The Virgin Mary across Cultures

This book examines women's relationship to the Virgin Mary in two different cultural and religious contexts, and compares how these relationships have been analyzed and explained on a theological and a sociological level. The figure of the Virgin Mary is a divisive one in our modern culture. To some, she appears to be a symbol of religious oppression, while to others, she is a constant comfort and even an inspiration towards empowerment.

Drawing on the author's own ethnographic research among Catholic Costa Rican women and Orthodox Finnish women, this study relates their experiences with Mary to the folklore and popular religion materials present in each culture. The book combines not only different social and religious frameworks but also takes a critical look at ways in which feminists have (mis)interpreted the meaning of Mary for women. It therefore combines theological and ethnographic methods in order to create a feminist Marian theology that is particularly attentive to women's lived religious practices and theological thinking.

This study provides a unique ethnographically informed insight into women's religious interactions with Mary. As such, it will be of great interest to those researching in religious studies and theology, gender studies, Latin American studies, anthropology of religion, and folklore studies.

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The Virgin Mary across Cultures

Devotion among Costa Rican Catholic and Finnish Orthodox Women

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For my mother

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Preface

Is the Virgin Mary, the quintessential woman of Christianity and Western culture, a harmful and oppressive figure for women, as many feminists claim? Or is she – as the crystallization of everything considered feminine in both Western and Christian theology – the only existing female reflection of the divine in which even contemporary women can see themselves reflected? Why is it that so many women all over the world, in different cultural and religious contexts, and at different times, consider her worthy of their love and devotion, and even claim that she is an important source of consolation and empowerment for them?

These questions have interested me throughout my career. Much of my research has if not focused on the Virgin Mary at least had her as an important thread in it – starting with my MTh thesis on feminist theology in the mid-eighties. In my 1997 doctoral dissertation on the interaction between Latin American liberation theology and feminist theology, I have an entire chapter on the Latin American Mary. At some point, I felt a need to go beyond mere theological and textual analysis, and listen to the voices of ordinary women, culminating in two sets of interviews: with Costa Rican Catholic women in 2006 and 2007, and with Finnish Orthodox women in 2013 and 2014. This book brings together all this work, with a broad intention to argue for the existence of women's cross-cultural Marian piety. At its root, it responds in the affirmative to my second question: that believing Christian women in very different contexts tell the same story of a Mary who is both like them and unlike them – and is therefore both a point of deep identification and a source of help and empowerment.

This project started as an English translation of my book on the Virgin Mary in Finnish (*Jumalainen nainen. Neitsyt Mariaa etsimässä*. Helsinki: Otava, 2010). Professor Kirsi Stjerna, of Finnish origin, kindly translated parts of the book into English, some of which is used in this book (especially Chapters 1 and 2). However, this book is not a direct translation. In English, my audience is different, so I have made significant changes to the text. I have also conducted further research with Orthodox women in Finland after the original Finnish book was published. Chapter 4 is thus new material in its entirety.

A unique combination of factors makes my book different from other books on Mary. First, my critical discussion with feminist (both secular and theological) critique of the Mary symbol; second, my extensive knowledge of Latin American theology and my own ethnographic research in Costa Rica; and third, my placing these in dialogue with the Finnish-Karelian oral folk tradition – in which Mary is a central figure – and my original ethnographic research with Orthodox women in Finland. Fourth, I am a systematic theologian who has used ethnographic methods. Too often, either theological considerations or lived experiences are lacking since theologians are not usually ethnographers, and anthropologists do not work with doctrines. Finally, the book is a concrete example of my more theoretical critique of gender studies and feminist scholars, which often fail to understand or deal with religion adequately.

I move between disciplines and methods. In practical terms, I discuss the Virgin Mary in two contexts beyond the Anglo-American culture and research tradition. Thus, this is also a question of language. Besides being multidisciplinary, I am also multilingual. My mother tongue, Finnish, is not an Indo-European language and is spoken by less than six million people, which makes any materials difficult to access without speaking the language. I am convinced that it is absolutely essential to present examples and experiences from non-English speaking cultural contexts to avoid generalizations and narrowness in our claims about the interplay of religion and culture as well as religion and gender. Obviously, this discussion has to be carried out in the *lingua franca* of today's world, English.

During my career, I have worked outside my home country for long periods, mainly in the United States and Central America. Even at my *alma mater*, the University of Helsinki, my research is influenced by the long periods during which I was working in non-theological settings, including the faculties of social sciences and humanities. My research is by definition multidisciplinary: I have worked in development studies, gender studies, and Latin American studies, and learned to 'translate' and justify my interests to different audiences: why religion, why gender, why both?

The common thread running through my book is women's relationships to the Virgin Mary in different cultural and religious contexts, and how this relationship has been explained by formal teachings, theologians, feminists, and ordinary religious women.

The book is truly multicultural, moving on different levels – historical, dogmatic, feminist, folkloric, and ethnographic. It combines not only diverse cultural and religious contexts but also takes a critical look at ways in which feminists have (mis)interpreted the meaning of Mary for women. Further, it combines theological and ethnographic methods in order to create a feminist theology more attentive to women's everyday religious practices and theological thinking. It presents a unique combination of contemporary meanings of the Virgin Mary symbol.

As a theologian who uses interviewing as a method – not trained in this during my studies but learning it at a later stage – I am fully aware that I am not doing full-scale ethnography or fieldwork in the standard anthropological sense. In fact, anthropologists have reminded me of this. It is thus more correct to say that I use ethnographic methods, primarily interviewing and participatory observation. Regarding fieldwork, I kept a fieldwork diary both in Costa Rica and in Finland, but more importantly, I am native Finnish – though not Orthodox – and have lived in Costa Rica altogether for about three years. I am fluent in Spanish and knew my 'field,' including the religious 'field,' there quite well before doing the interviews. I will talk about my position in these two fields in more detail in the respective chapters.

Since the book is a sort of compendium of my research over many years, I use some excerpts from my earlier published articles in English. I thank the following publishers for their kind permission to reuse these texts:

"Finnish Orthodox Women and the Virgin Mary." First published in the *Yearbook of the European Society for Women in Theological Research* 24, 2016, pp. 63–80.

"Feminist Theology, Religious Studies and Gender Studies. Mutual Challenges." First published in *Contemporary Encounters of Gender and Religion. European Perspectives*, edited by Lena Gemzöe and Marja-Liisa Keinänen. Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2016, pp. 307–334.

"The Ecumenical Mother Mary and Her Significance for Lutheran Tradition." First published in *Seminary Ridge Review* 2:17, 2015, pp. 1–21.

"Luther's Interpretation of the Magnificat and Latin American Liberation Theology." First published in *Justification in a Post-Christian Society*, edited by Carl-Henric Grenholm and Göran Gunner. Pickwick Publications: Eugene, 2014, pp. 222–240.

"*La Morenita* on Skis. Women's Popular Marian Piety and Feminist Research of Religion." First published in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, edited by Sheila Briggs and Mary McClintock Fulkerson. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011, pp. 494–524.

"A Symbol of Submission or the Master of Intersectionality? Costa Rica's *La Negrita* and the Hierarchies of Race, Gender, and Class." First published in *Mot bättre vetande. Festskrift till Tage Kurtén på 60-årsdagen*, edited by Mikael Lindfelt, Pamela Slotte and Malena Björkgren. Åbo Akademis förlag: Åbo, 2010, pp. 281–299.

"Patriarchal Ecumenism, Feminism and Women's Religious Experiences in Latin America." First published in *Gendering Religion and Politics. Untangling Modernities*, edited by Hanna Herzog and Ann Braude. Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2009, pp. 217–238.

"Seriously Harmful for Your Health? Religion, Feminism and Sexuality in Latin America." First published in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality: New Radicalism from Latin America*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid. Ashgate: London, 2006, pp. 137–162.

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Part of the research and the writing for this book was done in the research project *Embodied Religion. Changing Meanings of Body and Gender in Contemporary Forms of Religious Identity in Finland*, which I directed as part of my five-year academy professorship, funded by the Academy of Finland (2013–17). I thank both the Academy of Finland for this funding and the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki for providing a wonderful supporting infrastructure of research and collegiality.

Most of all, I thank all the women I interviewed in Costa Rica and Finland, who trusted me, opened their hearts and minds to me, and made me rethink many things I had thought I knew.

Introduction

The many dimensions of Mary

I lived in Costa Rica in the early 1990s, when I was working on my doctoral dissertation. I also wanted to become pregnant, but it turned out to be difficult. Month after month, I was disappointed. For many, this was a continuous source of questioning: a woman in her early thirties and not a mother yet. For some, it was probably a confirmation of the stereotypical view of a European career woman who has no place for children in her life. My neighbor, an elderly woman of Chilean origin and a devout Catholic, saw it differently. She assumed that I was childless against my will and that I needed help. She asked if I would like to go with her to the basilica of the *Virgen de los Angeles*, the patroness of Costa Rica, known for her miraculous power, to pray. She suggested that we could even take along a *promesa*, an ex-voto made of metal in the shape of my problem, *un bebecito* – I learned later how common this practice is and that there are a variety of *promesas* reflecting all the insecurities of human life. My neighbor was convinced that only the Virgin Mary could help me – she was the one who both understands women's sorrows and has the power to intervene.

Before I promised my neighbor anything, I had become curious about this local personification of the Virgin Mary, whom Costa Ricans call affectionately *La Negrita*, the Little Black One. I decided to go to the basilica and learn more about the devotion. Then I found out that I was pregnant. My neighbor hugged me warmly and said *gracias a la Virgen*, thanks to the Virgin, and promised to thank *La Negrita* for me. I was moved by her gesture. There was something in me that even made me wonder if Mary really had intervened – which for me, as a scholar who is not even Catholic, was embarrassing to admit. That event was the beginning of my many years' research on *La Negrita*.

I had been interested in the Virgin Mary long before that. My earliest research, the MTh thesis on feminist theology, includes a chapter on Mariology. When I started paying attention to the ways secular feminism and gender scholars in Latin America were extremely critical of Catholicism and, within it, particularly, of Virgin Mary symbolism, I decided to focus my post-doctoral research on women's devotion to her. Having lived in Costa Rica, I knew that women interpreted Mary differently from how many feminists portrayed their beliefs. I also knew that the truth about Mary is not to be found only in the doctrines of the Catholic Church, which

presents Mary to women as a perfect model to follow. So, I returned to Costa Rica, intending to interview local Catholic women.

Back in Finland, I later gave a talk on Latin American women's devotion to Mary. The discussion that followed my presentation was lively. One participant, a middle-aged woman, introduced herself as a member of the Lutheran Church who is not particularly religious – something quite common in Finland, where the majority belongs to the Lutheran Church but does not in fact participate actively. Then she said, slightly embarrassed, that when she has a really difficult time in her life, she may step into a local Orthodox church and pray in front of an icon of the Mother of God – or maybe, just light a candle and stand there. She said she understands the Latin American women I had been talking about, who experience Mary as someone closer and easier for women to approach than God and Jesus.

Why is it that she felt this was something she had to hide or feel ashamed of? Maybe she thought it is heretical for a Protestant to do something like that. Her reaction made me ponder if Mary is too absent from the Lutheran tradition – or, if not Mary, anything which links womanhood to the divine.

Having lived several years in Catholic countries and conversed with local women in those contexts, I have observed in their experience a certain 'overdose' of Mary. Having grown up in a Catholic environment, educated in Catholic schools, a Latin American Catholic woman today may feel both alienated from and overburdened by Mary. Do women who have grown up in Protestant cultures lack Mary and what she represents? Has it been a blessing or a curse that Protestant women have grown up without Mary? Which is worse, from a woman's perspective: that the only significant female figure in her religious tradition is interpreted in opposition to her ordinary experiences as a woman or that such a figure is entirely absent? The Orthodox churches offer a middle ground in this regard: Mary is a paragon and model of faith for both men and women.

However, in most Protestant churches, either hostile or at least negligent towards Mary, women's ordination has been achieved. In the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions where Mary is highly celebrated, the door for ordination remains firmly closed for women. What can we say, then, about the correlation between the status of Mary and the status of women in different Christian churches?

In my most recent research, I not only interviewed Orthodox women in my home country on their relationship with the Mother of God but also considered the role of Mary in the churches of the Protestant reformations (hereafter, the Reformation).

This book is a combination of all these interests. It brings together years of research. My principal question here is the same that I presented to my female interviewees in both Costa Rica and Finland: what does the Virgin Mary mean to you, to women?

*

Religion and gender

Issues related to gender have been embedded in Christian theology since its inception, including in the Bible. Women and feminine symbolism have always factored in Christian theology, which was formulated and canonized by men from the earliest centuries, as evidenced in the authorship of the New Testament texts and patristic theology. Christianity has a complex history of excluding women, nurturing negative interpretations of women and, relatedly, of body and sexuality. Women's writing being recognized as theology is a relatively recent phenomenon, although history shows that there have always been women who have created theological insights.

Questions related to gender and religion have suffered from a double blindness in scholarship: blindness to religion in gender studies, on the one hand, and blindness to gender in religious studies, including theology, on the other. The situation is changing, but it is still very much on the level of acknowledging the importance of gender in religious studies and theology, and of religion in gender studies, respectively. Scholars of religion and gender, including feminist theologians, share a concern for this double blindness. However, from the perspective of theology, I wish to add yet another possible blindness at the core of the study of religion and gender: namely some kind of blindness to theology – or avoidance of it, to put it more mildly. I will also argue that another blind spot is that of lived religion in theology, including feminist theology: ordinary women's theological thinking and interpretation have not occupied a central place in feminist theology, which has centered on academic theological critique of religious traditions.

At the same time, scholars of religious studies, anthropology of religion, and theology have been critical of the way religion has been conceptualized in much of gender studies (e.g. Gemzöe, Keinänen & Maddrell, eds. 2016; Vuola 2016 in that volume). Much of contemporary feminist scholarship on women is guided by a twofold relationship to religion: on the one hand, religion is not seen, or much less analyzed, as a factor in women's lives. I call this *feminist blindness* to the importance of religion, especially in its aspects that women might experience as positive and life-sustaining. On the other hand, when religion is taken into account at all by feminist scholars, it is often done so through something that could be called a *religious paradigm* or *religion-as-a-lens* type of theorizing. Unlike the former, in the latter, religion is seen as the chief or sole explanatory factor of women's lives in a given culture and the root source of women's oppression. Religion is taken into account in this case, but too often as a monolithically negative, misogynist, and immutable force in people's lives. Thus, religion is simultaneously under- and overestimated in gender studies. Women's own interpretations are not necessarily taken into account, nor is religion interpreted as lived, shaped by people; rather, it is interpreted as an institution with

doctrines. Hardly any distinction is drawn between institutional, official religion, on the one hand, and lived religious practices on the other (see Vuola 2006, 2009, 2012a, 2015, 2017).

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) presents religion in terms of its power to shape our perceptions of gender relations, stressing the importance of ethnographic methods for studying religion. She discusses the feminist unease with religion, including an acceptance of secularism that is often not too well founded. She is interested in the construction of subjectivity and agency in a religious movement, which many would see as anti-feminist and reinforcing hierarchical gender relations. Nevertheless, she succeeds in painting a rich picture of both Islam and deeply religious Muslim women in Egypt, explaining some of the reasons why women want to have a religious identity and what it means for them. She tries to take up the task she sees as a lacuna in feminist scholarship: questions regarding religious difference (compared with other 'differences') have remained relatively unexplored (Mahmood 2005).

Even theories of intersectionality, according to which differences between women – such as race, ethnicity, and class – are analyzed together with gender, have been rather blind to religion. I have argued elsewhere that religion could and, in some cases, should be taken into account as a 'difference' between women. For any feminist analysis, it is crucial that religious women are seen in terms of their agency, including their critical or non-traditional assessment of their religious traditions. It is important that detailed analyses of religion and gender are carried out in different cultural, political, and social contexts, as well as in different religious traditions, in order to avoid monolithic interpretations of the complex category of religion and its interplay with gender. It is essential that scholars pay attention to sexist interpretations and practices within religions, but this should be done in relation to women's religious and other agency. In this, gender scholars from different fields could make much more use of feminist theology (Vuola 2012b, 2017).

I join scholars whose theoretical approach to analyzing the relationship between gender and religion is not framed only in terms of submission (e.g., El-Or 1994; Fader 2009; various articles in Gemzöe, Keinänen & Maddrell, eds. 2016; Griffith 2000; Longman 2007, 2008; Mahmood 2005; Manning 1999; Orsi 2002, 2005). Taking human agency seriously means understanding how identities are constructed in religious communities which are understood as traditional or non-liberal but at the same time are in a process of change. Agency is not always about resistance or rejection.

It is crucial to remember that change should not always be equated with (linear) progress, or emancipation with resistance, and that women in different religious contexts have considered their religious traditions as important sites of struggle, emancipation, and empowerment – often also presenting women's rights as God-given and based on sacred scripture (Braude, ed. 2004; El-Or 1994; Griffith 2000; Longman 2007; Mahmood 2005).

Research on Mary thrives on the question of her significance for women: does Mary 'belong' to women, and if so, how? Can women claim the Virgin Mary, the principal woman of Christianity, as 'their own'? Negative images of women have often been conveyed via Mary, and these interpretations have been criticized by scholars, including many feminist theologians.

In Catholic regions, such as Latin America, the feminist movement often considers the Catholic Church and its tradition as its archenemy. Nevertheless, it may be that many women disassociate themselves from feminism rather than from the church because of this feminist hostility. Ordinary Catholic women may find themselves in a difficult position between often alienating discourses and church teachings, especially in the area of sexual ethics, and a feminist movement which identifies women's liberation with secularization. The Virgin Mary – ironically, the one woman who supposedly knew nothing about anything real – is often, for women, the only one who understands them and their sorrows.

Theology and ethnography

The step towards an ethnographic direction in my own research stems from a growing interest in the often tense relationship between religion as lived and the scholarly study of religion, particularly in theology. Interviewing turned out to be one method for testing my hypothesis about the binary way of approaching religion and religious women in much of gender studies.

