early British Christianity. This is appropriate given the Celtic preservation of classical Christian civilization generally and the fact that English devotion to Mary would later become fervent enough to earn England a designation as ?Mary?s Dower.? Rubin concludes the early medieval portion of the book by quickly moving forward chronologically to explain the situation of Marian devotion on the European continent by around the year 1000. Mary had now acquired an exalted position at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of power ?linking heaven and earth? (p. 116). The supreme earthly representative of power was the king, whose connection to the triune God was assured by the patronage of Mary, Mother of God.

The next three parts of Rubin?s book, chapters 8?20, explore further developments in devotion to Mary in the high and late Middle Ages. This section forms the core of the book and begins with a relatively lengthy look at the celebration of love for Mary in monastic art, liturgy and music, particularly as related to the feast of the Assumption and the depiction of Mary?s coronation as Queen of Heaven. Included here is the rich musical and poetic legacy of St. Hildegard of Bingen and the ubiquitous influence of the Cistercian order throughout Europe, an order dedicated specifically to Mary and popularized by one of Mary?s most devoted admirers, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. There is also a focus on the significance of Biblical commentary in fostering theological reflection on Mary and in occasionally provoking polemical attacks on Judaism. Especially important for the development of insight into the multifaceted meaning of Mary is commentary on *The Song of Songs*, which inspired a romantic approach to Mary that parallels the contemporary secular love poems of the troubadours, although Rubin does not deal with this similarity of theme in her work.

Rubin also highlights the significance of the sermons of the new orders of friars, such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, in spreading love for Mary beyond the walls of the cloister, beginning in the 13th century. These orders engaged directly with the world in service and in preaching to the people in their own vernacular language. Their sermons were often illustrated by Marian miracle stories which circulated in popular collections and which encouraged people to trust in Mary both to intercede with God on their behalf and to procure miraculous interventions from God in their own lives. These same sermons were also responsible for helping to create among the people an understanding of the intimate connection between the suffering of Mary at the cross and the suffering of her son, thus highlighting her involvement in the central act of salvation. As the laity were brought to appreciate more fully the wealth of devotion to Mary previously experienced only by men and women of religious orders, they sought to incorporate this into their daily lives in both public and private ways. This led to the growing popularity among the literate populace of books of hours, and among all, to creation of meditative forms of prayer, including the Rosary. Lay confraternities devoted to Mary were also organized by both men and women. In this medieval portion of *Mother of God*, there is one significant omission in Rubin?s discussion of the impact of contemporary intellectual developments on ideas concerning Mary. Rubin fails to discuss the importance of Aristotle?s work in reshaping scholastic thought about women and their role in reproduction. A theologian or preacher who adopted Aristotelian biology was likely to portray Mary as passive in her conception of Christ, while those who accepted the theories of Galen tended to see her role as more active. Even more important, Aristotle?s belief that a woman?s menstrual blood was used to form the body of the child in the womb, and his corresponding belief that breast milk was likewise produced by transforming the mother?s blood into food for the child created a rich source of inspiration for a host of medieval reflections on Mary?s bodily relation to Jesus. This resulted in an emphasis on Mary?s blood that had formed Jesus? body and fed him at her breast, and included Aristotelian explorations of Mary?s intimate connection to the body and blood of Christ received in the Eucharist. While Mary?s association with the Eucharist had been recognized at least as early as St. Ephrem in the fourth century, it received a new source of significance with acceptance of Aristotle?s distinctive biological concepts.

The final three chapters of *Mother of God* (chapters 21?3) are centered on the challenges and opportunities

brought to traditional Catholic devotion in the 16th century. The religious upheaval created by the Protestant challenge to all devotion to the saints, Mary included, meant that Catholics would have to respond. As they did so, even Catholic devotion to Mary would not remain totally unchanged. There were also new expressions of Marian piety in lands conquered or evangelized by European powers in Asia, and North and South America. The cultural links between Europe and the new world in the Early Modern period and the ways in which these diverse cultures interacted and influenced each other has been a major inspiration for research over the last few years, and Rubin has much to draw on to enrich her picture of Marian devotion in the European colonies. Finally, Rubin returns to Europe exclusively and provides a picture of the place of the Virgin Mary toward the end of the 16th century, as European Christians began to adapt themselves and their religious lives to the situation of a religiously divided Christendom.

Given the scope of Rubin?s book and the consequent necessity of synthesizing so much historical material, one is hesitant to offer many general criticisms, however the fact that there is no overall interpretive framework for the book does mean that at times it might be difficult for the reader to grasp the persistence of central themes in Marian devotion over time and fully to understand their significance. This is also most likely the reason for a certain degree of repetitiveness in dealing with some of the material. One example would be the incorporation of devotion to Mary into private family life. This appears in three places in the book, all of them dealing essentially with the medieval period: ?Mary in Parish and Home, (pp. 217?20)? ?Mary of Parish Practice and Family Life? (pp. 313?31), and ?Mary of Hearth and Home? (pp. 358?60). While it is true that the last of these sections falls in chapter 21, which introduces the way in which Mary was dealt with by reformers in the 16th century, the material discussed generally dates from the late 15th or very early 16th century, prior to either the Protestant or Catholic Reformations.

In spite of this, it would be wrong to give the impression that Rubin?s book is anything but a significant achievement. One of the more obvious benefits of her work is that she introduces scholars to a wide range of recent research concerning Mary?s place in Christian thought and practice. With this in mind, a bibliography would have been a valuable addition. Rubin also offers the general reader many insights into the ways in which Marian devotion has shaped the growth and development of Christianity throughout the world, not only in the Eastern Church or Western Europe. Finally, the book is especially important for familiarizing a broader reading public with the fact that Mary has often been used polemically to oppose Jewish rejection of Christianity, something usually omitted in works designed specifically for Christian readers. Miri Rubin?s *Mother of God* is a significant addition to the ongoing exploration of the Virgin Mary in Christian history.

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