

**Mary – not just for Catholics**  
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Thanks for coming to this final Thurber Thursday session - of 2012, that is, not in an absolute sense (I hasten to add to any representatives of the Mayan or Zombie Apocalypse communities who may be with us tonight).

Let me briefly explain why I chose to entitle this presentation 'Mary – not just for Catholics'. Once two Methodists were talking after a sermon at their Church on the importance of Jewish-Christian relations, and one said to the other 'Wow, I never realized that Jesus was a Jew', to which the other replied 'Amazing when you think that his mother was a Roman Catholic.'<sup>1</sup> My basic contention over the next hour or so will be that, for those of us whose background is in the Protestant tradition – which of course includes myself -, there is no Biblical figure (or area of theology) so misunderstood as the Mother of God incarnate. In the short amount of time available, I would like to present a thumbnail history of how this came about, indicate some signs from recent ecumenical dialogue suggestive of change, and give some reasons why I feel that this is a matter of considerable importance and urgency.

My talk will basically be divided into two parts. The first, which I will try to keep as short as possible, will essentially be historical (but before you start yawning, please don't tune out during this essential groundwork, which cannot be skipped if we want to understand how modern misunderstandings have come about). Then we will switch gears and move into more evidence-based territory, applying some of the methods familiar from our sessions on science and faith in a deliberately provocative attempt to discern what is going on in contemporary Mariology and why.

I would like to underscore that I take sole responsibility for the views expressed, and so it would perhaps be useful for me to give a little information as to my starting-point and how I embarked on what has for me been a surprising and I would even say transformative inquiry. As many of you know, I am from a Methodist background which is not naturally friendly towards expressions of Marian piety or Catholicism in general. However, for 25 years now I have been involved with the ecumenical community of Taizé in Burgundy, whose founder, Reformed pastor Roger Schütz, made reconciliation between Christian traditions his life's quest. 'Ecumenism' is a much-abused word, as it all too frequently turns either into nothing more than condescending tolerance of our mutual eccentricities or else a minimalism based on quietly discarding anything from Christian belief that cannot be affirmed by all faiths and philosophies. This was absolutely not the sense in which Brother Roger understood the word. His ecumenism was born out of profound pain and shame at the division of the Body of Christ, an understanding of the absolute necessity of restoration, and a commitment to embracing what is most precious from each of the three strands of Christianity, Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic. To use a telling phrase of Cardinal Walter Kasper (who officiated at his funeral following his murder during a prayer service in 2005), Brother Roger's ecumenism was one of the 'highest common denominator'. In seeking to honour the best of the Protestant tradition, he identified the emphasis on the Scriptures as the greatest treasure, whereas in the case of Eastern Orthodoxy, he looked to the mystical depth of Eastern Christian spirituality and the sublime beauty of Orthodox liturgy. As for Catholicism, Roger

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from John Newton, 'Mary, Mother of the Lord, sign of grace, faith and holiness: reflections on the Methodist-Roman Catholic joint statement' in William McLoughlin, Jill Pinnock, eds, *Mary is for Everyone: Essays on Mary and Ecumenism* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997), 171-180: 171.

Schütz affirmed the universality of the Catholic vision (expressed through a universal Pastor in the seat of Peter), the miracle of the Eucharist and the rôle of Mary in God's plan of salvation, co-authoring the book 'Mary, Mother of Reconciliations' with Mother Teresa of Calcutta. In 1980, at a meeting for young adults held in St Peter's Basilica in Rome, he affirmed the position that I would like to make my own: "I have found my own Christian identity by reconciling within myself the faith of my origins with the Mystery of the Catholic faith, without breaking fellowship with anyone."<sup>2</sup> In this his success was ground-breaking: towards the end of his life, he was personally given Communion by both Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI in the full knowledge that, contrary to rumours posthumously spread in the French press, he technically remained a Protestant (following the personal advice of Pope Paul VI). Frère Roger's life is an inspiring precedent upon which we would do well to meditate. I believe that it is somehow also convergent with the vision expressed in the six wooden figures around the ACP pulpit, who include not only Luther, Calvin and Wesley but also John XXIII, the Pope with whom Brother Roger was intimately linked and who called the Second Vatican Council, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of which has been celebrated this year.

So, on the specific topic of the Virgin Mary, how did the Christian churches get where they are today. Or, to put it slightly more pointedly, how did it come about that most of the Protestant tradition has taken a radically divergent stance regarding her from that taken both by Catholics and Eastern Orthodox?