My argument throughout this book is that critiques and reinterpretations should consider not only formal theologies, teachings, and doctrines of Christian churches, although these are important. Much of this work has already been done. I am building on a tradition of feminist reading of the Mary symbol and do not want to repeat it. There are, however, aspects of that scholarship that I find problematic. The lack of constructive dialogue between different disciplines and the focus on the doctrinal level creates a situation in which the lived devotion of ordinary women in different times and contexts may be left out altogether. This is why I argue for a combination of theological and ethnographic methods in any constructive contemporary reinterpretation of the figure of the Virgin Mary.

What could it be, then, that theology can add to the theorizing about religion and gender? Even today, Marian piety and Mariological teachings of Christian churches are intimately tied to the most central theological claims of Christianity, such as incarnation – God becoming human – and salvation. However, theology has always been attentive to religion, not just as dogma but also as spirituality, the quest for the meaning of life, ethics, and the human need to relate to transcendence. Feminist theology has questioned the traditional exclusion of women from the sacred by claiming women's full humanity as *imago Dei*. Theology pays special attention to this symbolic dimension of religion and, in the case of feminist critique, its

deep sexism. In the case of Mary and Mariology, it is often in the image of Mary that women see their own humanity reflected in the divine.

Which grounds and methods can be used to say something about women's relationship to their religion? What are the results of an ethnographic approach to developing both a feminist theology that is more attentive to lived religion and not just dogma, and a feminist theory more open towards (and less categorical about) the multiple meanings of religion in women's lives?

In feminist theology, there has always been a keen interest in women's everyday experiences. However, there is still a striking gap between what is said about women's religious experiences, on the one hand, and the methods used to sustain those claims, on the other. By this, I refer mainly to the absence or meagerness of ethnographic methods.

Feminist theologians have not made extensive use of ethnographic methods. Neither have they drawn on insights gained by anthropologists of religion in developing a feminist theology attentive to women's lived religious practices and ways of understanding their religious identity. The emphasis has been on the interpretation of texts, doctrines, and traditions. In other words, if there is some sort of theology blindness in religious studies and anthropology, there is a blindness towards different forms of lived religion in feminist theology (see more on the relationship between feminist theology, religious studies, and gender studies in Vuola 2016).

I argue that in order to understand women's devotional practices, besides theological understanding, ethnographic methods should be used more – and the two placed in dialogue with each other. Theoretically, then, ethnographers should be more knowledgeable of theology – in the case of gender and women, especially feminist theology – and theologians, including feminist theologians, should broaden their methodological tool kit to include insights from ethnographic research, or even learn to do it. According to Maaike de Haardt (2011), theology has taken a complex and rather dismissive attitude to popular devotion. Theologians should concern themselves with religious practices and lived faith. De Haardt has identified a lack of theological research into the meaning of Marian popular devotions.

An emphasis on lived, vernacular religion (what people do with religion) is central to studying ordinary believers and their identities. The meager use of ethnographic methods in theology may result in a limited understanding of the multifaceted meanings religion holds.

Methodologically, it is thus important to pay attention to how ethnographic and textual methods could enrich each other in theology, religious studies, and anthropology of religion. As was said, it is rare to see a theologian, even a feminist theologian, using ethnographic methods, but it seems the reverse is also true. Questions related to doctrine and scriptures are too easily bypassed in religious studies and anthropology of religion, even when such questions would be crucial in understanding a specific religious phenomenon.

Ethnographic study of religion is, of course, valid without theological knowledge and analysis. However, there are cases in which a lack of theological understanding may be problematic. If textual analyses are not enough to understand the interplay between gender and religion, much the same can be said of mere ethnographic analysis. The relevance of different methods obviously depends on the object of research. At least in the three monotheistic religions, women's ways of thinking theologically and interpreting their tradition's core teachings are central to their religious identity and should not be ignored.

People negotiate with their religious traditions in multiple ways, including on theological issues. They can support and reproduce hegemonic ideas and structures of formal religion but also challenge, interpret, and question them. Especially in religious traditions such as the Catholic and Orthodox, in which women hold less formal power and right to interpretation than men, it is important to understand how women create, produce, and reproduce theological ideas as well as question and reinterpret them.

In the context of the three monotheistic religions, theological ideas and doctrinal interpretations are an essential part of people's religious identity and agency. Attention to how people create their theological worldview as part of their religious identity is important when scholars aim to understand how people negotiate with their religious inheritance. This negotiation is often a complicated, layered, and conflicted process, especially with regard to gender, women's position, and sexuality. Religious agency thus always includes theology and theological agency. In order to understand it, scholars need to understand the core theological doctrines and their development over time. We should thus study both practices and doctrines.

Anne M. Blackburn (2012) makes a similar point in her analysis of the relationship between textual and empirical analysis of religion:

> There is a danger, however, that the turn to studies of ritual and everyday life, especially in the context of an apologetic retreat from the study of texts, leaves scholars of religion in an intellectually untenable position. We may fail to recognize the often profoundly influential connections between texts and devotional practice, for example, and to neglect the very high value accorded to textual composition, transmission, and interpretation within the communities we seek to understand.
>
> (Blackburn 2012: p. 155)

Blackburn does not speak of theology as such since she is writing about Thai Buddhism, but in my view, her point is just as accurate in the case of Christianity and the other monotheistic religions. Perhaps it applies even more since the authority of ancient texts is considered sacred and normative in these textual religions: their theology is drawn from and interpreted on the basis of these texts. For Blackburn, textual interpretation is an essential part of religious renewal. In my view, this includes interpretations from the point of view of gender.

Lived religion and its interdisciplinary study

Some of the perspectives of lived religion are useful for my research, particularly those that focus on the material, bodily, and gendered aspects of religion. However, the field of lived religion has tended to focus on certain geographical, cultural contexts, and religious traditions (Ammerman 2016). There is very little original research on lived religion in the Orthodox tradition from any perspective, and feminist research on Mary in religious studies tends to concentrate on the Catholic tradition (e.g., Gemzöe 2000; several articles in Hermkens, Jansen & Notermans, eds. 2009).

Conceptually, it is important to understand the inner logic of religious faith as a specific part of culture, as well as how it is reflected and codified – not only in sacred texts, dogma, and authoritative teaching but also in religious practices and beliefs. The understanding of religion as everyday practices and lived (e.g., Hall, ed. 1997; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2002, 2005) covers all these aspects of religious experience, questioning the dichotomy between formal and informal, institutional and 'popular,' textual and 'experienced.'

As a concept and research interest, lived religion surfaced from the necessity to study ordinary believers, the material aspects of religion, lay people – mostly women – and other marginalized groups, and what people do in and with religion, rather than what they believe. However, the very differentiation between institutional or formal and popular or informal is in itself a problematic binary. Institutions, dogmas, and power hierarchies are as much 'lived' as ordinary people's rituals and practices. Ordinary people reflect on, reproduce, and critique institutions and teachings. Furthermore, different contextual and liberation theologies, including feminist theologies, have a strong practical starting point and interest. According to my understanding, they share lived religion's emphasis on the practical and contextual, even when they do not use these terms. Taking feminist theology into account is especially crucial in the interplay of religion and gender. In both my contexts, women with a variety of educational and class backgrounds negotiated the teachings and practices of their respective churches in many ways.

Especially in the study of the Abrahamic faiths, which are textual religions, the dogmatic, and scriptural aspects should be part of analysis, even when the focus is in ordinary people's experiences. Methodologically, this means – at best – the ability to combine textual (theological) and ethnographic methods, without creating a false dichotomy and value hierarchy between them. In some cases, official teaching arises from long-held beliefs and practices of the ordinary faithful.

An understanding of Mary as somebody who affirms and shares but also transcends and is beyond human womanhood is sometimes in open contradiction with the more 'official' Mary of the churches and their theological doctrines, especially in terms of her bodiliness and motherhood.

At the same time, the Marian doctrines are good examples of how doctrinal development has followed popular beliefs and lived spirituality. Classical Mariology is not as 'top-down' as one might first think. Jaroslav Pelikan (1996) makes the point that we should not automatically assume that what the church councils legislated as dogma was what the common people actually believed or, conversely, that what the common people actually believe is always different from dogma and creed. He argues that the veneration of Virgin Mary is one of the clearest examples of how ideas and practices have moved from the faith of ordinary people into liturgy, creed, and dogma, rather than the other way around. However, according to Sarah Jane Boss, the view that the doctrines' final acceptance by the church is always a victory for popular devotion over the opinions of theologians is questionable, as strong Marian devotion has also been shared and promoted by theologians since the medieval period (Boss 2007).

The work of Robert Orsi has especially influenced my conviction of the importance of popular religion for theology. In reality, Orsi questions the very use of terms such as popular religion as tendentious and unclear, and uses the term lived religion instead, meaning 'religious practice and imagination in ongoing, dynamic relation with the realities and structures of everyday life in particular times and places' (Orsi 2002: pp. xiii–xiv). His critique of the use of the term popular is closely related to the hierarchies between the normative and the other in academic studies of religion (Orsi 2002: pp. xiv–xix).

He does not exclude theology and texts from his ethnography. For him,

> The study of lived religion situates all religious creativity within culture and approaches all religion as lived experience, theology no less than lighting a candle for a troubled one, spirituality as well as other, less culturally sanctioned forms of religious expression. Rethinking religion as a form of cultural work, the study of lived religion directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas … The key questions concern what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them … Religious practices and understandings have meaning only in relation to other cultural forms and in relation to the life experiences and actual circumstances of the people using them ….
>
> (Orsi 2002: pp. xix–xx, emphasis in the original)

About this book

In this book, I intend to be simultaneously attentive to the theological and the lived, the textual, and the practical or material. I argue that they are not separated but inform each other and cannot be understood without each other. I have conducted interviews in two countries, in two Christian traditions in which Mary is central, as a theologian, not as an anthropologist or sociologist. De Haardt, too, pays attention to this artificial and tendentious

separation of 'lived religion' and teaching, which for her seems a false distinction (De Haardt 2011, referring to Hermkens, Jansen & Notermans, eds. 2009). This separation is a result of the history of separation between religious studies (and anthropology) and theology as well as of a simplistic view of theology.

In my research on Costa Rican Catholic and Finnish Orthodox women's Marian piety, I wanted to understand both their Mariological (theological) interpretations and the lived practices of their religious activity related to the Mother of God. In Costa Rica, even those women I interviewed who had very little formal schooling were often quite knowledgeable about Catholic Mariology. My informants in Finland were better educated, which includes their good knowledge of the teachings of the Orthodox Church. I found out how women – defined as subordinate and lay persons in both churches – negotiate with the core theological teachings of their tradition, often in unexpected and interesting ways.

I do not consider my interviews full ethnography as anthropologists would understand it. For me, interviewing turned out to be a necessary method, given my scholarly interests. As I said in the preface, I am fully aware that I still do ethnographic research as a theologian, trained mainly in reading texts. Maybe the combination of these two could be called theological fieldwork, in which one pays attention not only to lived religious practices but also to continuities and changes within theology. Latin American liberation theology and feminist theology are both examples of such rethinking of religion (Christianity), which also informs religious communities and even the society and culture around them. When interviewing people on religious subjects, it is also important to understand what they say theologically.

I argue that there is a living tradition of devotion to a very human (feminine) Mary, who comes close to people (especially women) in some of their most intimate experiences. My main examples are temporally and geographically distant from each other: first, the Virgin Mary in the oral folk tradition, collected mainly in the nineteenth century, of Finnish Orthodox Karelia; second, my interviews with contemporary Finnish Orthodox women on their relationship with the Mother of God; and third, my similar interviews with Catholic women in Costa Rica. What the Karelian Mary who goes to the *sauna* to give birth and the dark-skinned Latin American Mary who understands women's sufferings have in common is their powerful rooting in the everyday experiences of ordinary women in a syncretized and multicultural religious context. I consider Mary as an important key to understanding women's lives for feminist scholarship, whether in feminist theory, in religious studies, or in theology, and offer my examples of women's lived Marian piety to substantiate this claim. Christianity replaced and changed indigenous religious beliefs and practices and was tied to larger colonial and imperial interests, both inside and outside Europe, impacting on my both contexts.

This book is not a general survey on the Virgin Mary in Christian tradition. Rather, it focuses on one particular religious symbol primarily from

women's perspective. My emphasis and most original contribution are in the interviews I have done in Costa Rica and Finland. I will, however, briefly address Mary's position in Christian churches, Judaism, and Islam. I also present the main feminist critiques, both secular and theological, of the Mary symbol.

My examples are taken from different geographical areas, periods, fields and methods, such as theology, anthropology and folklore studies. I try to pay attention to religion in its different aspects – the theological and institutional, the historical, the lived, and so on. This certainly poses methodological problems. I am not claiming that there is a direct causality between certain characteristics in women's devotional practices and their social and religious status. Nor am I making direct comparisons between disparate materials (collected oral poetry, contemporary ethnographic data, mythology, and theology). However, in the case of the folklore material in Chapter 5, I have been informed by Wendy Doniger's bottom-up type of cross-cultural comparison. She uses the method to study myths, assuming that 'certain continuities [are] not about overarching human universals but about particular narrative details concerning the body, sexual desire, procreation, parenting, pain, and death' (Doniger 1998: p. 59). She introduces the concepts of micromyth and macromyth: the latter makes the cross-cultural enterprise possible. A macromyth includes all variants of a myth and scholarly interpretations of them, which combine in a multinational multimyth (Doniger 1998: pp. 93–94). Even when I am not working on myths alone, I have found the methods and suggestions of historians and anthropologists of religion, including folklorists, very useful for my work on different levels of popular Marian piety, which includes the oral, the written and the ritualistic.

Methodologically, this means theoretical borrowing from other fields. Instead of using philosophy or social sciences, I construct my multidisciplinary feminist theology in dialogue with disciplines such as anthropology and comparative folklore studies. In my view, feminist theologians, especially up to the late 1990s, have not been in a substantial dialogue with non-theological feminist theory (see Vuola 2002), and could work much more closely with scholars who study religion as lived, without excluding the doctrinal and theological levels either.

Finally, my focus on the Virgin Mary in Catholic and Orthodox contexts is based on two related points. First, Mary is extremely important in these traditions, theologically, and practically. She is central to both the formal and more informal aspects of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Second, her unique role as a female figure has made her an object of feminist critique, both theological and secular. An important part of that critique has focused on her ambiguity as an example and ideal for women: not only is her example (being a virgin mother) impossible to follow, but her exaltation based on this unique experience tends to separate her from all other women.

Interviewing contemporary women in these traditions reveals material that has been invisible in both traditional theology of the two churches

and feminist theorizing on religion and gender, especially on the Virgin Mary. As we will see, there are remarkable similarities in the experiences of women in two different cultural and religious contexts.

Despite these parallels, the two contexts are also very far apart. In the case of Costa Rica, the Catholic Church is the majority religion, whereas the Orthodox are a small minority in predominantly Lutheran Finland. Costa Rica is not a poor country but is in the global south, historically and today. Finland has emerged from poverty and the devastation of the Second World War to become a modern, economically stable country with high levels of education and equality. It is also considered a rather secularized country, even though the majority of people formally belong to the Lutheran Church. In Costa Rica, as in other Latin American countries, Catholicism is traditionally a powerful societal force – however, levels of secularization and membership of other churches are on the rise. I do not want to paint a too simplistic picture of a secularized global north in contrast with a religious global south. By and large, education and income levels may constitute the biggest differences between my two sets of informants.

Aware of these connections and contrasts, I will give examples of interpretations of the Virgin Mary that possibly could serve as a transcendental ideal for many women in these two settings. I am not only saying that the Mary symbol *could* do this after enough feminist critique – necessary as I consider it – but also that that is exactly how many women in different contexts see and venerate her.

My aim is to present the voices of these women who do not experience or recognize the separation between Mary and themselves which both institutional religion and its feminist critique may uphold. I hope to show glimpses of a living, cross-cultural and ecumenical Marian piety based on women's intense identification with the Mother of God, which questions her 'impossibility' claimed by feminists and her 'uniqueness' insisted on by the churches.

I am thus standing, with my informants and possibly the Mother of God, on a shaky bridge, constructed to make connections across different gaps. The gaps are between disciplines, fields of research, Christian churches and religions, and cultures. The task is vast and difficult, and I am not pretending to make huge claims about possible comparisons between disparate materials and contexts. Rather, I decide to walk over that bridge and see if it holds and takes me somewhere or if it leads to a dead end or feels too shaky to go any further.

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1 Blessed among women
Various teachings on Mary

Mariology, theological study of the Virgin Mary, is central to Christian theology, integrally related to its central teachings. Mary's importance is not limited to the dogmas the Christian traditions share. Whereas the theological weight given to Mary varies from denomination to denomination, some central ideas and common threads can be found in all Christian theology and spirituality. In the Protestant churches, this shared tradition ceased to develop in both theology and practice after the connection with the Roman Catholic Church was severed. The Virgin Mary is not prominent in Protestant liturgies, spirituality, prayers, or church celebrations. Even if the Virgin Mary remained important to the spirituality of the reformer Martin Luther, who continued to hold Mary in high regard as an exemplary Christian, the ensuing Protestant generations have become alienated from Mary, to the point of considering any references to Mary as heretical or as signs of heresy. The Church of England is an exception among Reformation churches in this regard (Nazir-Ali & Sagovsky 2007; Tavard 1996).[1] In this chapter, of the Protestant churches, I concentrate on the Lutheran tradition, which I know best and which is the closest mirror to my Orthodox interviewees in Finland.