In the early Church, the question of Mary was obviously subsidiary to the debates of the first centuries concerning how to talk about the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The growing honour accorded to Mary arose from and was intrinsically linked to the debates about the nature of Christ. When the Church officially proclaimed Mary as *Theotokos*, 'God-bearer' or Mother of God in the fifth century (against Nestorius, perhaps a little unfairly as recent research suggests that Nestorius himself was not a 'Nestorian' as the term later came to be defined), it was to protect the notion that Jesus Christ was genuinely one person, both human and divine, not a man who was subsequently adopted by God. In other words, veneration of Mary was in the exclusive context of worship of Christ, God and man (this distinction between veneration and worship is fundamental to everything that I will be saying this evening). It is crucially important to recognize that the title *Theotokos* does not mean that Mary is the mother of God the Eternal Logos, begotten of the Father before all worlds; Mary remains a created being like us who is absolutely qualitatively different from God. But as the one in whose womb God Incarnate dwelt bodily and from whom he took his flesh (and his genetic material, to put it in contemporary language), Mary's status is truly unique. Good examples of Marian devotion by the early Christians can be found in the liturgies of some of the greatest Church Fathers, St John Chrysostom and Basil the Great, which are the best indication of the faith of Orthodox Christianity during the same period in which the New Testament canon itself was affirmed in its definitive shape:

Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom:

*It is truly meet and right to bless you, O Theotokos,  
Ever blessed and most pure, and the Mother of our God.  
More honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the  
Seraphim,  
Without defilement you gave birth to God the Word.  
True Theotokos, we magnify you!*

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Osservatore Romano*, August 15, 2008. English translation available online at <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/206302?eng=y>

From the Divine Liturgy of St Basil the Great :

*All of creation rejoices in you, O Full of Grace,  
The assembly of Angels and the race of men.  
O Sanctified Temple and Rational Paradise! O Glory of Virgins!  
From you, God was incarnate and became a child, our God before the ages.  
He made your body into a throne, and your womb He made more spacious than the  
heavens.  
All of creation rejoices in you, O Full of Grace! Glory to you!*

Eastern Orthodoxy – for which adherence to the faith expressed in the ecumenical councils of the first millenium remains normative - has, significantly, never departed from this view of the Mother of God Incarnate; Chrysostom’s words are still sung today. In the West, there was also virtually no argument about the exalted status of Mary until the major turbulence of the Reformation period. However, the trouble clearly started much earlier; as Rowan Williams puts it in his remarkable early book *The Wound of Knowledge*, ‘the later Middle Ages witnessed a marked degeneration in much Christian thought and practice over large areas of the Christian world’.<sup>3</sup> He characterizes this degeneration in terms of the split between an increasingly intellectualized theology (counting angels dancing on the heads of pins) and a piety marked by ‘devotional overheating’<sup>4</sup> in reaction to it. It was in this period that the first millenium’s veneration of Mary in relation to Christ arguably acquired a life of its own, breaking free from theological control. A joint recent statement entitled ‘Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ’ put out by the Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission summarizes this usefully:

*In the Late Middle Ages, scholastic theology grew increasingly apart from spirituality. Less and less rooted in scriptural exegesis, theologians relied on logical probability to establish their positions, and Nominalists speculated on what could be done by the absolute power and will of God. Spirituality, no longer in creative tension with theology, emphasized affectivity and personal experience. In popular religion, Mary came widely to be viewed as an intermediary between God and humanity, and even as a worker of miracles with powers that verged on the divine.<sup>5</sup>*

Part of the reason why Mary became divorced from Christology was that the late Medieval view of Christ became excessively focused on his rôle as the severe judge, as can be seen from some of the extant Cathedral porticos of the period. While this is perhaps understandable given that the era of the Black Death in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century must have seemed truly apocalyptic, it stands to reason that Mary, instead of being the one to lead Christians to her Son, would become the one to protect us *from* her Son.

It was against all this that the Reformers reacted and, with the benefit of hindsight, over-reacted in some respects. Again, the Anglican-Catholic joint statement provides a balanced appraisal that can serve as a possible basis for ecumenical consensus:

*Together with a radical re-reception of Scripture as the fundamental touchstone of divine revelation, there was a re-reception by the Reformers of the belief that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. This entailed a rejection of*

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<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge : Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA : Cowley, 1991), 149.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>5</sup> **The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) *Mary Grace and Hope in Christ* § 43.** Available online at [http://www.aco.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/mary\\_grace%20\\_and\\_hope.cfm](http://www.aco.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/mary_grace%20_and_hope.cfm)

*real and perceived abuses surrounding devotion to Mary. It led also to the loss of some positive aspects of devotion and the diminution of her place in the life of the Church.*<sup>6</sup>

However, it is important to realize that this reaction against Marian piety in the generation of the *first* Reformers was by no means as sweeping as Protestants frequently imagine. Here, another ecumenical study provides some extremely useful contextual information, this time by the Reformed and Catholic French theologians of the Groupe des Dombes.<sup>7</sup> Zwingli for example retained the Feast-Day of the Assumption, the term *Theotokos* and the first Scriptural part of the *Ave Maria* (which was after all the same that Thomas Aquinas had known when he delivered his sermon on the text in 1273). Calvin maintained the belief in Mary's perpetual virginity and her rôle as an example and teacher. But it is the case of Martin Luther which is perhaps the most striking. Luther justifiably opposed honoring Mary for her own sake independent of Christ, but argued strongly that to venerate her is to praise God. 'She is nobility, wisdom and holiness personified. We can never honour her enough. Still honor and praise must be given to her in such a way as to injure neither Christ nor the Scriptures', he wrote in his Christmas Sermon of 1531. Luther was arguably far more Marian not only than most present-day Lutherans but also than many revisionist Catholic theologians writing today, even defending a belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary three centuries before the Catholic dogma on the subject was pronounced. In his Christmas sermon of 1522 he puts the Christian's relationship to Mary very clearly in a way with which no contemporary orthodox Catholic would disagree: 'It is the consolation and superabundant goodness of God, that man is able to exult in such a treasure. Mary is his Mother, Christ is his Brother, God is his Father.'

What seems to have happened is that in the later sixteenth century, as the positions of both Protestants and Catholics hardened in opposition to one another, emphasizing divergence over commonality became a means of defining identity on both sides. As a consequence the whole tradition of Catholic Marial piety became alien territory to Protestants (there were of course exceptions, including that other great Reformer John Wesley who believed, like Luther and Zwingli, in the perpetual virginity of Mary and personally used the Rosary). This was especially true of the Protestant perception of popular Catholic devotion; for example, the apparition of the Virgin to Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes in 1858 seems to have sparked little if any engagement as to its authenticity from the Protestant side. The thought-categories of Catholicism had become so foreign to Protestantism that the latter simply had no tools for any kind of reasoned appraisal. In other words, Mary was 'just for Catholics'.

If this stereotypical situation has by and large persisted until today, there are however some signs that a re-alignment may be in progress as the result of courageous ecumenical discussions. This dialogue was given a huge boost by Vatican II, whose pronouncements on Mary have surely gone a long way to clearing up the misunderstandings of the sixteenth century. These are heavily quoted in the work both of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission and in a similar document produced jointly by Methodists and Catholics.<sup>8</sup> Historical scholarship has clearly identified that the problems of the Reformation period resulted from considering Mary in isolation from a Christological context. The ecumenical way forward would therefore obviously seem to lie in a return to the faith of the first millenium, in which Mary and Jesus are tied together indissolubly, where the primacy of

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, § 44.

<sup>7</sup> See Groupe des Dombes, *Marie dans le dessein de Dieu et la communion des saints : les questions controversées et la conversion des Eglises* (Paris : Bayard, 1997), 42 ff..

<sup>8</sup> British Methodist/Roman Catholic Committee, *Mary, Mother of the Lord: Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1995).

Christ is unassailable. Once that is in place, honouring Mary and affirming her rôle as an intercessor (not 'mediator' in the same sense as Christ, on whom she totally depends) is not a threat to Christ. Instead, to give honour to Mary is automatically to honour her Son. Here the authors of the Methodist/Catholic joint statement 'Mary, Mother of the Lord' are agreed:

*We reject any understanding of Mary which detracts from the primacy of God, of Christ and grace, or which undermines our common Christian faith in Jesus Christ as the one Mediator between God and humanity*<sup>9</sup>

Vatican II's constitution on the Church entitled *Lumen Gentium* puts it this way:

*We have but one Mediator [...]. The maternal duty of Mary toward men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. For all the saving influences of the Blessed Virgin on men originate, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. They flow forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rest on His mediation, depend entirely on it, and draw all their power from it. In no way do they impede the immediate union of the faithful with Christ. Rather, they foster this union*<sup>10</sup>

There is much to indicate that progress is being made in inter-confessional dialogue, the rôle of Mary being one area that cannot be avoided if there is to be a prospect of inter-communion between the Christian traditions. It is surely significant that in September 2008, Rowan Williams became the first ever Anglican archbishop to preach at an international Mass in Lourdes (despite predictable accusations of being a 'papal puppet'<sup>11</sup>).

Lourdes, however, brings us to the point in this talk at which I will switch registers. So what, the cynics might argue, so what if there is a rapprochement between certain Churches on the subject of Mary. What if they are simply *all agreeing to be wrong together*? It is at this juncture that I would like to argue that there are indeed compelling reasons to take notice of a trend, in certain quarters at least, of a return towards a first-millennium Christian consensus and the reaffirmation of Mary's unique place in God's plan of salvation. The evidence, however, is not to be found in documents produced by high-level Church commissions that, if we are honest about it, very few people read. It is rather to be found in empirical data and precisely the sort of first-hand experience that Rowan Williams has boldly chosen to affirm by his act of pilgrimage to Lourdes.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., quoted William McLoughlin, Jill Pinnock, eds, *Mary is for Everyone: Essays on Mary and Ecumenism*, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, November 21, 1964, § 60.

Available online at

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

<sup>11</sup> See Martin Beckford, 'Dr Rowan Williams becomes first Archbishop of Canterbury to visit Lourdes', *The Telegraph*, September 24, 2008, consultable online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3073175/Dr-Rowan-Williams-becomes-first-Archbishop-of-Canterbury-to-visit-Lourdes.html>

## FIVE LINES OF EVIDENCE

Let me summarize what I have called ‘five lines of evidence’ for the case which I am mounting here (and which, I repeat, naturally only represents my personal opinion):

- i) near-death experience
- ii) spontaneous resurgence of Marian themes in sacred art
- iii) exorcism reports
- iv) writings of contemporary mystics
- v) Marian apparitions, many of them not taking place in a Catholic context

Any one of these could provide material for a whole session, so my treatment is necessarily going to be extremely cursory in what follows.