In the following, I will briefly outline the central teachings about the Virgin Mary. I will address both the ecumenical teachings shared among Christian denominations, and the areas where the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran teachings differ. I will also make brief observations on Mary's role in Judaism and Islam.[2]

Mary has a significant position in Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, both of which celebrate Mary on several fixed occasions during the liturgical year. Catholic theology holds Mary as the most noteworthy member of the church, an embodiment of humanity, a co-redeemer and a mediator of grace. These functions of Mary have been declared official church teaching in the ecclesiological documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965, *Constitutio Dogmatica de Ecclesia*). In the Orthodox churches – and in part also in the Lutheran tradition – Mary stands out as the exemplary believer and paradigm of faith. She is the mother of all believers and the embodiment of the church that gathers all her dispersed children. For Orthodox Christians, Mary is the exemplary human being filled with the Holy Spirit, through whom grace is mediated. She is the Most Holy (*Panagia*), above all

other saints and holy people. Regardless of the many historical differences between them, Orthodox and Catholic Christians are closer to one another in this regard. Both of them honor Mary in many ways in both practice and theology, visible on all levels from popular piety to liturgy and doctrine. Importantly, however, in none of them is Mary worshipped, but respected, venerated and the object of devotion. This distinction is important in order to avoid divinizing Mary: she and the saints deserve respect and devotion as special human beings. Only God deserves worshipping (*latria*), not humans. Mary can, however, be the object of the respect and veneration belonging to the saints (*dulia*) in its highest form (*hyperdulia*), restricted only for her.

What, then, is the role of Mary in the Lutheran tradition? There is ambiguity about this. For instance, praying to or with Mary is not considered heretical in the Lutheran tradition but in practice hardly happens, and it is not recommended or even given much thought, at least in public. What happened to Mary in the Lutheran tradition, and why? Mary is familiar to Lutherans from holy days and a few liturgically designated days, from visual arts and music, the names of flowers, women's first names, and poetry. Clarissa Atkinson has pointed out Mary's broad-ranging impact on all Christian understanding of motherhood (Atkinson 1991). Mary is thus both present and hidden in Western culture, including in Protestant countries.

Mariology as its own branch of theology has principally developed in the Catholic tradition from Late Middle Ages. In the seventeenth century, Marian theology flourished in the Catholic Church. The following Marian renaissance can be said to stretch from the 1850s to the present day. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Catholic Church declared a new dogma about Mary and thus set itself apart from other Christian churches concerning her theological status. The late Pope John Paul II, known for his Marian piety, contributed to the reinvigoration of Marian devotion in our times. Some of the most notable apparitions of Mary have taken place in the last 150 years, such as Lourdes, France, in 1858, and Fátima, Portugal, in 1917.

The cult of the Virgin Mary has been studied extensively from different perspectives and disciplines. My aim here is merely to give some background to my own research, which is not covered previously. Thus, my limited presentation of the various teachings on Mary serves my broader argument here about the possibilities of a more cross-cultural and ecumenical Marian devotion, in which her figure might serve as a bridge rather than a barrier.

Apparitions of Mary

The two best-known European apparitions of Mary, Lourdes and Fátima, have been confirmed by the Catholic Church. Both are popular destinations for pilgrims. Millions of people annually visit these sites to pray and to show their respect to Mary. At Lourdes, according to the tradition, the Virgin Mary appeared to a teenage girl named Bernadette Soubirous several times in the spring of 1858. The legend tells us that Bernadette was picking up firewood near a cave in Massabielle, when a young woman appeared, dressed in white,

asking the girl to return another day. During the apparitions, Bernadette found a fountain in the cave. On March 25th, the day of the Annunciation to Mary (*Annuntiatio*), the woman in white told Bernadette that she was the 'Immaculate Conception'. The apparitions happened four years after the Catholic Church had approved the dogma about Mary's Immaculate Conception (to which I will return). Today this place, with its enormous church building, draws people from all corners of the world who want to visit the fountain that is believed to mediate healing miracles. Bernadette herself was canonized in 1933 and is today the patron saint of the sick and the poor.

In Fátima, Portugal, Mary appeared several times to three peasant children in 1917. Similarly to the apparitions in Lourdes, it was the young Mary dressed in white who appeared to rural children. The apparition in Fátima had a clear ideological and political content: Mary warned the children about the dangers of communism and urged Christians to pray for the conversion of Russia and world peace. The political context of the apparitions was the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Our Lady of Fátima is believed to effect miracles, too. She was particularly important for Pope John Paul II who attributed his survival of an attempt on his life in 1981 to her intervention.

Apparitions of Mary are a common occurrence in Catholic experience, even if the church has not officially accepted all of them. They are also a global phenomenon. Generally, the apparitions bear many similarities: Mary appears almost without exception to ordinary humble and poor people, offering a clear message, often with a specific request, such as to build a church in her honor. Further, the sites of her apparition often comprise caves, rocks, water and even celestial bodies – stars, the sun, and the moon. As the importance and the reputation of the apparition increase, miraculous and healing powers are attributed to the site.

Regardless of the similarities, the apparitions differ greatly in different locations. An individual may feel affinity to or find meaning in one apparition more than in another. One reason for this is that the apparition often becomes highly significant locally and nationally. These local(ized) Marys are incarnations of the Virgin Mary in a particular context, which is also why they are often declared as the patronesses of the nation states where the apparition first occurred. The same religious symbol, Mary, is interpreted differently from one cultural context to another.

Pilgrimages to a multitude of sites of Marian apparitions and otherwise important places of devotion are an old form of Christian piety, extending to our times and covering different geographical areas (e.g., Hermkens, Jansen & Notermans, eds. 2009).

Who is Mary?

The devotion to Mary and the theological teaching concerning her began to develop in the fourth century C.E. Prior to that, it is mostly found in commentaries on the New Testament. The juxtaposition and parallelizing of Mary and Eve, in which Mary is presented as the New Eve, is among the

oldest material pertaining to Marian theology. I will return to this later in the book. In the Bible, Mary appears and is mentioned by name only rarely. In addition to the narratives of Jesus's birth and childhood, the New Testament mentions Mary among the followers of Jesus, at his cross, and as a member of the early Christian community. Due to this meagerness, the connection between the biblical Mary and the later doctrines concerning her is often difficult to create, which is one of the main reasons for the Protestant critique of the status of Mary especially in Catholic theology.

In Mary – as well as in Eve – everything that Western and Christian culture associates with femininity becomes crystallized. Scratching the surface of the images and ideas about Mary brings out and makes visible rich, ambiguous, ancient but still influential perceptions about gender, differences between women and men, and concomitant assumptions on femininity and masculinity. Through Mary, both the patriarchal image of women as submissive and secondary to men and conceptions of womanhood as the fundamental power of being and source of life become visible.

In theological discourses, the feminine and woman can represent the soul, the spirit at its purest, but also its opposite, the body and the flesh. In this light, it is not at all surprising that these two aspects of human life are personified in two female figures, Mary and Eve. We need to remember, however, that religious ideas and symbols are not identical with ordinary maleness or femaleness. Obviously, there is a connection between them on some level, but since ideas about what is 'feminine' and 'masculine' vary at different times, we cannot assume any direct equivalence between, for example, medieval and contemporary ideas about gender. In the course of history, the Virgin Mary has been associated with a variety of different ideas considered feminine, but their connection to actual women is complex and versatile. Still, the Mary symbol is perhaps the most influential factor that has shaped Western, Christian images of women and femininity for a long time.

The Virgin Mary has a significant position in the theologies of both East and West. There are two ecumenical dogmas on Mary, which are accepted in both the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions. These two dogmas are about Mary's title as *Theotokos*, the Mother of God (from 431), and her perpetual virginity (from 681). In addition, the Roman Catholic Church has two other dogmas that are not accepted by the Orthodox or the Protestant churches: Immaculate Conception (1854) and Assumption (1950). I will present all these dogmas in detail later in this chapter.

In some apocryphal gospels, left outside the biblical canon, Mary is more present than in the canonical texts of the New Testament. Particularly the Gospel of James (also called the Infancy Gospel of James or the Protoevangelium of James) includes narratives from Mary's childhood and life before the birth of Jesus, most of them, according to scholars, with little if any historical basis. In the Middle Ages, these apocryphal texts and the thirteenth-century Golden Legend (*Legenda Aurea*) became more important sources and inspiration for the intensified Marian devotion than the New Testament.

Because much of Western art and popular piety concerning Mary draws from the Gospel of James, I will briefly introduce its central content (e.g., Hock 1995). In the Byzantine tradition, this gospel formally has a more important status than in the West. According to the narrative, Mary's parents Joachim and Anna suffered from infertility, but then Anna conceived in her old age. In visual art, there is an abundance of depictions of Anna and Joachim meeting each other after an angel has told each of them the news about the forthcoming child. The tender encounter between Anna and Joachim has often been understood as an illustration of Mary's Immaculate Conception. The Gospel of James narrates Mary's early childhood, including her first steps at the age of six months. According to the gospel, Anna and Joachim gave their daughter to be raised at the temple, where she lived from age three till twelve. At that point, a widower named Joseph was appointed as the girl's guardian.

The narrative of Mary's conception of Jesus in the Gospel of James basically follows Luke's New Testament narration about the apparition of an angel, another common theme in visual art. The oldest artistic depictions of the Annunciation originate from the fifth century. In art, the Annunciation can be presented both realistically, faithfully to the biblical story, and more mystically or indirectly as a union of the divine (heaven) and the human (earth), accentuating God's maleness and Mary's femaleness. The Angel Gabriel can even be presented as a spokesman of a sort, who proposes to Mary on behalf of God, making Mary an actual bride of God (*Sponsa Dei*). This erotically charged theme is particularly expressed in poetry.

The beginning of the most common prayer to Mary, *Ave Maria*, consists of the Angel Gabriel's greeting of Mary, from the New Testament. The latter part of the prayer was added much later, in the sixteenth century.

Ave Maria, gratia plena	Hail Mary, full of grace
Dominus tecum	The Lord is with you
benedicta tu in mulieribus	Blessed are you among women
et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.	and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Sancta Maria, Mater Dei	Holy Mary, Mother of God
ora pro nobis peccatoribus	Pray for us sinners,
nunc et hora mortis nostrae.	now and at the hour of our death.

Unlike in the New Testament, the Gospel of James narrates the broader social context of Mary's pregnancy. Joseph feels guilty about neglecting his responsibilities as Mary's guardian, while also being afraid that the community would accuse him of getting her pregnant. Mary has to defend her innocence and her exceptional pregnancy in tears. This theme of Mary's shame and obligation to defend her purity has prevailed for example in the Finnish oral folklore about Mary (see Chapter 5). In the Gospel of James, both Joseph and Mary are examined at the Temple to determine whether

they speak the truth or not. Obviously, they pass the test, after which the gospel only states that Joseph took Mary and brought her to his house.

The unusual nature of the relationship between Mary and Joseph is pondered upon first and foremost from Joseph's perspective: should he treat Mary as a wife or as a daughter? The gospel does not mention an actual engagement, but later, after Mary has given birth in a cave, Joseph introduces Mary to the midwife as his fiancée. After Jesus is born, this woman named Salome performs a postpartum examination on Mary – possibly the earliest record of a gynecological examination – only to discover that she has in fact maintained her virginity. The Gospel of James does not cover the earliest years of Jesus's life but ends with the order of Herod to kill all the male infants. Unlike in the New Testament, Mary does not escape to Egypt. Instead, a mountain encloses upon the mother and the child to protect them.

According to Ronald Hock, the main purpose of the Gospel of James has been to defend a particular understanding of Mary as a person worthy of devotion in herself, not only as the mother of Jesus. Scholars are still not in agreement on when exactly the text was written, the time span covering the years between 150–400 C.E. and the later time period appearing to be more probable (Hock 1995).

Other important moments in Mary's earthly life, all narrated in the New Testament and amply recorded in both visual arts and poetry, are the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth (Visitation) (See Figure 1.1), which

Figure 1.1 Mother of God greets Elizabeth (Visitation in the West). Tapiola Orthodox Church, Espoo, Finland. Photo: Elina Vuola.

includes Mary proclaiming the *Magnificat*; the Song or Canticle of Mary; as well as the birth of Jesus (Nativity) and events related to it, such as the visitation of the wise men or Magi (Epiphany), the flight to Egypt, and Mary at the foot of the cross.

The two ecumenical dogmas on Mary

The two oldest Marian dogmas are from the shared tradition of the early Christian centuries, although their significance varies in different churches. Although Mary has been suppressed in the theology, liturgy, and spirituality of the Protestant churches, the early ecumenical dogmas on Mary continue to be part of the official teaching of all Christian churches, including the Protestant. Before these dogmas were approved, Christian doctrine was shaped by several important theological debates. After the first two ecumenical dogmas were accepted, it took almost 1,200 years before the Catholic Church (alone) decided to formulate another dogma about the Virgin Mary. Unlike in the Protestant churches, in the Catholic Church, the authority of Scripture is paired with the authority of the tradition and the church's teaching office. Thus, centuries of Marian theological thinking and practices of popular piety both contributed to the formation of the two later Catholic dogmas. The weak or even nonexistent biblical foundation for these dogmas has not been as big a problem for the Catholics as it has been for the Protestants.[3]

Theotokos*, the Mother of God*

The Council of Ephesus, 431 C.E., approved the dogma according to which Mary can be called the Mother of God (in Greek, *Theotokos*, in Latin *Mater Dei*, *Deipara* or *Dei Genitrix*, God-Bearer or God-Birther). Before the dogma was approved, one of the early church's most important theological debates took place: is Jesus divine or human or both? Is he simultaneously fully human and fully divine, or is he God who took a human form? The *Theotokos* dogma is essentially Christological – it deals with the nature of Christ, not so much that of his mother. It was shaped by the early church's need to formulate and articulate its understanding of Christ by drawing the line between orthodoxy and heresy.

The doctrine of Christ's two natures reinforced the Christian belief in Christ who is simultaneously fully human and fully God. His birth from a human mother, Mary, guarantees his full humanity. If Mary was not the Mother of God, then Jesus could not be fully God or fully human. Mary is called the Mother of God only because of her son, but otherwise Mary is an ordinary human mother. Mary is honored as the Mother of God especially in the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox churches.

The term *Theotokos* is not used in the canonical biblical texts. The New Testament only speaks of Jesus's mother, Miriam of Nazareth. The difference between these two names is enormous. Already the first Marian

dogma indicates how in the case of Mary, the early church's teachings moved further and further away from the biblical texts. The oldest known prayer of Mary is from (around) the third century, *Sub tuum praesidium*. The text was originally written in Greek, but it is mostly known in its Latin version. It is a petition to the Mother of God for protection. It is the earliest known text that gives Mary the title *Theotokos*, or the Latin version *Dei Genitrix*:

Sub tuum praesidium	We fly to thy protection,
confugimus, confugimus	
Sancta Dei Genitrix	O Holy Mother of God
Sancta Dei Genitrix	
Nostras deprecationes ne despicias	Do not despise our petitions
in necessitatibus nostris	in our necessities
sed a periculis cunctis	but deliver us always
libera nos semper	from all dangers
Virgo gloriosa et benedicta	O Glorious and Blessed Virgin.

The *Theotokos* dogma is not only part of the early church's theological formulation of its faith statements about Christ as the Son of God, but also has significance on a continuum older than Christianity. Both Judaism and Christianity were born in the clash between a monotheistic religion and 'pagan' fertility cults, to which female goddesses were often central. The earliest images and conceptions of Mary were influenced by these pre-Christian goddesses, such as Ishtar, Cybele, Artemis, and Isis. The Egyptian goddess Isis nursing her god-son Horus is a direct model for the earliest Christian iconography of Mary. The *Theotokos* dogma thus confirms – perhaps unintentionally – this continuum between Mary and the pre-Christian goddesses. Ephesus, the location for the ecumenical council in which the dogma was approved, had been the central location for the cult of Artemis (Diana in the West). *Theotokos* began to replace Artemis as a more significant female divinity, both conceptually and visually (Hirn 1987). The last temple of Isis in Egypt was destroyed as late as in the sixth century.

Semper virgo*, the perpetual virgin*

The second ecumenical dogma of Mary, shared by all Christian churches, concerns Mary's perpetual virginity. The concept was first officially discussed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., while it appears also in a fourth-century confession of faith from Constantinople. The doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity was defined in Rome in 649 C.E. and was officially accepted at the third Council of Constantinople in 681 C.E. According to this dogma, Mary is an eternal virgin, *aeiparthenos* in Greek, *semper*

virgo in Latin – prior to the birth of Christ, at the moment of birth and after it, *ante partum, in partu et post partum Christi*. Particularly the middle statement about Mary's virginity maintained intact even in labor, *in partu*, may both amuse and annoy a contemporary reader: did Mary's hymen tear during her labor, or not? The emphasis of the dogma is, however, in the statement that Mary became pregnant virginally, without a human male, and lived as a virgin the rest of her life. The apocryphal Gospel of James influenced Christian teaching on Mary's perpetual, physiological virginity more than the New Testament texts that offer only few words on Mary and her persona.

The dogma developed in the fourth century in the context of increasing asceticism and ascetic orientations in Christianity, which in turn contributed to the development of monasticism. The virginal, celibate lifestyle – refusing marriage, sex, and procreation – was presented as an ideal for both men and women. Mary and her virginity thus became the model of celibacy to imitate. Asceticism was fed by a perception that evil rules the material reality. Life in a monastery and as a virgin was respected as a higher calling than marriage and parenthood. The early church fathers' views on women and femaleness were influenced by both monasticism, with its ideal of asceticism, and the body-soul dualism embedded in Greek philosophy. With all these influences, the Virgin Mary was elevated to a status above all other women.

The tension between asceticism, on the one hand, and affirmation of the body, on the other, is still contested in Christianity today. The church fathers of both East and West taught about the goodness of the original creation and had a positive view of the human body. The tension is about a conflict with two opposite emphases leading to opposite directions. Addressing Mary's status and significance became one way of easing this tension. Thus, it can be traced in practically everything said and taught about Mary: she is an ordinary woman and a mother, but also a supernatural being and an object of ideals that appear impossible.