- I will not dwell on near-death experience, a topic I have covered in previous presentations, except to say that while it might be expected that Catholics would give accounts of out-of-the body meetings with Mary, there are also such reports from non-Catholics (the most notable recent example being a Baptist woman named Gladys L Hargis from Topeka, Kansas<sup>12</sup>).
- Concerning trends in the arts, I am thinking of the fact that, from the 1970s onwards, there has been a remarkable flourishing of new sacred music with Marian themes by Orthodox and even Protestant composers whose music sounds remarkably similar even though the composers in question were not in contact with one another (names here include the Estonian Arvo Pärt, Henryk Gorecki from Poland, Englishman John Tavener, Scotland’s James MacMillan and lately the young Latvian Baptist composer Eriks Esenvalds).
- As for exorcisms, the testimonies to the power of appeals for intercession on the part of Jesus’s Mother are frequent and striking. Here the best-known accounts are provided by the extensive memoirs of Gabriele Amorth, exorcist to the Diocese of Rome.<sup>13</sup> Amorth, honorary life president of the International Society of Exorcists, is one of the most authoritative living experts in the field, having conducted tens of thousands of exorcisms over a period of 25 years (his writings also contain extensive discussions of near-death experience accounts and Marian apparitions).
- Latter-day prophetic and mystical writing is naturally a hugely controversial subject, one where extreme caution and discernment needs to be exercised in sifting out what may be true from what is almost definitely false. Again, a proper consideration of what I feel is a highly important and neglected subject is outside the scope of this evening. I would nonetheless like to emphasize that, in the case of the very few contemporary seers to have gained a major following in official Church circles, the testimony to the intimate ongoing inter-connection between Jesus and Mary is unanimous. Here I am thinking particularly of the 3000 or so pages I have studied penned by the late Archbishop Ottavio Michelini<sup>14</sup> (whose writing has never to my knowledge received an official refutation), Don Stefano Gobbi and, from outside the Catholic world, the 70 year-old Greek Orthodox Egyptian-born former tennis champion

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<sup>12</sup> Gladys L. Hargis, *“You Live Forever”* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2010), 38.

<sup>13</sup> See Padre Gabriele Amorth, interviewed by Marco Tosatti, *Memorie di un esorcista : La mia vita in lotta contro Satana* (Rome : Piemme, 2010), passim..

<sup>14</sup> Ottavio Michelini, *Confidences de Jésus à ses prêtre et à ses fidèles données à Monseigneur Ottavio Michelini* (6 vols.) (Hauteville : Editions du Parvis, 1990). Available online in partially satisfactory English translation in pdf form, ‘Confidences of Jesus to a Priest’, at <http://www.ottavio-michelini.com/Files/PDF/English-Buchform884S.pdf> . Stefano Gobbi, *Aux Prêtres, les fils de prédilection de la Vierge*, new French Edition, 1174 pp., available online in pdf form at <http://www.fichier-pdf.fr/2010/09/18/v9uh18c/>

Vassula Rydén. 'Vassula', whom I have heard personally, is both perhaps the most widely attacked of all contemporary mystics and the one with the highest-ranking supporters, her worldwide ministry for Christian Unity being actively welcomed by Cardinals in Belgium, Croatia, South Africa and Brazil as well as by the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa.

At this point I would like to say briefly what impelled me to launch my inquiry into the question of Marian apparitions. As you may know, I am a musicologist with a special interest in French music of <sup>15</sup>the twentieth century. A few months ago I was contracted to write a chapter for an academic book on the French composer Charles Tournemire (1870-1939), in my view one of the most under-estimated musicians of the last hundred years, who for forty years was organist at the Basilique Ste Clotilde just the other side of the Esplanade des Invalides. Tournemire wrote eight symphonies, several oratorios and a good deal else, but his main claim to fame is a colossal 14-hour cycle of 255 pieces called 'The Mystical Organ' (*L'Orgue Mystique*). In connection with my research, Rev. Stephen Schloesser, a brilliant Jesuit scholar friend of mine from Loyola University in Chicago, passed me a clandestine pdf of Tournemire's unpublished memoirs, from which it became clear that like many leading French Catholic intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth-century, the composer took mystical experience extremely seriously.