Semper virgo is, however, not only about Mary's physiological virginity, her being sexually untouched and inexperienced when becoming pregnant with Jesus. According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Mary's virginity is a physical and real fact (Owens & Jelly 2003). The New Testament narrates Mary's puzzlement over her upcoming pregnancy: 'How is it possible? I am still untouched' (Lk 1:34). The Greek word *parthenos*, nevertheless, signifies a young woman, a maiden, or a girl and thus does not necessarily refer to physiological virginity – although in practice they often mean the same.

According to Mary F. Foskett, the term *parthenos* has many dimensions and meanings, and at no point during the antiquity did it refer exclusively to the physiological state of virginity. The concept had different meanings in different contexts. Classical Mariology is built on only one of these meanings, perhaps the narrowest of them all. The term *parthenos* can refer

not only to a physiological state of being sexually untouched but also to age, marital status, and sexual immaturity in young boys and girls. In the case of women, it refers to a young girl who has not yet achieved the marital status of a grown woman. In a broader cultural sense, the term virgin can also signify the location for encountering the holy – as pre-Christian cults of holy virgins, such as the Vestal Virgins – or it can signify virgin birth. Foskett concludes that a *parthenos* is an ethical, spiritual, moral, and bodily agent, in which case virginity can refer to the physiological and social as well as the moral state of liminality (Foskett 2002).

The growing emphasis on virginity as an ideal for both men and women in early Christianity has to do with this holistic and ambiguous meaning of virginity, rather than only refusal of sexuality or marriage, although this is one of the meanings. Mostly, it was understood as a spiritual commitment and full devotion to God.

In Judaism, the term *betulah*, typically translated as virgin, referred primarily to social status and was important in terms of the young girl's fertility potential and, thus, the family's honor. The *betulah* stands poised on the threshold of adult womanhood awaiting her transition from the legal jurisdiction of her father to that of her husband. The translation of *betulah* has long been debated, but it consistently refers to a female's age rather than to her sexual experience (Foskett 2002).

Virginity as power, strength, and autonomy – as self-sufficiency – was a central characteristic of many pre-Christian goddesses. Different cultural images associated with the language of virginity loom behind the statements about Mary's eternal virginity but it is the anatomical definition of virginity that came to dominate. However, to speak of Mary as a virgin is to engage a host of competing but not necessarily exclusive valences (Foskett 2002).

In any case, the dogma on Mary's perpetual virginity confirms the exceptional birth of Jesus: her mother remained a virgin and did not experience any pain. Thus, only Mary avoids the curse on all women in the Old Testament's narration of the Fall, which included painful labor for women.

Mary's role as the New Eve and her opposite liberates her from the punishment issued on women because of Eve. This freedom is Mary's prerogative and not applicable to other women. The dogma not only distances Mary from the biblical Mary but also separates her from other women: it underscores Mary's exceptional status in relation to other women or womanhood in general. This polarizing of Mary and all other women has been central in feminist criticism of classical Mariology, which I will present in Chapter 2.

The *post partum* part of the dogma refers to the belief that Mary remained a virgin also after the birth of Jesus. In other words, she had no other children but Jesus. The identity of Jesus's brothers and sisters mentioned in the New Testament has been interpreted in several ways.

The dogma reinforces the idea that these siblings were actually his cousins or children from Joseph's previous marriage or sisters and brothers in a spiritual sense.

As was said, calling Mary the Mother of God and believing in her perpetual virginity belong to the commonly shared tradition of all Christian churches. It is thus correct to call Mary the Mother of Jesus and believe that she remained a virgin throughout her life also in the Protestant churches. The dogmas are held as church teaching, but not necessarily as central beliefs, for example in the Lutheran tradition. It may be a more common belief that the siblings of Jesus mentioned in the New Testament were actual children of Mary and Joseph just like Jesus was, and that Mary lived the rather ordinary life of a Jewish woman, including marriage, motherhood, and family.

The dogma can be understood as being on a continuum with pre-Christian cultures. Like Mary, the pre-Christian goddesses were often virgin mothers. The belief in a wondrous, unusual birth is older than Christian theology and relates to what Jung called the archetype of the great mother (*magna mater*) in the human psyche, according to which all human origin is to be found in a woman.

The Roman Catholic dogmas on Mary

In addition to the ecumenical dogmas on Mary, the Roman Catholic Church has declared two more: the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (*Immaculata conceptio*), in 1854, and Mary's Assumption to heaven (*Assumptio*), in 1950. Both dogmas were declared by the act of a single pope, without a broad consultation process or approval of a council. The Orthodox and Protestant churches have not accepted these two later Marian dogmas, and particularly the last one has caused ecumenical contention. The Catholic Church admits that these dogmas are a result of the development of the tradition, that is, they are a matter of faith rather than of intellectual deliberation.

Immaculata conceptio, *the immaculate conception*

The first of the Catholic Church's later dogmas on Mary is that of the Immaculate Conception declared in 1854 (by Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*). It is often confused, erroneously, with Mary's becoming pregnant and giving birth as a virgin. The dogma on the Immaculate Conception is an independent Mary-centric doctrine: Mary herself is understood to be free from the original sin and have a virginal origin since her conception, unlike the rest of humankind who inherits a human nature infected with sin. The Catholic Church celebrates Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception on December the eighth.

Connecting original sin and sexuality in Christian theology means that all human beings are born in original sin because of their sexual origins and particularly the sexual desire involved in conception. It is an old thought particularly in the Western theology, prominent since St. Augustine (354–430). It is based on an understanding of the Fall according to which each human being inherits a sinful nature and origin. It is only the Virgin Mary who would have inherited an immaculate, unpolluted human nature and origin. Mary's virginity – that is, the sinless conception of Christ – was thus not considered to be enough, but it was seen important to prove that Mary herself had the same sinless origin. It is impossible to understand this train of thought without the concept of original sin and particularly, the way in which sexuality and procreation have been associated with sin over the centuries.

The idea that, apart from her son, Mary is the only human being free from original sin is significantly older than the dogma of Immaculate Conception and has been discussed over the centuries. Even Luther deals with it in his writings in the sixteenth century. Not all theologians have found the dogma acceptable, and varying interpretations have been debated, at times heavily. Thus, merely one view ended up being confirmed as a dogma. According to Jaroslav Pelikan (1996), Mary's immaculate nature was a commonly shared understanding in the Western Church by the end of the fifteenth century. However, the dogma does not have a clear biblical basis and the early church fathers considered Mary holy, but not immaculate.

The idea about Mary's holiness, and her veneration in general, was first developed in the Eastern Church, but it has never affirmed Mary's immaculate nature as a dogma. The theological debate lasted over a millennium, but popular piety and related liturgical practices are behind it. At least since the eleventh century, feasts of Mary's Immaculate Conception have been celebrated. The dogma is thus a good example of how doctrines developed over time, and how they should not be seen as only resulting from the inventions of individual theologians or church councils. Rather, many doctrines have risen from lived religious traditions with deep roots. The two dogmas of the Catholic Church on Mary demonstrate how the faith and practices of ordinary believers can be filtered into official theology and doctrine – sometimes slowly, as has been the case with the *Immaculata* dogma. At the same time, theologians may hold quite differing views on the importance and content of these doctrines.

As early as the fourth century, St. Augustine taught that Mary was different from all other human beings. Thomas Aquinas rejected this notion in the thirteenth century. In his view, Mary was under the influence of original sin during her conception just like any other human being, with the exception that she was purified from it before her own conception.

The dogma is an example of tensions in the Catholic teaching on Mary: the opinion of a Doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas, was defeated

in the 1854 dogma. A compromise between the extremes was presented by Duns Scotus, also in the thirteenth century, who argued that Christ had the power to save his mother from original sin. This view is Christocentric, while not specifically biblical. The nineteenth-century view won, confirming the church's belief that Mary herself had a virginal, immaculate origin.

In iconography of Mary, the dogma on her immaculate nature is often associated with the female figure from the Book of Revelation who crushes the head of the snake and thus conquers sin. With this association, Mary is greeted as the New Eve. As said earlier, the dogma distances itself from Christology both in content and symbolically. In the *Immaculata* type of images, Mary is typically portrayed alone, without her son, often as a young woman, not as a mother. (See Figure 1.2) The narratives from the Gospel of James about Mary's parents Anna and Joachim, and paintings of them, have been interpreted as presentations of Mary's Immaculate Conception. The most famous of these is the portrait of Anna and Joachim in embrace by the Golden Gate of Jerusalem, alluding to something else than ordinary conception.

Figure 1.2 Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. Guatemala City, Guatemala. Photo: Elina Vuola.

The most commonly known iconography on the *Immaculata*, especially by the great Spanish painters, dates from the seventeenth century – much before the dogma was confirmed. In these images, Mary stands on the moon, crowned with stars, crushing the snake with her heel. She is alone, without her child. Today the best-known images of the *Immaculata* type are those of the Virgins of Lourdes and Fátima. The Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, who according to the legend appeared already in 1531, is also envisioned in the fashion of the *Immaculata*.

The centuries-old theological discussions on the details of Mary's immaculate nature – was she free of original sin, or purged of it, and if so, how? – show how important the belief in Mary's unusual nature is, as much as they reflect the ambivalent attitude Christian tradition towards the human body and bodiliness. The doctrine on Mary's purity speaks of some aspiration to rise 'above' the body, sexuality and human procreation. How far can Mary be removed from ordinary (women's) experience?

Even when Mary is not worshipped as a goddess, in practice she becomes divine-like when she is so drastically removed from ordinary human experience. To be above the inevitable human dependence on embodied procreation is in itself a sign of divinity. There is precedence for this: female goddesses who give birth from and by themselves and who are mystically considered to be life itself.

Assumptio, *Mary's assumption to heaven*

The other Marian dogma accepted only in the Roman Catholic Church is about Mary's Assumption to heaven (*Assumptio*). It was issued in 1950 by Pope Pius XII (*Munificentissimus Deus*). According to the dogma, the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever-virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed (taken up) in body and soul into heavenly glory. Mary is thus the first and the only person – apart from her son – who has experienced being raised up to heaven. The dogma confirms the centuries-old belief that Mary is in heaven, which is why people can pray to her. She is the intercessor, who prays for people and mediates for them to God.

The Catholic Church admits that there is no direct biblical basis for the dogma of Mary's Assumption, in which Mary is presented not only as exceptional among women but among all humankind. The Book of Revelation's female figure – who is dressed in the sun and standing on a moon with 12 stars framing her head – is interpreted in this dogma as Mary, the Queen of Heaven, already in heavenly glory, and as a predecessor for humankind. The words of the Gospel of Luke 'blessed are you among women' (*benedicta tu in mulieribus*, included in the *Ave Maria* prayer) are crystallized in this dogma, even if with a remarkable leap in thought. The biblical understanding of Mary being blessed among women does not presume that Mary receives such a special status as the dogma implies.

An essential part of the dogma's rationale is in the paralleling of Mary and Eve. Mary is the New Eve, who atones for the sin of Eve's fall.

Because of her actions, Eve proved to be not the mother of life but rather the 'mother of death' who led Adam to sin and all humankind to suffer death. Eve was disobedient, whereas Mary was obedient. Through her obedience, Mary as the New Eve thus atones for humankind's Fall into sin.

Similarly to the dogma on the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption dogma was developed and crystallized over centuries. Apparently, the feast day of Mary's Assumption to heaven (August 15th) was celebrated already in the Middle Ages, first in the Eastern Church. For centuries, Christians have prayed to Mary asking for her help and intercession. She has been easier to approach than the more abstract or distant God. Approaching Jesus Christ through his mother is an old thought, fully accepted in Catholic Mariology: *per Mariam ad Jesum*, through Mary to Jesus. It is related to an understanding that a son cannot deny his mother anything. Because Mary is both human and closer to God and Jesus than any other human, she has exceptional, nonhuman power. She prays for people and helps them. In her role as a mother, she embodies maternal care and understanding. People can approach her with trust and closeness as they would their own mother. Compared with the traditional male-centric imagery of God as a stern and distant judge, the experience of the caring, maternal Mary becomes psychologically understandable.

Naming Mary as the Queen of Heaven, *Maria Regina* or *Regina Caeli*, is an older tradition than the Assumption dogma but relates to the understanding of Mary as semi-divine in popular piety. Conceptually, Mary's royal status is based on the belief that she has risen to heaven. Mary's Assumption to heaven had been a recurring, favorite topic in art long before the dogma was issued. In Christian art, Mary is depicted rising to heaven and being crowned there, sometimes by Christ, other times by both God the Father and Christ. (See Figure 1.3)

Calling Mary Our Lady (*Notre Dame*, *Nuestra Señora*, *Madonna*) is related to her royal status. As with the *Immaculata* dogma, this further distances Mary from Christology, and she becomes an independent theological and religious character in her own right.

Protestant theologians and churches have rejected the foundations of the *Assumptio* dogma. Given the centrality and uniqueness of Christ, Protestant theology cannot allow Mary's elevation to such a significant role as the dogma implies. The Eastern Church has for centuries recognized the day of Mary's death or 'falling asleep' (Lat. *Dormitio*, Gr. *Koimesis, Uspenjie* in Russian) on August 15th, the same day when the Western Church celebrates the Assumption. The Orthodox tradition recognizes Mary's actual death. In Orthodox iconography, this is portrayed in images of Mary resting on her deathbed, surrounded by the saints. Her resurrected son is by her bed and transports his mother's soul to heaven. The little child in Jesus's arms depicts Mary's soul. (See Figure 1.4) In the Eastern tradition, too, Mary is understood to be at God's side, even though she is believed to have experienced a natural death.

Figure 1.3 Crowning of the Virgin Mary. Naantali medieval church, Finland. Photo: Timo Kvist.

Figure 1.4 Koimesis icon. Ilomantsi, Finland. Icon: Auli Martiskainen. Photo: Petter Martiskainen.

Eve and Mary, the bad and the good woman

One of the oldest ways of interpreting Mary in traditional Christian thought has been to juxtapose her with Eve. This paralleling is apparent in the rationales for the dogmas on Mary. Mariology developed initially in conjunction with increased asceticism, admiration of virginity, and the rise of monasticism. Prior to that, deliberations on Mary related to her role as the New Eve. The great theologians of the second century, Justin the Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus, formed this new notion of Mary. In this pair of two women, Eve is the mother of fallen humankind and the one who brought sin into the world. In the words of Tertullian, Eve is *porta diaboli*, the devil's gateway. In contrast Mary represents the New Israel, the mother of all believers and redeemed humanity; she is heaven's gateway. Eve, the woman, is the original reason for sin, who also seduced her male partner to sin. Eve's fall is contradictorily both a sign of women's weakness and inability to resist temptation and of the power women have; this is exemplified in her independent action and her success in convincing the man to follow her will.

The punishment for the Fall was women's subjection to men. Just as sin, death, and disobedience are essential in Eve's persona, Mary is associated with the opposite: grace and salvation, life, and obedience. In the duality of Eve and Mary, the Christian teaching on humanity's fate is played out: humankind is either destroyed or saved by a woman.

In a framework where men and masculinity are seen as representing the spirit and the soul, and women and femininity represent the body and the flesh, Eve's act is also seen as the body's rebellion against the spirit. The punishment for this is restoration of the right order. It means both the submission of the body to the spirit – the ascetic ideal – and women's subjection to men. In the polarization of the two women, Mary reconciles Eve's sin and returns everything to its proper place. Mary is the personification and embodiment of the ideal woman; this elevates her to a supernatural status. In visual art, Eve's nudity accentuates her sexuality, conceptually and visually linked to sin and death. Sometimes Mary, as the personification of the church, is depicted in the role of the priest: feeding her children, the church, in an act of Eucharist.

These opposites – two women representing good and evil, salvation and destruction – parallel the juxtaposition of Adam and Christ in Christian theology. Christ is the new Adam; Mary is the New Eve. In Christian thinking, because of Christ's redemptive work, also women are new Adams, new people, and part of redeemed humankind. In spite of this, the parallel between the two women thus applies particularly, and solely, to women. Men are not considered new Eves.

Theologically, the paralleling of the Eve-Mary pair with the Adam-Christ pair seems to suggest that Mary stands next to Christ as some kind of a savior of her gender and as another symbol and embodiment of salvation.

These are some of the reasons why Protestants are critical towards Catholic Mariology.

In this constellation, Eve and Mary are represented as two mutually opposed female characters. This dualism reflects the dualism of the overall teaching on women in Christian theology. Eve is weak and prone to sin. She seduces a man to sin. She is simultaneously tempting and frightening, as often depicted in Christian art. In Eve, sexuality, femaleness and death are combined. It was Eve, not Adam, who desired to taste the fruit from the tree of knowledge, and she did not ask for her man's permission. In contemporary terms, Eve is an active subject or agent. Yet theologians have traditionally interpreted the story of the Fall as a negative, cosmic, and dramatic moment in the fate of humankind.

I will return to the Eve–Mary parallel, as evaluated by feminist theologians, in the next chapter.

Mary and spiritual femininity

Gender is a way of understanding and analyzing reality – also within religion. This is manifested in Christian tradition in multitude of ways. Most importantly, divinity is associated with maleness or with male attributes. Human nature is often described with attributes and concepts typically seen as female. In other words, the religious notions of gender are not separate from human reality, language, and the different ways of understanding the meaning of gender.

Femininity as a theological idea, that is, as a way of depicting complicated issues such as the human soul and its relation to God in feminine terms, crystallizes in Mary. At the same time, pre-Christian traditions, such as considering Mary symbolically as both her son's mother and spouse, are at play. Mary is the symbol of the church, its embodiment. At the same time, the church has been traditionally described as the spouse or bride of Christ.

In Judaism, the relation between God and Israel is described in terms of marriage. This affirms the notion of divinity as masculine, in relation to whom humanity is depicted symbolically as feminine. Israel, who breaks the covenant with God, is portrayed as a whore, as an unfaithful, deceitful woman. Mary's symbolic significance as a representative of humanity, and the church is thus directly related to the traditional masculine notion of divinity.

Understanding humanity and the church as feminine in relation to a masculine God and Christ is well established in Christian tradition. The individual human being and her soul are associated with the feminine, especially in the church's mystical tradition: the mystical union, *unio mystica*, between God and the soul presupposes that the latter is passive and receptive. This is based on the dualistic understanding of gender, which assumes that

strength and rationality are masculine qualities, whereas submission and proneness to emotion are considered feminine. In this line of thought, receptivity is considered a feminine trait. This gendered imagery stimulated a rich mystical tradition, loaded with erotic overtones, represented by some of the most notable Western mystics such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. On this symbolic level, it does not matter whether one is a man or a woman, or what one's place in society or the church is. We are all 'women' in relation to the male God. This, obviously, leads to portraying masculinity in the ontext of God principally as omnipotence, power, activity, and perfection.

In early Christian soul-body dualism, drawn from ancient Hellenistic philosophy, the soul is seen as masculine and in control, whereas the body is the submissive feminine element. In the 'bridal mysticism' of later centuries, however, even a man's soul becomes feminine: he too is the true spiritual bride of Christ who passively and receptively waits for his bridegroom. The male mystic or believer, in this line of thinking, in a way exemplifies femininity, as the true bride of Christ.

All the metaphors in which women and femininity are at play present passivity and a secondary status in relation to the more active and primary principle such as God, understood in masculine terms. Conversely, the elements considered feminine – Israel, the church, the human soul – are symbolized as feminine, because they are the submissive element. In other words, the relationship between God and humanity is presented as analogical with the hierarchical relationship between men and women.

Mary, the embodiment of the church

Mary is also theologically understood as the symbol and personification of the church in relation to God and Christ. Thus, Mary can be called *persona ecclesiae*, the personification of the church. She is not only the ideal and predecessor for believers, but she is also the church itself, the mother church, humanity in its original and eschatological meaning. Because the church and the whole of humankind in relation to God are understood as feminine through the marital metaphor, it is understandable that the purest and the most excellent woman becomes the most perfect representative and symbol of the church.

Associating space, particularly holy space, with the feminine is an old tradition. In the case of Mary, this association shows particularly in the 'shrine madonnas' and the Mary of the Protective Mantle, which the Reformation banned. In these, Mary is represented visually with characteristics that refer to divinity: as the original source, the creator, and the protector. Under the cloak of Mary or even inside Mary herself stand the church and the whole of humankind with its popes, kings, and bishops. In the images, the body of a woman is simultaneously the

origin of us all – born from a woman – and the space for the holy, a holy space. Mary is the embodiment of both life itself and of the holy in a most concrete way.

In the final documents of the Second Vatican Council, Mary and Mariology are addressed as part of ecclesiology. The bishops voted on the matter; some considered it important to address Mary as an independent theme, rather than in association with the doctrine of the church. With a small margin of victory, however, Mariology became attached to ecclesiology. This is based on an argument that Mary as the mother of Jesus participates in the salvation history in a unique way. These considerations give Mary a significance that she does not have in the Protestant and Orthodox traditions.

Mary symbolizes the church as the bride of Christ and as the mother of believers. Besides these, she is also known as holy wisdom, *Hagia Sofia*, especially in the Eastern tradition. The roots of the Christian wisdom tradition are found in the Jewish wisdom literature where wisdom or God's spirit was understood in feminine terms. This was identified in the Christian tradition with the Holy Spirit, one of the persons of the Trinity.

The Greek and Latin words *sofia* and *sapientia* are grammatically feminine. Wisdom in Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is clearly feminine. To identify the Wisdom of Proverbs with Christ is a Christian interpretation, whereas in the Hebrew Bible, Wisdom is found in its original feminine form (Sollamo 1992). The feminine Wisdom has her roots in traditions preceding both Judaism and Christianity. In ancient Judaism, Lady Wisdom replaced the goddesses, in Christianity she lives first and foremost as one dimension of Mary. The apocryphal Book of Sirach has an idea of Lady Wisdom as the conveyer of divine knowledge. This idea is based on a very old Near Eastern religious tradition (Nissinen 2009).

The connection between Mary and Wisdom became common in the Middle Ages, when texts related to Wisdom started to be used in connection to Mary. According to Sarah Jane Boss (2004), behind this is the conviction that Mary is the mother of Christ and God not only physically but in a moral and spiritual sense. Visually, in particular, this aspect of Mary was associated with her status as the goddess and ruler of the heaven.

Sophia, the divine Wisdom, the feminine face of God, appears more clearly than anywhere else in Mary's motherhood; from this draws the idea of Mary as the Seat of Wisdom (*Sedes Sapientiae*). Here Wisdom refers to both Christ, whose seat Mary is, and to Mary herself as the feminine aspect of the divine. Mary both sits on her seat, holding Jesus, or Wisdom, on her lap, and she is the seat itself. (See Figure 1.5) For this reason, especially in art and popular piety, Mary sometimes bypasses the Holy Spirit as a member of the Holy Trinity. The Trinity becomes formed by the Father, the Son, and the Mother.

Figure 1.5 Sedes sapientiae, Seat of Wisdom. Medieval sculpture known as Our Lady of Leuven. Saint Peter's Church, Leuven, Belgium. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Mediatrix: *Mary the intercessor*

The idea of Mary as the intercessor between God and humanity (*Mediatrix*) is old, and commonly known in Catholic and Orthodox churches, and in many ways gets to the heart of Marian devotion. Especially in the Catholic Church, this is related to Mary's role in her son's redemptive work and in God's salvation plan. Because Mary is a human being, but free of sin and assumed into heaven, she is thus the only one in 'direct' communication with her son and the Godhead.

This idea gained ground in the Middle Ages. The term intercessor originated in the Eastern Christian tradition, becoming accepted in the West no later than the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It conceives of Mary's role as one who prays for others and conveys grace. She mediates in two directions: from human beings to God and from God to human beings. As God became human through Mary, human beings have access to Christ and God

through her. God became human in Christ whose humanity is guaranteed by his birth of a human mother. The idea gives Mary a significant role not only in the incarnation but also in salvation. She is a unique channel and bridge between God and humankind; associated with Eve she is the bridge to paradise, rather than the devil's gate (Pelikan 1996). Again, this kind of a mediator role is not unique to Mary: similar mediator roles were typical for some of the pre-Christian goddesses, such as the Sumerian Ishtar.

Especially in popular piety and among the faithful, Mary's active role as the intercessor entails her ability to perform miracles. Mary's intercessions are petitioned with trust in her maternal power over her son: a son can deny his mother nothing. One can negotiate and converse with Mary. Mary understands, she does not judge, she is human – a woman and a mother. No request is too mundane or insignificant to be expressed to Mary. This became evident in my interviews with Catholic and Orthodox women in Costa Rica and Finland, which I will present in Chapters 3 and 4.

In medieval mysticism, both men and women cultivated feminine imagery, but medieval Christians considered women saints or mystics, rather than men, as the channels between this world and the next. Women thus had special spiritual attributes that allowed them even some authority. This relates to Mary in that the idea that she was intercessor also became central in the West in the Middle Ages (Mooney 1999).

Mary in the Orthodox tradition

The Mother of God, the God-Bearer (*Theotokos*) occupies an important place in the Orthodox tradition. The written and oral, visual and musical heritage related to the Mother of God constitutes a rich and multilayered tradition with slightly varying focal points in different countries at different times. Orthodox theology on the Mother of God has been discursively framed as devotional rather than systematic. For Orthodox believers, the Mother of God is a powerful symbol of incarnation because she miraculously gave birth to God. She is considered the intercessor on behalf of all Christians, she is seen as the mother of all people, who helps, protects, and mediates prayers to God. Still, the Orthodox churches emphasize her human qualities, which render Mary easily accessible to her believers and are associated with popular views of her as mother and intercessor (Kalkun & Vuola 2017).

The Orthodox tradition related to the Mother of God is in general more associated with oral Church heritage and practices, which have varied in different regions and periods, than with Scripture. Scripture makes up a small proportion of the Marian texts and Mariology, which contain considerably more piety literature, writings of the holy fathers, the poetics of church singing, and iconographic theology.

According to the Orthodox tradition, the Mother of God had a fully human nature and thus experienced human life and death. While the Mother

of God is considered chosen and without sin, she was not radically different from ordinary humans. In order to highlight the full humanity of the Mother of God, Orthodox theologians emphasize Mary's actual death before she was assumed into heaven (Dormition). The Orthodox churches venerate Mary as a human being who has attained true purity and sanctification in the course of her life. She is thus a model of *theosis*, deificiation (Kalkun & Vuola 2017).

In the Orthodox tradition, Mary is most often called the Mother of God and the God-Bearer or God-Birther (*Theotokos*) and All Holy (*Panagia*). She is the example and paragon of holiness for the faithful, both for men and women. Human beings, both men and women, can consider Mary as the example and forerunner whom they can follow. She is ever-virgin – thus, the Orthodox doctrine affirms the virginal conception and birth of Jesus. She has intercessory and protective powers (Atanassova 2011; McGuckin 2008; Sandu 2011).

Deification means that human beings are exalted by grace, even to share in God's life. Human beings can live at the same level of existence as the divine Trinity, to some extent already in this life. The Orthodox understanding of *theosis* differs from the atonement theology of Western Christianity: salvation, in the Byzantine tradition, consists of deification of the human person, made possible in incarnation. The concept is thus Christocentric. Christ becoming human makes the deification of human beings possible. God became human so that humans can become godlike. Human nature is created able to participate in God's being (Thomas 2011). At least in this way, the theological anthropology – the theologically founded image of the human being – of the Eastern Church is more positive than the Western one. However, from a gender perspective, there are tensions in the Orthodox view of the human being: for example, men's likeness or resemblance to Christ is the main argument against women's ordination (for more on Orthodox views of women, see Raunistola-Juutinen 2012).

Mary as the Mother of God and God-Bearer grants her son his human nature, and by the same token, she herself participates in divinity in a special way. She is the Mother of not only Christ but also God. Mary is an exemplary human being, filled with the Holy Spirit, All-Holy, through whom grace is conveyed. The latter notion does not give Mary the same significance as the Catholic tradition of Mary as the co-redeemer (*Coredemptrix*) and mediator (*Mediatrix*). However, Mary prays for humankind and can be prayed to. Mary is also the symbol and personification of the church, similarly as in the Western tradition. Mary, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, represents the church as the model for new humanity.

Even if the Orthodox churches have not approved the Catholic *Assumptio* dogma, the church teaches that after Mary fell into her sleep of death, she was received into heaven with her body and soul (McGuckin 2011). The iconographic tradition depicts this as an event where Jesus, standing by her mother's death bed, holds in his hands his mother's soul, which is portrayed

in the form of a small child. The son has returned to retrieve his mother to dwell by his side. The *Koimesis* of the Virgin presents her in one of her roles as an intercessor for the soul of the believer after death. She is the most powerful of all intercessors, always ready to listen to those in distress. She is also the most powerful symbol of protection, particularly of women (McGuckin 2008: p. 219).

Likewise, the Orthodox churches have not approved the other later Catholic dogma of Immaculate Conception. Both in popular piety and theology in the West, according to Jaroslav Pelikan (1996), this dogma has shallower roots than the *Assumptio* dogma, even if it was considered accepted teaching by the fifteenth century. In the Orthodox Church, the doctrine of original sin is conceived differently from the Catholic Church, where it is essentially related to the *Immaculata* dogma. Nevertheless, the celebration of the Mother of God as immaculate is a 'clear and universal recognition of her exceptional and iconic sanctity' (McGuckin 2008: p. 218).

Eastern Orthodox Marian devotion is closer to the Catholic than the Protestant tradition(s). At the same time, in its reservation towards the Catholic Church's later Mariological developments, the Orthodox are closer to the Protestant traditions. However, in Orthodox liturgy, iconography, and spirituality, Mary has a significant role in contrast with the silence and absence of Mary in the Protestant churches. In the Orthodox Church, Mary represents a lived religiosity, which does not necessarily need the support of heavy doctrinal statements.

Marian spirituality has long and deep roots in the Eastern Church, which shows most clearly in iconography and the feasts for Mary that are central to the liturgical calendar. The earliest visual images of Mary come from Byzantium. Marian devotion and the liturgical and visual tradition related to her originate from the East, from the cultural heritage of Byzantium. Because the earliest Mariology developed in the Eastern tradition, the Orthodox tradition on Mary stands in uninterrupted continuity with the earliest Christian centuries.

The Lutheran understanding of Mary

In spite of her own evangelical claim that 'all generations will call me blessed' (Luke 1:48), the Blessed Virgin Mary has not held a particularly prominent place in the devotional life or theological imagination of Protestant Christians. This observation of Cody C. Unterseher (2010) is shared by many Protestant writers who point out the silence or avoidance of Mariology and Marian devotion in the Protestant tradition, both academically and in the churches. In addition, Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, editors of *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (2002), while commenting on the title of their book, state, 'although we Protestants identify Scripture as authoritative, the Lukan blessing of Mary has rarely inspired Protestants to act accordingly' (Gaventa & Rigby 2002: p. 1).

According to Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, 'this uncertainty about Mary [in Protestantism] is not unrelated to ambivalence about women and motherhood' (Miller-McLemore 2002: p. 97). Further, she states that 'while the exaltation of the virgin ideal had its problems, so did the glorification of marriage and motherhood as the only legitimate calling for women after the Reformation. Protestants no longer exalted Mary. They elevated instead the virtuosity of submissive wives and selflessly loving mothers' (Miller-McLemore 2002: p. 101). Because of the absence of Mary, there remains a vacuum of feminine imagery in the Lutheran tradition. The inheritors of the Reformation and their secularized counterparts may have lost something in their rejection of Mary's sacred status precisely as mother and woman (Malcolm 2002).

The nearly complete silence on Mary in Lutheran theology as well as the avoidance, if not fear, of mentioning her in Lutheran liturgy and spirituality, have shown signs of change recently. Mary has begun to reappear in some form in Protestant churches recently, even if modestly. This is probably due to many factors. Ecumenical feminist theology is certainly one reason, with interest in Mary being shared by women scholars from different denominations and backgrounds. Ecumenical dialogue – and within it, greater interest in and emphasis on gender issues – is another reason.

The Reformer Martin Luther was a Catholic Augustinian friar before he married Katharina von Bora, a former Cistercian nun. Luther grew in the bosom of the Catholic Church and, devoted to religious life, he desired to reform it rather than build a new tradition. Splitting from the Catholic mother church was not his original goal. Faithfulness to the Biblical texts, the centrality of Christ, and salvation by God's grace alone were Luther's core principles, and these are reflected in his understanding of Mary. Luther's three 'solas,' *solus Christus, sola gratia, sola scriptura* (Christ alone, grace alone, Scripture alone) appeared to contradict the widespread Marian devotion of his time. Luther, however – and later the Lutheran churches – approved of the first two ecumenical dogmas on Mary. To Luther, Mary was *Theotokos*, the Mother of God and ever-virgin (*semper virgo*).

Protestants are correct in their observation that Marian devotion has hardly any biblical or historical foundation. The Protestant churches' critical attitude towards any gesture of elevating Mary is based on the conviction that she should not be placed next to Christ and God as some kind of a deity. None of the Christian churches does that, but her elevated status in the Catholic and Orthodox churches nevertheless arouses Protestant suspicions. As said earlier, historically speaking, Mary has undoubtedly replaced some of the pre-Christian goddesses in the long continuum of female deities, regardless of how Marian devotion and her role are argued for. When Christianity was brought to the Americas in the sixteenth century, the missionaries consciously and actively replaced the pre-Colombian

female deities with the Virgin Mary. A similar development took place in the earliest Christian centuries. In this regard, the Protestant suspicions are well founded.

In most Lutheran churches today, the Mother of God, is absent – from prayers, liturgy, theology, and spirituality. There is a noteworthy theological silence about Mary in the Lutheran tradition, even though the first two Marian dogmas of the early church and Luther's thought provide much more common ground for an ecumenical Mariology than we may think. Thus, the least Lutherans could do is to create reasonable and well-founded theology of Mary in a contemporary Protestant context.

I will next look at Luther himself, particularly his most extensive text on Mary, the commentary on the *Magnificat*. I include this section also because of its relevance in the Latin American context (see Chapter 3).

Luther's commentary on the Magnificat

The commentary on the *Magnificat* is the only systematic and broad Mariological text by Luther. Besides it, he deals with Mariological themes in his sermons and elsewhere, but not as systematically as in his over sixty-page commentary of the *Magnificat*. It is a Biblical text found in Luke 1:46–55. The young Mary has found out that she will be the mother of Jesus. She visits her cousin Elizabeth, the mother-to-be of John the Baptist – an often-depicted scene called *Visitatio* in art. During this encounter, Mary bursts into praising God:

> My soul magnifies the Lord,
> And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior
> For he has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
> For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed
> …
> He has shown strength with His arm;
> He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
> He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
> And exalted the lowly.
> He has filled the hungry with good things,
> And the rich He has sent away empty.
> He has helped His servant Israel
> In remembrance of His mercy.

The main themes to be found in Luther's commentary are the following. First, the Virgin Mary is speaking on the basis of her own experience. Luther starts his commentary with the following words:

> In order properly to understand this sacred hymn of praise, we need to bear in mind that the Blessed Virgin Mary is speaking on the basis

> of her own experience, in which she was enlightened and instructed in the Holy Spirit. No one can correctly understand God or His Word unless he has received such understanding immediately from the Holy Spirit.
>
> (Luther in Luther's Works 1956, LW 21: p. 299)

Second, because of this experience and the wisdom it transmits, Mary is exemplary for others. She 'teaches us, with her words and by the example of her experience, how to know, love, and praise God' (LW 21: p. 301). This view of Mary as a teacher is repeated throughout Luther's text.