In particular, Tournemire paid great attention to what he considered the prophetic work of the writer Léon Bloy, especially concerning the Marian apparition of La Salette in 1846, of which I had never heard. As I read, I was quickly struck by the fact that for many Catholic writers and artists, La Salette (rather than Lourdes) was considered the interpretive key to an understanding of modern French history. These included major intellectuals such as the great scholar of Islam Louis Massignon, playwright Paul Claudel, novelist François Mauriac and the pre-eminent philosopher Jacques Maritain, Léon Bloy's godson. All can be considered prime representatives of the *Renouveau intellectuel catholique* (Catholic intellectual revival) at a time when Christian thinkers with a strong commitment to belief in the 'miraculous'/supernatural were at the cutting-edge of French culture. As part of the book project I read Bloy's extraordinary book on La Salette, *Celle qui pleure*<sup>16</sup> ('She who weeps') and began to realize what the fuss was about. Bloy's thesis was that, although the Church had officially accepted the accounts of the appearance of Mary to two children in the Alpine village of La Salette in 1846, the religious authorities had subsequently done everything possible to silence the visionaries because the Virgin's message condemning institutional corruption and politicking in the French Church was intensely inconvenient for them (the Marian 'Wikileaks' of the nineteenth century, you might say). I found Bloy's evidence compelling, especially when supported by that of Jacques Maritain, who wrote a 1000-page monograph exposé of the cover-up which was studied with interest by Pope Benedict XV but which the French clerical hierarchy refused to publish.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For more information on Vassula Rydén and her supporters/detractors within the Catholic and Orthodox churches, including details of her dialogue with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith headed by the then Cardinal Ratzinger, see [www.defending-vassula.org](http://www.defending-vassula.org). Extensive scans of her handwritten notebooks (in which the words of Jesus appear in what graphologists have termed 'hieratic writing' different from Vassula Rydén's own hand) can be consulted online at <http://www.tlig.net/pageflip/handwritten.html>. See also Niels Christian Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy: the Post-Biblical Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), foreword Joseph Ratzinger, 111-119, available online as 'A Case History from the 21st Century' at <http://www.defending-vassula.org/reflection-prophecy>

<sup>16</sup> Léon Bloy, *Celle qui pleure (Notre-Dame de La Salette)* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1908).

<sup>17</sup> See 'Jacques Maritain's Notebooks, Chapter Three: Our First Trip to Rome' available online at the Jacques Maritain Center webpage, University of Notre Dame, <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/nbo3.htm>

The question I found myself asking was this – why had I never even bothered to look into the history of La Salette, given that some of the greatest French minds of the modern era felt the apparition to have been of capital importance (it should be remembered that Maritain was one of the authors of the UN Declaration of Human Rights)? And why, for that matter, had I not undertaken a serious consideration of any of the other major Marian apparitions approved by a Church representing a thousand million Christians? It's not as if I was against them, but for some reason that I cannot logically explain I had never regarded them as worthy of serious inquiry, perhaps because I considered visions as irreducibly subjective experience which can neither be verified or proved false by science or historical research. That I now consider to be a mistaken position, and what persuaded me more than anything was the famous case of the apparitions of Fatima in 1917. Of course I had heard vaguely of the accounts of the three Portuguese children to whom the Virgin allegedly appeared, as well as Pope John Paul II's conviction that Our Lady of Fatima had saved him from his attempted assassination by Ali Agça on May 13, 1981, the 64<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first apparition. But what I had never investigated, and what takes Fatima out of the realm of the mystical into the sphere of publicly verifiable occurrences, was the 'Miracle of the Sun' (the sighting of otherwise inexplicable solar phenomena) that accompanied the final apparition on October 13, 1917. A miracle had been announced by the three visionaries beforehand, and the dancing sun, which suddenly appeared to plunge to earth before resuming its position in the sky, was seen by an estimated 70,000 people. These included some not present at the actual site, and the event was reported in the national secular Portuguese press, with one account being given by a journalist who had previously set out to lampoon the visionaries.

#### **DAWKINS' MARIAN DELUSION**

95 years on, the miracle of Fatima has to my knowledge never received a coherent scientific explanation. As part of his effort to debunk miracles in his 1998 book *Unweaving the Rainbow*, Richard Dawkins devotes several pages to an attempted deconstruction of the events of 1917, presumably because he acknowledges that Fatima appears to be one of the 'best attested miracles of all time'.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, Dawkins appeals to the logical test for miracles offered by the notorious David Hume in the eighteenth century in order to try to disqualify eyewitness testimony (of which there is plenty in the case of Fatima):

... no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish.'

On this basis, Dawkins argues as follows :

Faced with the 70,000 who witnessed the sun move at Fatima, let's apply Hume's criterion. On the one hand, we are asked to believe in a mass hallucination, a trick of the light, or mass lie involving 70,000 people. This is admittedly improbable. But it is *less* improbable than the alternative : that the sun really did move.'

The sun hanging over Fatima was not, after all, a private sun ; it was the same sun that warmed all the other millions of people on the daylight side of the planet. If the sun had moved in truth, but the event was seen only by the people of Fatima, an even greater miracle would have to have been perpetuated : an illusion of *non*-movement had to be staged for all the millions of witnesses not in Fatima. And that's ignoring the fact that, if the sun had really moved at the speed reported, the solar system would have broken up.

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow : Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder* (New York : Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 133.



In his remarks concerning the sun, Dawkins is of course right. Where his philosophical argumentation is extremely weak, however, is in the conclusions he draws :

We have no alternative but to follow Hume, choose the less miraculous of the available alternatives and conclude, contrary to official Vatican doctrine, that the miracle of Fatima never happened. Moreover, it is not at all clear that the onus is on us to explain how those 70,000 witnesses were misled.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, Dawkins is saying, on the authority of David Hume's personal opinion alone, that it is enough not to offer *any* explanation for the alleged miracle in order to conclude that it did not happen. Here at least four things need to be said. Firstly, Dawkins simply *assumes* that the 70,000 onlookers were misled, which is not a legitimate move in logic because it builds the conclusion of the inquiry into its premise. Secondly, he has not considered the possibility offered by the Benedictine physics professor Stanley Jaki, namely that the apparent movement of the sun may have been an extremely rare but natural optical phenomenon but still miraculous to the extent that the date for the public miracle had been announced beforehand by the child visionaries.<sup>20</sup> After all, why had a crowd of 70,000 people gathered in the obscure village of Fatima in the first place? Thirdly, YouTube is awash with home video shot with mobile phones of similar solar phenomena sighted on multiple occasions at other alleged Marian apparition sights such as Medjugorje in Bosnia. To my knowledge, mobile phones do not hallucinate or suffer from mass psychosis. Fourthly, what does Dawkins make of the fulfillment of the prophetic message of Fatima of July 13, 1917 with regard to the outbreak of World War II two decades later and Mary's warning (months before the Russian October Revolution) that if her requests for penance were not granted, an atheistic Russia would 'spread its errors throughout the world, raising up wars and persecutions against the Church.' Which is of course exactly what happened. Lacking any real understanding of Catholic doctrine Dawkins mocks John Paul II as a superstitious polytheist for his Marian devotion, but what is he to make of the fact that Communism unexpectedly collapsed a matter of years after the Pope carried out the instructions of Fatima. Or that this collapse was due in no small part to an unlikely electrician compatriot of Karol Wojtyla who led the Solidarity trade union wearing a lapel pin with an image of the Virgin (Lech Walesa)? Whose narrative is more coherent with the facts here?

However, returning to the title of this talk, 'Mary – not just for Catholics', perhaps the strongest contemporary evidence that God still has a rôle for Jesus's Mother in today's world is not found in historically Catholic lands such as Portugal and Poland, but in countries with Islamic majorities. And, quite remarkably, a case can be made for saying that, statistically, it is Muslims, not Christians, who make up the majority of those to have reported seeing the Virgin over the last 50 years. Perhaps the most striking of all Marian apparitions, officially recognized by the Coptic Church, took place in Egypt in 1968-1970 in Zeitoun, a neighbourhood of Cairo where the holy family is traditionally said to have stayed after fleeing from Herod. An estimated 500,000 or more people, including government officials and President Nasser himself, witnessed a silent luminous white female figure above Zeitoun Church. There was a similar occurrence three years ago in Warraq-el-Hadar (2009-2010), an island in Greater Cairo's Nile River viewed by an estimated 200,000 and first noticed by a Muslim café-owner named Hassan (read Bishopric report). But for my final case study I would like to turn to the events of 1982 in the house of Myrna and Nicolas Nazzour in Soufanieh in Damascus, Syria, around 200 yards away from where St Paul's sight was restored at the house of Ananias following his dramatic conversion.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 134-135.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley Jaki, *God and the Sun at Fatima* (New Hope, KY : Real View Books, 1999).

## **SOUFANIEH – ‘FATIMA OF THE EAST’**

On November 1982, the hands of the Melkite (Greco-Catholic) young woman Myrna Nazzour, recently married to her nominally Orthodox husband Nicolas, inexplicably began to exude what subsequently turned out to be 100% pure olive oil with healing properties. A few days later, an icon of the Virgin Mary which Nicolas had bought in Bulgaria also began oozing oil. This was followed not only by apparitions of Mary but also messages from Jesus (all publicly available) calling – as with the messages of Vassula Rydén – for the unification of the date of Easter between Western and Eastern Christians. Stigmatization of the visionary (recorded on video) occurred repeatedly at Easter, but uniquely on those occasions when the date was shared between Catholics and Orthodox. The Nazzours’ house rapidly became a pilgrimage site open for prayer to all-comers. The events in Soufanieh, which continued until 2004 were the object of extensive scientific verification by TV crews from Sweden and Lebanon as well as by researchers including neurologist Philippe Loron from La Salpêtrière<sup>21</sup> and Antoine Mansour, former physician to the US President. Soufanieh has received unusually few attempts at refutation in comparison to other apparition sites such as Garabandal and Medjugorje, even from committed skeptics.

One argument strongly supporting the authenticity of Soufanieh is the ongoing evidence of the extraordinary personal witness of Myrna and her husband Nicolas (nominally Orthodox, Nicolas did not even want a Church wedding, but subsequently gave up a lucrative business in luxury hotel construction on account of the transformation of his house into a sanctuary of prayer), carried out while refusing any remuneration.