Third, another thread running through Luther's text is the understanding of Mary as an ordinary human being and ordinary woman, including her being of poor and humble origin. Luther writes,

> … we must believe that she came of poor, despised, and lowly parents … Even in her own town of Nazareth she was not the daughter of one of the chief rulers, but a poor and plain citizen's daughter, whom none looked up to or esteemed. To her neighbors and their daughters she was but a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework ….
>
> (LW 21: p. 301)

Fourth, in spite of her lowliness and ordinariness, Mary is the Mother of God, *Theotokos*, worthy of devotion.

> The 'great things' are nothing less than that she became the Mother of God, in which work so many and such great good things are bestowed on her as pass man's understanding. For on this there follows all honor, all blessedness, and her unique place in the whole of mankind, among which she has no equal ….
>
> (LW 21: p. 326)

The editor of Luther's works in English, Jaroslav Pelikan, comments in this context, that throughout his life and theological development, Luther continued to ascribe the title *Theotokos* to the Virgin Mary, as well as calling her blessed in every sense of the word (LW 21: p. 326, footnote 26). According to Luther, calling Mary the Mother of God is the greatest thing one can say of her or to her, and it 'needs to be pondered in the heart what it means to be the Mother of God' (LW 21: p. 326). In my understanding, this points to a deep Marian spirituality in Luther. Certain things, including Mary and her role as the Mother of God, can primarily be understood by heart, not by intellect.

Fifth and finally, in spite of Mary's unique place and role as an example for the rest of humankind, Luther quickly – and consistently with his overall theology – reminds the reader of the danger of idolatry regarding the Mother of God. Mary is not to be seen as a goddess, or an idol, or even as

the Queen of Heaven (LW 21: p. 327), the latter being standard understanding in Catholic Marian teaching and devotion.

By and large, it can be said that Luther's relationship to the Virgin Mary is positive, even warm and affectionate. There is a Marian spirituality and importance given to Mary in Luther's thinking, which later pretty much disappeared from the Lutheran tradition, both theologically and practically. It is probably the Marian spirituality that is so poorly understood in the Lutheran churches, and often even seen as something heretical. This is also the biggest difference between the Lutheran and Orthodox churches concerning Mary. The differences are not so much dogmatic, since like the Protestant churches, the Orthodox churches have not approved the two later Marian dogmas of the Catholic Church. Rather, the differences are related to ecclesiology, liturgy, and spirituality: the central place of the Mother of God in the Orthodox understanding of the church, its liturgy and its spirituality, has no equivalent in the Lutheran churches.

According to the Finnish Luther scholar Anja Ghiselli, Luther's overall Mariology can best be understood in the context of Christology, especially the theology of the cross. This is also the context of much of liberation theology's Mariology. Ghiselli stresses that Luther agrees with the two Marian dogmas of the early church, as Lutheran churches still do today. Consistently with his overall theology, Luther stresses Mary's exemplary faith in God: the entire *Magnificat* is about praising God's glory and goodness. It is God-centered. Mary's humility – that Luther so much underlines – is not so much about Mary herself as about the critique of power and self-centeredness. God chose her who had no power in human terms. Mary's humanity, even when praised as exemplary, does not make her divine. There is space for Marian spirituality and devotion in Luther, but not for her divinization (Ghiselli 2005).

According to the Danish Luther scholar Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, Luther's ambivalent and torn ('between bad anthropology and good theology') view of women is reflected in his Marian interpretations. However, Luther's commentary on the *Magnificat* has clear social implications. It is a political program, talking about real and concrete poverty and oppression, but it is foremost a theological program: true Mariology is about humanizing the human world. Luther's approach to women – his 'bad anthropology'– is in tension with his 'good theology,' which comes to the fore in his Mariology, in which Mary is not just a woman but the human being *par excellence* in her truly faithful relation to God (Wiberg Pedersen 2010).

Luther is consistent in seeing Mary as a human being, even if an exemplary one, which is why she is worthy of praise and devotion. Luther's overall appreciation of Mary reveals that he gave her a status that she does not enjoy in contemporary Lutheran churches. Later Lutheranism has been less Marian than Luther himself. Luther's warm and reverent attitude towards Mary has been all but forgotten. What this vacuum in contemporary

Lutheranism means, and whether it could possibly change, is an open question. It is, however, safe to say that Mary could have more space in the Lutheran tradition, also doctrinally speaking.

I have written on the similarities and differences between Luther's interpretation of the *Magnificat* and Latin American liberation theology (Vuola 2014), which I will shortly touch upon in the Epilogue.

Who is missing? The Jewish Miriam

In autumn 2008, the historical museum of Stockholm hosted an exhibit on the Virgin Mary: medieval sculptures of Mary were paired with contemporary interpretations. For the exhibition, several women were interviewed about Mary's importance for them as women – a key question in my research. As I was jotting down notes on the different ideas of Mary held by Swedish Lutherans, atheists, Muslims, and Catholics, my Jewish friend grabbed the pencil from my hand and inserted a comment in the middle of my notes: 'Who is missing?' Only later, after some conversation, I realized what he had meant: Jewish women had not been asked what they thought about this Jewish woman named Mary.

Nearly all research on Mary, regardless of the writers' religious affiliation, reiterates the same fact: Mary was an ordinary Jewish woman, Miriam of Nazareth, who lived as any Jewish woman of her time. Only few Christian scholars bother to unpack the statement any further than is historically necessary.

There is a deep silence on Mary in Judaism, obviously so, but it does not erase the question of Mary's Jewishness. Even as a Jewish woman, Mary has really had no significance for the Jews. This leads to the interesting situation that Mary's Jewishness is bypassed in both Christian and Jewish circles, albeit for different reasons.

Miriam of Nazareth was a Jewish woman. She was born, lived, and died as a Jewish woman. She was most probably familiar with key Jewish religious teachings and practices, even if she was illiterate. Her Jewish son was killed as the King of the Jews by Roman soldiers (crucifixion was a Roman practice). This is what Christians and Jews can agree upon concerning Mary.

The German-Israeli scholar of religion Schalom Ben-Chorin has authored a trilogy on Paul, Jesus, and Mary (Ben-Chorin 1971). He says that the trilogy could be named 'returning home'; with this, he means the returning of these three Jewish persons to their homes, to their people. Only Jews can do this kind of returning or retrieval, if they so desire. The central historical sources and persons of the Christian tradition are of Jewish origin, persons such as Jesus and Mary were born and lived in Jewish tradition, and thus understandable only in that context. Ben-Chorin wants to examine Mary as a Jew, as Miriam, as a woman and a mother with almost nothing in common with the Queen of Heaven or the holy virgin, celebrated particularly

by Catholics, arguing that: 'The Jewish mother, Miriam, cannot recognize herself in such a mirror.' He asks who the historical Mary, mother of Jesus, was and what we really know about her, examining early Jewish sources and comparing them with the New Testament texts and apocryphal sources. In agreement with most scholars of religion, Ben-Chorin considers it self-evident that the earliest cult around Mary was formed on a continuum with the Mediterranean goddesses, both in terms of location and timing, particularly with the cult of Artemis in Ephesus. That the *Theotokos* dogma was declared in the ecumenical council held in Ephesus in 431 C.E. is far from a coincidence. Ben-Chorin also points out the connections to Mary's Jewish foremothers in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the prophetesses Hannah and Miriam, the sister of Moses. Hannah's hymn of praise (1 Sam. 2:1–10) is, according to Ben-Chorin, the immediate Jewish prototype for Mary's *Magnificat* hymn, which implies that the Miriam of Nazareth was familiar with the Jewish oral tradition. Whether she was illiterate or not, she benefitted from the Jewish oral tradition that has flourished even in the humblest of circumstances.

Ben-Chorin interprets all the New Testament texts on Mary from the logical starting point that she was a Jewish woman whose son Jeshua lived and died also as a Jew. This historical approach, considering Mary as a Jewish woman and mother, appears common among Jewish scholars writing on Mary, few as they may be. These Jewish writers also share their rejection of Christian anti-Semitism.

In connection to Mary, Christian anti-Semitism may manifest itself in an understanding that Christianity, and particularly the actions of Jesus, liberated women and gave them a more equal status, using Judaism as a contrast to make the point. In other words, Judaism is thus described as the patriarchal setting from which Christianity liberated women.

With Ben-Chorin, several scholars have pointed out how unsubstantiated and intentionally anti-Jewish such conclusions are. There have been learned women in leadership positions in both Jewish and early Christian communities. In both religions, women's agency was limited by religious elites and texts, often with similar arguments. Thus, neither Christianity nor Judaism can take the praise or blame for women's greater equality or submission.

Ben-Chorin considers the latest Catholic dogma on Mary, the *Assumptio*, as unbiblical, thus standing with Protestant and even some Catholic scholars. He too recognizes how deeply rooted this doctrine is in popular piety – with celebrations since the sixth century. Ben-Chorin does not see such an alienation from the Hebrew tradition in any other New Testament character but Mary.

Johann Maier, a German emeritus professor of Judaism, writes similarly to Ben-Chorin about the different Jewish interpretations of Mary, for instance concerning Jesus's origin outside marriage (Maier 1978). Jane Schaberg, a New Testament scholar, has researched this issue. She argues

that the New Testament texts dealing with the origin of Jesus were originally about an illegitimate conception (Schaberg 1990). Maier characterizes the discussions on Jesus's origins as contentious: on one side, there is the Christian idea of the virginal conception and birth – difficult to understand rationally – with its anti-Jewish tendencies. On the other side, there are anti-Christian polemical Jewish statements about the shameful descent of Jesus, calling him even a son of a whore. In principle, a child born out of wedlock is not called a bastard in Jewish tradition. The lineage presented for Jesus in the New Testament, linking Jesus with David, proves how the idea of the virgin birth came from a later date, according to Maier. Presenting a family tree for Jesus is in contradiction with the idea of the virgin birth. Joseph's fatherhood was in one way or the other something natural in Jewish thinking: either he was Jesus's biological father or his stepfather, but nevertheless the father of the family Jesus belonged to. The siblings of Jesus, mentioned in the Bible, have been understood as either his full siblings, half-siblings, or cousins; Maier considers the first two options as the most believable.

Another scholar who has researched Mary from a Jewish perspective is David Flusser, an Austrian-Israeli professor emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His article 'Mary and Israel' has been published in a small edition that includes interpretations of Mary from a Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant scholar, none of whom are women (Flusser 2005). He too starts his work with the recognition of Mary as a Jewish woman. That Mary was mother of Jesus makes him – with some tension – part of the Jewish people: Mary is the Jewish mother of Christ. Flusser adopts the Western Christianity's term *Mater Dolorosa*, the suffering mother. He too ties Mary's suffering with actual, concrete suffering: '*The Mater Dolorosa* is not a theological concept or an overpowering experience of the archetypal but primarily a real person who was inspired by her joy and never defeated by her unspeakable pain' (Flusser 2005: p. 3). Flusser states that both Mary and her son Jesus need to be interpreted in the context of the suffering of the Jewish people. Crucifixion was a Roman death penalty, and Jesus was not the only Jewish man executed in that way. Flusser wants to demolish the foundation of Christian anti-Semitism that blames Jews for the death of Jesus. He underscores that the execution of the Christian Messiah was an expression of Roman anti-Semitism. For him, this kind of interpretation may have a healing effect on the wounds between Jews and Christians, and lead to a more sympathetic attitude toward Mary's people.

Mary can thus appear to Jews as an ordinary Jewish woman and mother, whose son brought about great things – either heroic or scandalous, depending on the perspective taken – but who in the end suffered a shameful and cruel death at the hands of the Romans. He was killed as a Jewish agitator, according to some even as the King of the Jews. Mary lived her life as any Jewish, oriental woman, and 'Jesus was one among countless Jewish

men who traveled the road of death to martyrdom … for that reason, Mary also belongs to the countless Jewish mothers who lament their cruelly murdered Jewish children' (Flusser 2005: p. 2).

Mary's tragedy is part of her people's suffering. From an anti-Christian and intentionally polemical Jewish perspective, Mary can be conceived as a traitor, the New Eve, but with a different meaning from the Christian understanding of Eve. This kind of traitor Mary gives birth to a child outside wedlock and thus contravenes the proper code of conduct for a Jewish woman, and her son comes to cause disarray and confusion in his Jewish community. Between these two extremes lies silence and a vacuum: Christians and Muslims speak of the Jewish Mary more than Jews do.

In Christian theology, the obvious but often downplayed fact that Mary was a Jewish woman of her time has only recently been taken more seriously. According to Mary Christine Athans (2013), an awakening to the Jewishness of Mary in recent years is related to two factors: Jewish-Catholic dialogue after Vatican II and feminist scholarship on Mary. Prominent Catholic feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Elisabeth Johnson have been among the first to pay attention to the ways Christian Mariology has historically functioned as a vehicle of both sexism and anti-Semitism.

Similarly to the Jewish scholars, Elizabeth Johnson (2003) reevaluates Mariology from the starting point of her Jewishness, and considers Mary in her original religious, political, and cultural context. She too emphasizes that Mary was a Jewish woman, also religiously, throughout her life. Only by understanding the deep Jewish roots of Miriam of Nazareth can she be appreciated as a historical person, says Johnson. Using a variety of sources and combining different scholarly disciplines, Johnson seeks to reconstruct the world in which Mary apparently lived. As a Christian theologian, Johnson treats Mary mostly as a religious symbol. One of the important points Johnson makes about Mary as a historical person is that the rural, poor, and possibly illiterate Jews, including the women, appear to have been religiously informed. The Jewish tradition was transmitted orally and women participated in this. Mary is thus best understood in the context of Judaism in her time. With this consideration, Johnson criticizes feminist aspirations to present early Christianity as more equal for women than Judaism. For example, the actions of Jesus towards women, which feminist theologians have considered feminist, treating women equally to men, may fuel anti-Semitic interpretations. Feminist critique needs to target both Christianity and Judaism, Johnson argues; both religions entail misogynist and egalitarian elements. Mary lived at the junction of two world religions, says Johnson, but she died as a Jewish woman who trusted her God (Johnson 2003).

In the course of history, Mary has been used as a sign of Christian triumph over Judaism. This is especially clear in *Ecclesia-Synagoga* ('Church and Synagogue') symbolism, elaborated both in theological writings and in visual art. Even when the symbolism is not directly and explicitly about

Mary, it is linked to the idea of Mary as *Persona Ecclesiae*, the personification of the church, on the one hand, and as the crystallization of everything feminine in Christianity, on the other. Gendered symbolism is frequently used to express theological truths and dogma symbolically or metaphorically, often but not always with reference to real women and men, and their roles. The symbolism is often construed in terms of simultaneous binarism (oppositions) and hierarchy (of value). Especially in Western Christianity, Mary has become the primary reservoir of this gendered symbolism in both theology and art (Rubin 2009, 2010).

Medieval historian Miri Rubin explains that Church and Synagogue as a visual theme depicts a pair of figures personifying the church and the Jewish synagogue – that is, the Jewish religion – found in medieval Christian art. They often appear as large sculpted figures on either side of a church portal, as in the most famous examples at Strasbourg Cathedral. They may also be found standing on either side of the cross in scenes of the Crucifixion. The two figures are shown as women. Ecclesia is generally adorned with a crown, chalice, and cross-topped staff, looking confidently forward, representing the victorious, triumphant Church. In contrast, Synagoga is blindfolded and drooping, carrying a broken lance and broken tablets of the Law or Torah scrolls that may even be slipping from her hand. If not blindfolded, Synagoga usually looks down, defeated. Theologically, this symbolism refers to the Christian understanding of the Jews as blind and Judaism as a dead religion (Rubin 2009, 2010).

The sculpted portal figures are generally found on the cathedrals of larger cities in northern Europe that had significant Jewish communities, like in Germany, and apart from their theological significance, were certainly also intended to remind Jews of their place in a Christian society, by projecting an ideal of Jewish submission within an ideally ordered Christian realm.

The *Ecclesia-Synagoga* parallel is visualized as two women in opposition: good vs. evil; beautiful vs. ugly; young (virgin) vs. old (hag); obedient vs. rebellious or reluctant (to convert); clearsighted vs. blind; erect vs. drooped; triumphant vs. defeated; life vs. death. This parallel is a continuation and a version of the much older parallel between Eve and Mary described earlier. Like Ecclesia in the *Ecclesia-Synagoga* pair, Mary represents the New Israel, new redeemed humanity, and grace. Her (gendered) chastity underlines her obedience and goodness.

The representation of Eve-Israel as the disobedient and unfaithful wife, a whore, is present already in the Old Testament. Christianity and Judaism share the marriage metaphor and its gendered imagery of the good vs. evil woman: humanity's relationship to God is expressed in terms of a woman's rightful relation to her husband, or men in general.

The Eve-Mary parallel is not only a binary view of women. Its overlapping with the *Ecclesia-Synagoga* symbolism is evident even when the church is not explicitly depicted as Mary. Mary *contra* the Jews is however an explicit theme in much of Christian theology from the same era as

the visual depiction. Jewish opposition to Christianity and unwillingness to convert are regularly interpreted as an insult to the Christian Mother Mary, as the mother of Christ but also as the primary symbol of the church.

According to Rubin (2010), this blend of biblical commentary, monastic liturgy, and Marian devotion was suffused with anti-Jewish themes. In the Middle Ages, a powerful new link emerged between the Jews' perceived malevolence towards Christ – Jews as killers of Christ – and Mary's motherly sorrow.

Theologically, the incarnation is impossible in Judaism. Jews reject above all the incongruities of a God taking flesh, a God who experienced gestation, birth, and childhood (Rubin 2010). The ideal of virginity and the possibility of a virgin birth are unthinkable in Judaism. However, Judaism and Christianity have by and large shared the belief that the natural functions of the female body – such as menstruation and childbirth – require purification. Thus, even when there has always been a more positive view of human sexuality in Judaism, one of the arguments for the necessity of the virgin birth in Christianity derives from this commonly shared view of the polluted female body and its functions.