Soufanieh also has an important ecumenical dimension – Melkite/Orthodox. Technically, Soufanieh cannot be treated as a ‘Catholic’ apparition, despite the fact that Myrna is a Melkite; in accordance with agreements in the Middle East on ‘mixed’ households, the Nazzour family is treated as Orthodox on account of the husband. Consequently, the apparition falls under Orthodox jurisdiction; it is clearly supported by the supreme head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Patriarch of Antioch Zakka I (see Fox, 177-178). It should be noted that Zakka I signed an agreement at the Vatican that Syriac Orthodox and Catholics should be allowed to receive Communion in each other’s churches.

Furthermore, there has been widespread acceptance of Soufanieh by Muslims in the region. On the wall of the Soufanieh house is a very large Icon painted in three days by three men, two Muslims and one Christian. The first person to be healed in connection with the events was a Muslim named Raquille Kilta in December 1982 who had been suffering paralysis of her right hand. This was attested by a Dr Jamil Marjithe, a former skeptic who had visited the house in Soufanieh in order to try to prove by rational arguments that all the events were subjective because untestable by modern science. His reaction: ‘I surrender. This is beyond me and beyond any human power. I am ready to testify before anyone.’<sup>22</sup>

One of the priests most closely connected with Soufanieh, Father Elias Zahlaoui, has referred to Soufanieh as the Fatima of the East. This intuition was borne out in 1998 when Myrna Nazzour, spent three days in Fatima and travelled to the Carmelite convent in nearby

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<sup>21</sup> An English translation of Philippe Loron’s 2001 testimonial originally printed in *Chrétiens Magazine* n.141, 18/19 is available online at <http://www.soufanieh.com/2001.SEMAINE.SAINTE/20010414.summary.loron.htm> See also René Laurentin, *Multiplications des Apparitions de la Vierge Aujourd’hui* (Paris : Fayard, 1995), excerpt reprinted online at <http://www.soufanieh.com/FRANCAIS/ABBE.RENE.LAURENTIN/19880000.fra.fra.phd.fr.rene.laurentin.multiplication.apparitions.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Robert J Fox, *Light from the East : Miracles of Our Lady of Soufanieh*, (Waite Park, MN : Park Press, 2002), 83.

Coimbra in order to meet the one surviving visionary from the events of 1917. And there, at the request of Sister Lucia, Myrna Nazzour anointed her with the oil from Soufanieh.<sup>23</sup>

And as Archbishop Fulton Sheen (1895-1979) argued in a remarkable analysis from 1952 quoted in Robert J. Fox's book on Soufanieh *Light from the East* (which I am following here), there is a fascinating relationship between Fatima and Islam. It is on the surface ironic that what many consider as the miracle *par excellence* of the 20th century should have occurred in a place named after the daughter of Mohammed, Fatima, after whose death, Mohammed wrote, 'Thou shalt be the most blessed of all the women in Paradise, after Mary'. Sheen contends, in my opinion compellingly, that 'the Blessed Virgin chose to be known as "Our Lady of Fatima" as a pledge and a sign of hope to the Moslem people and as an assurance that they, **who show her so much respect, will one day accept her Divine Son, too**'.<sup>24</sup> He explains the history behind the naming of the village thus:

the Moslems occupied Portugal for centuries. At the time when they were finally driven out, the last Moslem chief had a beautiful daughter by the name of Fatima. A Catholic boy fell in love with her, and for him she not only stayed behind when the Moslems left but even embraced the Faith. The young husband was so much in love with her that he changed the name of the town where he lived to Fatima. Thus the very place where Our Lady appeared in 1917 bears a historical connection to Fatima, the daughter of Mohammed.<sup>25</sup> (Fox, *ibid.*)

Sheen points also to the many conversions brought about amongst African and Indian Moslems (for example in Mozambique) through devotion to Our Lady of Fatima. Sheen:

In any apologetic endeavor, it is always best to start with that which people already accept. Because the Moslems have a devotion to Mary, our missionaries should be satisfied merely to expand and to develop that devotion, with the full realization that Our Blessed Lady will carry the Moslems the rest of the way to her Divine Son. She is forever a 'traitor' in the sense that she will not accept any devotion for herself, but will always bring anyone who is devoted to her to her Divine Son.<sup>26</sup>

As a remarkable article of 1978 in the *Osservatore Romano* by Giancarlo Finazzo<sup>27</sup> points out, there is for instance a celebrated *Hadith* attributed to the Prophet Mohammed which has led to the universal acceptance of Mary's Immaculate Conception in Islam: 'every child is touched by the devil as soon as he is born and this contact makes him cry. Excepted are Mary and her Son'. As Prof. Dudley Woodberry reminded us earlier this year in his presentation on Christian-Islamic relations, the only figures which Mohammed did not remove when purging Mecca of its idols were Jesus and his mother.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-143.