Similarly to Rubin, Kati Ihnat (2016) points out the crucial role Jews play in medieval Marian devotion. In the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Virgin Mary emerged as a central figure in medieval religious culture of Western Europe. As much as she was shaped as the mother of mercy and Queen of Heaven, she was also understood to be the bane of the Jews, seeking their conversion and punishment. Jews held a special place in the history of Marian devotion, envisioned as doubters of the virgin birth and incarnation, and therefore as Mary's natural enemy.

To conclude, Mary has occupied a central place not only in Christian anti-Semitism but also in Jewish anti-Christian polemics: over the centuries, she has been depicted as the adulteress and betrayer of her people. Here, too, the female body and femininity as a theological categories occupy a central place in the construction and defense of one religion against the other. Christian theological anti-Semitism needs to be deconstructed simultaneously with Christian theological sexism. Mary plays an important, even central, role in both. At the same time, critical and careful analysis of the role of gender opens up space for a critical rereading of sexism in both Christianity and Judaism.

Maryam in Islam

Perhaps surprisingly, Islam presents a less conflictive possibility of thinking about Mary in an interreligious context than does Judaism. Maryam, the mother of the prophet Jesus, is honored in Islam and in the Qur'an, which contains an entire section, the Sura of Mary, dedicated to her. She is in fact mentioned by name more often in the Qur'an (34 times) than in

the New Testament (19 times). She is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an, and only three other persons are named more frequently – Moses, Abraham and Noah, in this order.

Although Mary has no salvific powers in Islam, she is one of the most revered women in the Islamic faith. In various *hadiths* (traditions), Mary is discussed as being one of the four perfect women in history. Mary belongs to an exclusive group of women who are considered perfect because of their strength of faith and submission to God. Unlike in the traditional Christian understanding of Mary, the Mary of Islam is an important figure in her own right (Schleifer 1997).

Muslims venerate Jesus as a divinely inspired human and as a prophet but never as the Son of God. Consequently, the earliest ecumenical dogma on Mary, calling her Mother of God, *Theotokos*, is not shared by Muslims. If Jesus is not God's son, then his mother cannot be God's mother. In contrast to Jews, Muslims share Christian belief in the virgin birth and the consideration of Mary as an exemplary woman and human being. The Qur'an states clearly that Jesus was born of a virgin, but that neither Mary nor her son are divine. The virgin birth of Jesus is supremely significant in Islam, as one of the most important miracles of God. The Qur'an's narrative of the virgin birth is both similar to and somewhat different from that of the New Testament.

There are several joint sites of Marian devotion and pilgrimage in the Middle East where Muslims and Christians, especially women, pray together. The best-known of these sites is the House of Mary, near Ephesus in Turkey where, according to legend, Mary lived after her son's death. A water fountain and a wishing wall are located nearby, as the site is believed by some pilgrims to have miraculous powers of healing and fertility.

According to Willy Jansen, both the Qur'an and the *hadiths* uphold Mary as a role model, particularly for female believers. Mary's elevated status leads some Muslims to pray to her or believe in her divine intercession. There are instances in which Muslim women pray to Mary in times of sorrow and need. Mary is popular especially among Shi'ites (Jansen 2009). There may thus be more common ground for Mariological interpretations between Islam and Christianity than between Christianity and Judaism – despite the fact that the historical Mary, Miriam of Nazareth, was a Jewish woman.

The Qur'an's narration of Mary's birth and youth and about the angel's announcement of her pregnancy closely follows the Christian tradition. Mary is the virgin who is impregnated by the Word. According to Teuvo Laitila, in Muslim popular piety, Mary is believed to the first person who will rise to paradise on the day of the resurrection. He, too, notes that Muslim women have prayed and continue to pray to the Virgin Mary in many Christian sanctuaries in the Middle East and Asia Minor.

In the Qur'an, the angel bestows a son on Mary – without any indication of the angel being the father. To grant life is an easy task for God; Mary's question about her virginity is a minor matter in comparison. Mary becomes pregnant through God's creative breath, as was the case with the creation of Adam. Another explanation prevails as well: of God creating Jesus with God's Word, thus paralleling Jesus with Adam. The idea about creation by the power of the Word or by the Spirit can be also found in earlier Jewish, Sumerian, and Egyptian sources. The God of the Qur'an is the creator, not the father of Jesus. Thereby Jesus cannot be the Son of God. His status in relation to God is the same as Adam's. The birth of the 'son of Mary' is a sign given to humankind about God's omnipotence and grace (Räisänen 1986).

Especially Catholics have considered Mary as connector between Christians and Muslims. Given the difference between the meanings of Mary in Islam and Christianity, this may be true only to a limited degree (Laitila 2009). Pelikan, too, has examined Mary exactly in this role, as the bridge between different traditions, cultures, and religions, but has also recalled that for Muslims, Mary is the mother of Jesus, not of God. Regardless of this reservation, Mary builds a bridge from Judaism to Christianity and from Christianity to Islam (Pelikan 1996). Quite poignantly, Willy Jansen, who has done research on Marian devotion in the Middle East, quotes a Catholic sister in Jordan saying that 'the Muslims respect Our Lady more than the Protestants do' (Jansen 2009). Jaroslav Pelikan points out, however, that the main problem areas for Muslims in relation to Mary are related to beliefs about Mary as the Mother of God and the visual expressions of her in icons (Pelikan 1996).

Women are secondary in the Qur'an, but Mary has been written into the text more clearly than any other female figure. Unlike in the Bible, the Qur'an does not consider Eve as the temptress but as the archetypical mother of humankind (*Hawwa*, Hämeen-Anttila 1997). Thus, paralleling Eve and Mary is an exclusively Christian tradition. In Islamic tradition, Mary has at times appeared even as a prophet, based on her respected status in the Qur'an (Hämeen-Anttila 2004). The image of Mary in it draws from both the canonical gospels, and especially from the apocryphal Gospel of James (Winter 2007).

Even if Mary has a significant presence in the Qur'an, she does not have any cultic significance in Islam. Later Quranic interpreters and Muslim historians may have given her amplified meanings – akin to the developments in Christian tradition – although Islam does not recognize or confess any particular Mariology. Of the female figures in Islam, the object of prayers and devotion is most often the Prophet Mohammed's daughter Fatima, and not the Virgin Mary. At the same time, many of the prayers to Fatima repeat many of the themes and wordings from Christian devotion to Mary (Winter 2007).

For Asma Lamrabet (2016), a Muslim writer but not a scholar from Morocco, Mary is the most important single point of convergence and link between Muslims and Christians. The Qur'an elevates Maryam to a level unparalleled by any other woman. The Muslim mystical tradition qualifies her as a woman with an exceptional vocation enjoying pre-eternal election.

To conclude this first chapter, Mary is thus both present and absent in the three sibling religions. Within each of these faith traditions, different interpretations on Mary are presented, reflecting the aims of the interpreter. Mary is shared by all Christian churches, but she is also a bridge between Christianity and Judaism, very concretely so through her body. Mary's positive presence in Islam provides another important bridge with Muslims.

Who was Mary, or who is Mary, and what is her significance? These are the shared questions. An interest in the historical Jewish Mary, considering her an ordinary woman is a common thread between women scholars coming from the three sibling religions.

Notes

1 Teachings about Mary were not among the divisive issues, at least at the beginning of the Reformation. Of the reformers, Jean Calvin – not Martin Luther – was the most critical of Mary. In the Anglican tradition, certain thoughts and practices closer to Catholicism were maintained more than in the continental Reformation. Mary holds an important position in Anglican theology and liturgy (Nazir-Ali & Sagovsky 2007). This article can be found in a book that deals with the similarities and differences between Anglican and Roman Catholic Mariology as part of ecumenical endeavors (Denaux & Sagovsky, eds. 2007).
2 An excellent broad and in-depth compilation of the cult of the Virgin Mary from different perspectives (early Christianity, doctrinal differences between Christian churches, the development of the cult of Mary, popular devotion, and so on) is Boss, ed. (2007). See also Rubin (2010) from the perspective of cultural history.
3 A joint historical-critical analysis of Catholic and Protestant Biblical scholars on Mary in the New Testament is Brown et al., eds. (1978).

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2 The Virgin Mary
A feminist's nightmare?

To many, religions, including the Christian faith, may appear as bastions of patriarchy. A scholar of religion and gender faces this question on a regular basis: is this the case or not? If it is, what does that mean for women? Are the women who firmly hold on to their religious identity in a state of deep alienation? If religions, including Christianity, are not purely 'boys' clubs' and fortresses of sexism, what kind of arguments can be given to support the claim?

Theological gender research – most often called feminist theology – is one particular branch of women's studies and gender studies. When the focus is on women, as in this book, it involves the study of different religious traditions and churches from women's perspectives and – possibly – their transformation to more women-friendly belief systems. This combination of both critique and construction is typical of most feminist theology.

Most Christian feminist theologians have written on the Virgin Mary. The literature is extensive. In the chapter, I will not go into it in detail but rather present the feminist critique (both 'secular' and theological) as a background for my ethnographic research in two different settings. My broad argument, which I have presented elsewhere (e.g., Vuola 2002, 2006, 2009, 2016) is that the feminist critique of the Mary symbol is both justified and unjustified. In my view, the main problem in the latter case lies in the lack of empirical research on how women in different churches and regions in fact experience and interpret Mary. As important as a theologically informed critique of Mariology is – and to a large extent, I agree with it – a step forward is a more interdisciplinary and empirical approach.

The various ways in which gender and the body are conceived offer the parameters for both criticizing and reconsidering the figure of the Virgin Mary. Cultural notions of sex, gender, and the body in the Western world derive from Christianity to a large degree. Various interpretations of Mary can lead, paradoxically, to both denial of and sanctification of the body, particularly women's bodies.

Feminist theological analysis of Mary is interdenominational. She is, after all, the most significant woman in Christian tradition. In this regard, the conversation about Mary involves the entire Christian theology and

all denominations. However, most feminist theologians who have offered substantial critique of traditional Mariology are Catholic, given the central place she occupies in Catholicism. There is very little gender theoretical scholarship in the Orthodox tradition.

The feminist critique of the Mary symbol

There has been a tension within feminist theology over whether the Virgin Mary is an oppressive symbol for women or if she can be 'used' and reinterpreted from new perspectives. For the first, Mary is undoubtedly a feminist's nightmare. Most take the middle way, combining both critique and potential positive meanings of the figure of Mary.

Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson (2005) presents the most common feminist theological approaches to Mary and Mariology. The basic problem, in her view, is that the entire tradition is saturated with sexist constructions of gender, in which Mary appears as the ideal feminine person. Picturing Mary as the most perfect woman, the patriarchal tradition functions paradoxically to disparage the rest of her gender. Mary as the great exception among all women makes all the other women daughters of Eve, tied to flesh and sin. The ideal and normative femaleness symbolized by Mary is unattainable for other women (Johnson 2005). The parallel and contrast between Eve and Mary divides women in two opposite groups – but one of the groups contains only one woman and the other, all the rest.

Male clergy and male theologians have formulated their ideas about motherhood, which, after all, is a possibility and experience available only to women. Even Mary's motherhood is impossible for other women to imitate, while at the same time, motherhood is deemed as women's most important function. Thus, another problem is that Mary is an impossible model in practice.

Other problems that feminist theologians have tackled are Mary as the primary model of humility, according to which women's virtue lies in being obedient to the authority of men and God, depicted as male. Further, Mary's virginity has been an object of both critique and constructive reinterpretation in feminist theological work. In the latter case, the argument usually stems from the fact that in her virginity Mary is on the continuum of great goddesses – not an exception but rather one example of the idea of virginity as a sign of female autonomy and power (Johnson 2005).

All these aspects of the traditional Mary symbol have been part of a more secular feminist critique. One of the most famous such works is Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex* (1976), in which she argues that Mary is an effective instrument for subjecting women. Warner's early work had a significant impact on the feminist study of Mary both within and beyond theology. Many of the early feminist theologians repeated Warner's argument that it is impossible to consider Mary as a model for women. Warner considers Mary as one of the few female characters who has earned a

mythical status in Western culture and is thus worth studying. She analyzes the Western Mary cult from many angles but her conclusion is negative:

> The Virgin Mary is not the innate archetype of female nature, the dream incarnate; she is the instrument of a dynamic argument from the Catholic Church about the structure of society, presented as God-given code. … As an acknowledged creation of Christian mythology, the Virgin's legend will endure in its splendor and lyricism, but it will be emptied of moral significance, and thus lose its present real powers to heal and to harm.
>
> (Warner 1976: pp. 338–339)

This prediction finishes off Warner's book, written in 1976 (see also Warner 2013 for her introduction and epilogue for the new edition, in which she distances herself from some of her earlier claims). The prediction is inadequate not because there is subsequent research done after it, but because it was so influential on that research and because she did not pay attention to lived devotion. Much like scholars after her, including some feminist theologians, her critique of the Mary symbol focused on doctrine and Mary as the institutional ideal of womanhood.

Much as I think a feminist critique of Mary and traditional Mariology is necessary, I believe that feminism and feminist-oriented research have often considered Mary too simplistically and unnecessarily negatively. For example, in the Latin American culture, where Mary is central, the feminist critique presumes that Christianity and especially Roman Catholicism are thoroughly misogynist. In practice, this attitude may lead to a blindness to women's alternative experiences and interpretations. I will come back to this at the end of the chapter, before moving on to my ethnographic work in Costa Rica.

Mary and the pre-Christian goddesses

To name Mary the Mother of God does not mean that she is a goddess, but it does refer to and have background in the pre-Christian goddesses who have had a significant role in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern religions. Long before Mary, there was an understanding of a virgin mother-goddess who created life from herself. Her virginity could symbolize her eternal youth, her ability to regenerate, her autonomy and integrity. Often the virginity of the mother goddess was held up as an indicator of a special person's unique origins. Many of these ancient ideas continued in the tradition and beliefs regarding Mary, even if in a changed form (e.g., Atkinson 1991; King, ed. 1997; Pelikan 1996; Ruether 2005).

Goddess worship can be found in nearly all religions in one form or another. The Protestant and Islamic traditions have the least symbolism relating to womanhood or motherhood. From the perspective of anthropology

of religion, mother worship bears features that cross cultural divides: for instance, mother goddess cults are typically related to reproduction, motherhood, and nurturing, and often entail virgin motherhood. Mother worship in different cultures also shares a dual perception of the mother goddess: the great mother can be loving or severe, protective or destructive, forgiving or punishing. The mother goddess may protect from natural catastrophes, enemies, and illnesses. The latter manifests especially in beliefs that mother goddesses have healing and miraculous powers. The virginity of the goddess speaks of spiritual purity and omnipotence, rather than about separating sexuality from motherhood (Preston 1982).

According to Finnish professor of Old Testament Studies Martti Nissinen, the tasks of the ancient goddesses fluctuated. This was the case especially with the most popular goddesses, such as Ishtar: this Sumerian goddess was multifaceted, even liminal in character, alternating between her identities as a young maiden (virgin), mother, midwife, and sexually active adult woman. Ishtar was also a powerful warrior and a leader of warriors. Unlike other goddesses, Ishtar had the power to transcend gender roles and even change her sex (Nissinen, personal communication, January 2010).

The Virgin Mary has been assigned some of the ancient goddesses' tasks and roles. In other words, very old ideas about female divinity and about the relation between divinity and humanity live on in Mary. Securing fertility is not central to the myth of holy marriage, as it was earlier believed. Rather, the central task of the goddess was to mediate between the king (humanity) and the divinity (Nissinen 2001).

Those feminists who seek a spirituality free of patriarchal elements have eagerly invigorated a variety of pre-Christian goddess myths from different cultures. There are problems, however, in this kind of a feminist approach that seeks to go beyond the Christian tradition. There has never been a direct connection between goddess symbolism and women's religious or societal status. There is no evidence that elevating a woman to the status of a goddess would have a definite positive impact on women's status. This is also the case with the Virgin Mary: it would actually be easier to argue just the opposite.

Because of the New Testament narratives and particularly their one-sided interpretations it has been difficult for contemporary feminists to appreciate the Virgin Mary in continuity with the ancient goddesses. In her case, feminists interpret the combination of motherhood and virginity as a patriarchal invention that is harmful for women. At the same time, similar characteristics in the earlier goddesses may be appreciated. The Virgin Mary is not 'usable' in spite of the fact that ancient myths and beliefs live on in (only) her.

As was said, at least in the case of some pre-Christian goddesses, virginity was apparently understood as self-sufficiency or autonomy. Virgin motherhood was about a woman's mystical ability to produce life from herself. Mary stands on this continuum: she is not the first virgin-mother in human history.

Since we can observe the influence of pre-Christian goddesses in Mary, especially in her naming as Mother of God, how should this virgin motherhood be interpreted? If the combination of motherhood and virginity is interpreted as a harmful and impossible myth for contemporary women, would not this apply to pre-Christian goddesses? Why idealize virginity as a sign of women's autonomy and power in the pre-Mary goddesses, but consider it a sign of Christianity's alienation from the body in Mary's case? Why are pre-Christian goddesses interpreted as female- and women-friendly, but not Mary? If there is interest in revitalizing the ancient goddess cults, why not do the same with Mary?

My point is that as much as I understand a need to go beyond patriarchal religions, it is important to remember that Mary is not only an ahistorical, anti-female construction of androcentric Christianity. The early Christian image of Mary is obviously not the same as that of her predecessors. Part of early Christian theology was aimed at destroying the ancient goddess cults with the help of a 'better' female deity, the Virgin Mary. At the same time, elements of the earlier religion continued in the new.

We can observe this same dynamic in those situations closer to our time when Christianity was spread to new regions as part of European colonialism. For example, Spanish priests and monks consciously replaced pre-Columbian goddess cults with the Virgin Mary in the Americas. It is important to take this into account in contemporary cults of Mary in the region, also from a gender perspective. Many Latin American personifications of the Virgin Mary are combinations of European, African, and American elements, both visually and functionally. One such example is *La Virgen de los Angeles* of Costa Rica, which I will deal with in Chapter 3.