<sup>24</sup> Fulton J. Sheen, *The World's First Love: Mary, Mother of God* (original edition New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952, reprinted San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 203. Quoted Fox, *Light from the East*, 101.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*. David Michael Lindsey's *The Woman and the Dragon: Apparitions of Mary* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 2000), 118, provides a slightly different version of the story. According to Lindsey, Fatima was captured by Christian knight Don Gonçalo Hermingues, converted and was baptized Oureana. On her tragic early death, the grief-stricken Don Gonçalo joined the Cistercian abbey in Alcobaça: the Cistercians transferred the remains of his wife to a small priory nearby where they sent Gonçalo, with the latter naming it 'Fatima' in memory of her Muslim name.

<sup>26</sup> Sheen, 204.

<sup>27</sup> Giancarlo Finazzo, 'The Virgin Mary in the Koran', *Osservatore Romano*, April 13, 1978. Reprinted online at <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=412>

It should surely give us pause for thought to consider that Islam accords a higher place of honour to Mary than most strands of Protestantism. It is perhaps not far-fetched to see this as the reason why, in the light of available evidence, Marian apparitions and healing through the intercession of Mary are being granted to many Muslims but very few if any Protestants.

## CONCLUSIONS

What are we then to make of these 'lines of evidence', seen if not as irrefutable proof of God's work through Mary today then at the least very difficult to dismiss? The simplest course of action, is naturally to ignore it and the challenge that it may put to a Marian paradigm that may be inconvenient to change. This is most the frequently encountered response in Protestant circles, but one that seems to be incompatible with a serious search for truth. A second response, which can be found in some fundamentalist Protestant circles, is to accept the reality of the apparitions as supernatural but to attribute them *all* to the demonic. Although there are doubtless many false apparitions, the question has to be asked, 'how many white crows does it take to prove that all crows are not black?' Blanket attribution of Marian apparitions to the forces of darkness is both irrational and dangerous. Irrational to the extent that many of the church-approved apparitions contain explicit calls to counter the demonic through prayer, fasting and confession. Dangerous because the Gospel contains a specific and dire warning that to attribute God's action to the Devil is to run the risk of committing the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

A third option is reductionism, to attribute all inexplicable Marian phenomena either to psychopathology or, more mildly, to the workings of the pious imagination. There are indeed many instances of religious imaginings and mental disturbance, but a reductionist position is difficult to uphold in all cases. Reductive arguments may have some initial traction when it comes to the subjective pole of mystical experience but are powerless to deal with medically attested healings such as those of Soufanieh or the video recording of modern light phenomena in apparition sites such as Zeitoun and Medjugorje which are very similar to those described in Fatima.

A fourth option which is equally problematic in terms of intellectual coherence is to try to pick and choose by accepting the miraculous phenomena (which can be useful for debunking the New Atheism, after all) but ignoring the messages which the phenomena appear to legitimate. Especially when these are inconvenient for our own theological agenda or threatening to our institutional power, as has always been the case with prophetic utterance since Biblical times. This was the approach taken by the Church regarding La Salette; at best this line is intellectually incoherent, while at worst it represents a cynical sacrificing of truth to short-term expediency.

The only coherent and honest response in a case where acceptance of the data provides the best explanatory hypothesis is, I believe, to accept the logical implications of the messages attached to the miracles whose purpose is clearly to authenticate the ultimate source of those messages. And here acceptance surely implies obedience – after all, when that person is either God or Jesus's mother sent by God, arguing back is not an option.

In concluding I would like to make note of a curious irony. There are indications that some latter-day prophetic utterance (and here I am thinking particularly of Vassula Rydén, who has been invited to speak in many non-Christian places of worship and honoured by leaders of other religions) has encountered greater openness outside the Church than within Christian circles. It therefore somehow seems that the receptivity towards the reality of ongoing Divine action in our world is not primarily a question of doctrine, but psychological orientation. To

those of any religious tradition whose worldview is hermetically sealed, it is difficult to countenance the idea that God might – as so often in the Biblical prophetic tradition – speak in ways that may call our preconceptions into radical question. It unfortunately appears to be the case that hardness of heart and mind is well alive in our times across the religious spectrum.

When considering how to respond to evidence that challenges our paradigms, we could do worse than to take our lead from the Dalai Lama, who is said to have remarked on more than one occasion, in the context of dialogue between science and religion, that if science demonstrated conclusively that Buddhism is wrong, then Buddhism must change.<sup>28</sup>

It is my conviction that not only advances in ecumenical dialogue but also reason and science indeed suggest that we have some serious rethinking to do with respect to the honour that those of us in the Protestant tradition have paid, or rather not paid, to the Mother of God incarnate. Faced by the possibility that a paradigm shift may be required of us, it seems to me that our response should be that of Mary 2000 years ago: ‘we are the servants of the Lord. Let it be unto us according to His will’.

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<sup>28</sup> The Dalai Lama is quoted by Thupten Jinpa as follows: “If science proves facts that conflict with Buddhist understanding [...] Buddhism must change accordingly. **We should always adopt a view that accords with the facts**” (Anne Harrington, Arthur Zajonc (eds), *The Dalai Lama at MIT* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14, emphasis mine).