Virginity criticized and reinterpreted

The ideal of virginity and the ascetic lifestyle gained a great following in the Christian Church from the fourth century. Mariology and Marian devotion developed as part of that. Mary became the central symbol of the virginal ideal, embodying the original goodness of humanity before the Fall. To individual nuns and monks, Mary may have been not merely an example to imitate but also a channel and an object for forbidden erotic feelings. This manifests itself in the abundant and rich poetry, and mysticism on Mary through the ages.

One of the early feminist theologians, Mary Daly, when she still considered herself a (feminist Catholic) theologian, interpreted Mary's virginity as independence and autonomy, rather than as sexual purity. A woman who is a 'virgin' is not defined only through her relation to a man or her sexuality, but through her own independent existence. Virginity, according to Daly, can thus be understood holistically – and not narrowly in the physiological sense – as a space and a freedom to be one's own person.

To understand virginity as autonomy can also refer to a person who has freedom to be her own person and refuse oppressive sexuality (Daly 1974).

Guarding and controlling women's and girls' virginity is at the heart of the sexual morality in different cultures. The sexual 'maturity' of a woman is often defined by someone else, not the woman herself. The pressure to 'preserve' virginity on the one hand, and to 'lose' it, on the other, leaves little room for women's own experience, growth, and choices in an androcentric society. Thus, broadly conceived, virginity can be interpreted as something of a woman's 'own', as utopian sexual self-sufficiency: as a 'virgin', a woman refuses oppressive sexual relations and lives independently, 'untouched'. Interestingly, these kinds of interpretations of (Mary's) virginity came up in my interviews with both Catholic and Orthodox women.

The Protestant churches' rejection of Mary, according to Daly, can leave women with no other options than the roles of wife and mother, even though the virginal ideal in the Catholic tradition has hardly served women either. Neither of the traditions can offer liberation for women, says Daly. Still, perhaps unintentionally, the Marian dogmas convey messages of independence and power (Daly 1974).

Over the centuries, a virginal lifestyle gave Christian women an opportunity to avoid marriage and motherhood. Convent life and a monastic calling afforded women opportunities to study and cultivate their spirit and mind. Many of the well-known women in Christian history were indeed nuns. For a young woman desiring not to marry, the only acceptable rationale was entering a convent, becoming a bride of Christ. Virginity as a spiritual and physical space for both men and women signified a special status with exceptional authority and wisdom others lacked.

If Mary's words 'let it be according to your will' are interpreted only as a sign of passivity and submission, the experience of becoming pregnant against one's own will can be used to underscore (mis)conceptions of women's sexuality as passivity and submission. This kind of thought is not far from legitimizing sexual and other violence against women. Christian sexual ethics has historically largely drawn on ideas of woman as the 'body', a vessel and a recipient, and of man as the 'head', representing reason and activity. Even in the traditional understanding of Mary, however, the result could have been different: she assented by her own will. Her consent was a leap into the unknown. This is why Mary is considered the model of faith. This tension of passivity and activity is an undercurrent in Christian Mariology.

Sarah Jane Boss (2000) suggests that the long-lived and widespread belief in Mary's miraculous parturition has in several respects gained its popularity from the fact that under normal circumstances, childbearing is accompanied by pain and danger. If a woman in labor is suffering torment and feels her life to be at risk, then what supernatural figure could be of greater assistance to her than a compassionate and powerful woman who has herself given birth safely and painlessly?

In other words, Mary's exceptional labor is not something other women should try to emulate in order to be as perfect as Mary; quite the contrary, the story of Mary's miraculous, painless labor puts the human experience in a perspective that helps the woman giving birth. Unlike most feminist critics, theologians and others, I argue that Mary's exceptionality does not serve as a barrier between her and other women. Rather, it is her very exceptionality, including her miraculous pregnancy and childbirth, which is a source of her power in the eyes of ordinary women.

This is exactly the kind of understanding of Mary that is often at the heart of women's experiences of Mary as their human-transcendental resort, particularly in situations such as giving birth, as I will argue in the following chapters. Since so much of feminist critique of Mary is based on textual critique, the experiences of real women have not been the source of most feminist de- and reconstruction of Mariology. This is true of both Western and Eastern Christianity. My interviews with both Catholic and Orthodox women, in two very different contexts, point to a similar dialectic in their Marian devotion: that Mary is 'like me', who experienced childbirth and motherhood, and 'unlike me', who has the power and willingness to intervene and protect ordinary human beings, especially women. This, I claim, is at the heart of women's cross-cultural devotion to the Mother of God.

Pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding are universally mundane and ordinary human experiences. At the same time, experiences of the holy may be attached to them. The body, bodiliness, and everyday life thus become places for the holy, instead of treating them merely as metaphors or symbols of something 'higher'. Birth and labor are central metaphors in Christian vocabulary, but often separated from the ordinary experience of women.

Nearly all language about birth and labor – both concretely and symbolically – in Christian theology has been shaped by predominantly male perspectives. However, men do not and cannot experience labor and birth as bodily activities. Celibate, unmarried priests, sharing their everyday life with other men, also lack the experiences of conception, birth, and raising children from a father's perspective. Christian traditional notions of birth and labor thus miss both the embodied experience of motherhood and of fatherhood altogether.

Eve and Mary from a feminist perspective

As has been said, the juxtaposition of Eve and Mary is one of the earliest elements of Christian Mariology, alive and actively presented still today in both Eastern and Western Christianity. Nearly all feminist theologians address the Eve-Mary parallel, in one way or the other, because it is so central to theology concerning Mary. According to the Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary represents *good femininity,*

that is, passivity, sexual chastity, receptivity, and surrendering. Eve, for her part, represents *bad femaleness*, that is, activity, independence, and sexuality. These notions, particularly as they have been associated with Mary, have contributed to the dualistic fantasies of women as either good or bad, pure or filthy, pious or sinful, a Madonna or a whore (Ruether 1979). Through these kinds of theological constructions, passivity and humility are presented as Christian virtues, particularly for women. This is why Mary Daly named Eve as the only feasible model for women to even try to imitate (Daly 1974).

Elizabeth Johnson expresses similar thoughts. To consider Mary as the perfect woman separates her from other women. This separation is most striking when paralleling Mary and Eve. Christian tradition has historically emphasized Eve's disobedience and Mary's obedience. Through her disobedience Eve is responsible for the Fall of humankind. Through her obedience Mary, the New Eve, becomes the cause of salvation of both herself and the whole of humanity. Death through Eve, life through Mary became the axiom. 'A greater contrast could hardly be imagined' (Johnson 2005).

Johnson quotes the church father Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 240 C. E.), whose famous statement on Mary addresses all women:

> Do you not realize that you are each an Eve? The curse of God on this sex of yours lives on even in our times. Guilty, you must bear its hardships. You are the gateway of the devil; you desecrated the fatal tree; you were the first to betray the law of God; you softened up with your cajoling words the one [the man] against whom the devil could not prevail by force. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, Adam. You are the one who deserved death; because of you the Son of God had to die.
>
> (Tertullian, quoted in Johnson 2005: p. 24)

Johnson notes that the similar Adam-Christ parallel has not been used to men's disadvantage as vehemently as the Eve-Mary contrast has been used to disparage women. While Adam's sin is not without significance, Eve's sin is understood particularly on the basis of her sexuality and gender, her entire being, not only as an act of obedience: through her seductive powers, she caused the man to disobey God. Woman's sexuality and her gender become the original reason for sin and death (Johnson 2005).

Obviously, it is appropriate to ask if this whole construction does not somehow distort the understanding of all human sexuality, defined in terms of weakness, transgression, and temptation that (at least) Adam could not resist. Sexuality understood this way, as is evident in many church fathers' writings, depicts sexual desire, its force and uncontrollability, as the source of all evil. To see sexuality so instrumentally and negatively is in deep

contrast with those emphases in Christian theology that see human bodiliness as something good, created by God.

Tertullian, perhaps unintentionally, portrays men as weaklings, easily brought away by their emotions and women. Eve is depicted paradoxically simultaneously weak and strong – weak to resist the snake's false promises and seduction, and strong in managing to lure her man and the entire humankind into destruction.

Feminist theological interpretations aim to avoid such polarizations. For example, Anne Carr has emphasized that it is important for women, both psychologically and religiously, to see Mary as a symbol that signifies autonomy *and* relationship, strength *and* tenderness, struggle *and* victory, God's power *and* human agency. Carr does not assign different human characteristics to women and men or to Eve and Mary as two opposite types of women. Healing and wholeness – also as religious ideals – presuppose the integration of different human characteristics (Carr 1990).

Tina Beattie, another Catholic theologian, stresses the importance of both Eve and Mary for women. To lay all sin and evil on Eve, excluding her from the symbols of redemption, makes it impossible for (Christian) women to recognize both good and evil in themselves. To accept both is a more realistic approach: one can interpret Eve's agency as filled with human potential for both freedom and responsibility. The choice between good and evil is not essentially tied to any human being or womanhood *per se* but is part of everyone's moral choices. Beattie suggests that Eve and Mary can thus function as healing mirrors for women:

> Both Eve and Mary are necessary to reveal the full significance of the Christian story for women. … Eve must be refigured so that she no longer bears the burden of men's ideas of women's sins.
>
> (Beattie 2002: pp. 172–173)

To define Eve as entirely bad and to consider her, the mother of all humankind and the source of all life, as the primary cause of sin, in a grotesque way, makes her a symbol of women's historical abuse and misogyny. Beattie reminds us that the Christian tradition is filled with paradoxical symbols that seek to say something of the basic forces at play: life and death, good and evil, freedom and bondage. Linking Eve and Mary as symbols would serve a similar purpose (Beattie 2002). Eve is, after all, the mother of all being. She created life and gives it continuity; to position her as the symbol of death in a way denies the origins and the continuity of life.

Along the same lines, it is possible to think that knowledge and faith are paralleled in Eve and Mary. Eve specifically wished to 'know' when eating from the tree of knowledge. Mary's attitude, when faced with a miracle, was that of faith, not understanding. Both women can thus be considered courageous. In the Bible, Eve's desire for knowledge is associated with the awakening of sexual desire, which has led to viewing Eve as the

carnal temptress. In this kind of paralleling, knowledge and sexuality are linked (in Eve), on the one hand, and faith and asexuality (in Mary), on the other. In this train of thought, Mary's virginity could then be understood as something pre-cognitive, also related to a broader understanding of virginity as something more than just physiological. Through these two women, the Christian narrative addresses a more general existential question – the relationship between faith and knowledge. Faith can be associated with wisdom, which has been one of the personifications of the Virgin Mary.

Eve and Mary are not separated in these alternative parallels, rather they presuppose one another. Eve can be the model for knowledge and possibly desire, Mary can model faith or wisdom. Eve and Mary are thus symbols of two different choices, both free. The tradition claims, accordingly, that it is about choice – only that Eve chose wrongly and Mary chose rightly. Removing this polarity between the two women makes choices and the responsibility that go with them an essential part of human life, not something to get away from. Mary did not necessarily negate Eve's choice, she perfected it.

Mary, the exemplary woman

When Mary is an impossible identification model and ideal for all women who cannot be simultaneously virgins and mothers, virginity is understood in a narrowest possible sense, as a physiological condition. Besides the traditional contrasting of Eve and Mary, the combination of virginity and motherhood in Mary herself illustrates how traditional Mariology crystallizes such an ideal for and image of a woman, which – despite its impossibility – has only added to women's feelings of guilt. Undoubtedly, the traditional image of Mary has had an impact on women's low self-esteem, Christianity's negative attitude to the body and fear of sexuality, and on the development of sexual ethics distanced from real life. Catholic feminist theologians' criticism of Mary has been exactly about this: presenting Mary as an impossible ideal for women.

Rosemary Radford Ruether has argued that as long as masculinity and femininity are understood in the traditional narrow way and as binary opposites – both in human life and in respect to God – it is very difficult to alter perceptions of Mary as a symbol. 'The culturally dominant Mariology has been one which has sanctified the image of the female as the principle of passive receptivity in relation to the transcendent activity of the male gods and their agents, the clergy. This concept of the 'feminine principle' is not fundamentally different in Protestantism than in Catholicism' (Ruether 1979: p. 3). As long as we continue to take our symbolism of women from this tradition, women will be forced to represent the passive 'underside' of everything in a symbolic system of domination and hierarchy, says Ruether. If there is a way of interpreting Mary as a symbol for a new kind of humanity, and as one standing for equality, there is no need to discard Mary (Ruether 1979).

Because ordinary women can never be like their perfect model, Mary is distinct from all other women, as Marina Warner says. The obvious question, then, is whether there is something wrong with being a woman. Mary is made exceptional exactly in those areas where women differ from men most concretely and bodily: in their ability to get pregnant and give birth. The perfection attached to Mary is thus actually the opposite of being a flesh and blood woman.

The classical Christian theology of incarnation thus becomes paradoxically the antithesis of human bodiliness. Jesus became a human, but he could not be born like the other human beings. In the words of the Creed, Jesus was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit,' without physical intercourse, and 'born of the Virgin Mary.' Mary, as the perpetual virgin, was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Mary gave birth without any pain, which was the very punishment given for women because of Eve's fall. Even Mary's hymen remains intact through her labor.

Nevertheless, at the heart of Christianity stands Mary with her woman's body: a woman who conceived, gave birth, and breastfed her child. Without Mary's body, God could not have become human. Much of theology on Mary, popular piety and visual arts depict this ordinary bodiliness. The shrine madonnas portray Mary's – a woman's – body as a space for the holy (Gertsman 2015).

Many of the stories and images depicting the ordinary aspects of her motherhood include breastfeeding. Unlike her pregnancy and labor, Mary's breastfeeding has always been depicted as a most natural activity, just as with any other mother. Sometimes these stories came to include the belief in Mary's miraculous milk, especially in Western Christianity. Importantly, as far as I know Mary's breastfeeding has not been interpreted in ways which contradict ordinary women's experience, unlike in the case of her giving birth.

Images of Mary breastfeeding – called *Maria lactans* – portray her as an ordinary mother breastfeeding her child. Nevertheless, the images focus on the Mother of God, not her son, as the one on whom life depends. These images of Mary have pre-Christian predecessors. The Egyptian goddess Isis nursing her son Horus is one of the most important images that have influenced the *Maria lactans* imagery. Likewise, elements of the cult of the goddesses Artemis and Cybele leaked into the Marian devotion. Artemis was both a virgin and a nurturer.

In the images of the breastfeeding Mary, she is presented both as an ordinary breastfeeding woman and the Queen of Heaven on whom life and nourishment depend. This encapsulates almost to perfection the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation (Boss 2000). In the words of Sarah Jane Boss:

> He [Christ] is nevertheless only a boy in his mother's lap, being offered her breast, thus indicating that the all-sufficient Creator of the

> cosmos took on the dependent form of a creature who required bodily nourishment to sustain him: he became a helpless infant who needed a mother's milk for his survival.
>
> (Boss 2000: p. 29)

Jesus is both the Savior and a little boy. Unlike Mary's virginity and unusual labor, her breastfeeding makes the incarnation more real. Life comes from a woman, through a woman's body. Even God chose this way. Because conceptions of God are abstract and associated with masculinity, the Virgin Mary – as an ideal and as a concrete image – better conveys the idea of the origins of life. This is what both the ancient goddess myths and images and beliefs about Mary are telling us about. The *Pietà* images of the dead Jesus in the arms of his mother remind us how close life and death are. Mary holds in her arms both the holy life and the holy death, just as many of the pre-Christian goddesses who had a similar dual power over life and death.

The idea of God depending on Mary's human motherhood and body is extended in piety and visual arts to the idea of Mary as the one who speaks on behalf of human beings. God's dependency on and gratitude to Mary gives her the power to intercede on behalf of humanity before God at the Last Judgment. Visually this thought is depicted in those images where Mary exposes her bare breast as if to remind God and Christ of what they owe to her. This type of image is called also *Mater misericordiae*, the merciful and compassionate mother. (See Figure 2.1)

Figure 2.1 Mater misericordiae, the Merciful mother. Part of the scene on Last judgment. Lohja medieval church, Finland. Photo: Elina Vuola.

According to Sarah Jane Boss, the motif of Mary suckling Christ attained its greatest popularity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, until the eighteenth century, when it more or less died out. The extinction of the nursing Madonna in Christian art is related to the changes in attitudes towards women's bodies that occurred in the West. Exposing one's breast today has an entirely different meaning from the use of medieval holy images of the sacred breast, including in churches. The fact that the Virgin could be portrayed with a naked breast is evidence in itself that it was possible for a woman's breast – at least in the context of nursing – to be incorporated into an image that was essentially sacred. Making the female breast exclusively an erotic or sexual symbol, has deprived it from the connection to the sacred (Boss 2000).

> Western Christianity has moved away from a culture in which a maternal body, carrying several layers of meaning, could be incorporated into religious devotion, and has moved instead towards a culture in which a woman's breasts have primarily sexual significance … Accordingly, the medieval representations of the Virgin as physical mother and bearer of God have been gradually supplanted in Catholic devotion by images of a prayerful young woman whose body had no ostensible association with maternal functions.
>
> (Boss 2000: p. 40)

This is certainly true. However, as will become clear in the forthcoming chapters, there are elements in Marian devotion which do present Mary's motherhood in very concrete terms even today, not necessarily visually but in other forms.

Mater Dolorosa, Mary as the mother of sorrows – who in art is known as *Pietà* – is a beloved and recurring theme in both popular piety and visual art. It has many variations: Mary by the cross witnessing her child's death, Mary holding the dead Jesus on her lap, or swords piercing the mother's heart. Mary's pain because of the loss of her son is another point of identification for ordinary women, especially in regions where child mortality and societal violence are high – like in many countries of Latin America. In this aspect of Mary, she is not so much the powerful protector as in giving birth, but another mother who went through the same as so many other women. It is this similarity and identification that can console other mothers in sorrow and pain: even the greatest and most powerful of mothers had to surrender to powerlessness in the face of death.

Before the next chapter on Latin American Marian devotion, I present a specifically Latin American feminist critique of the figure of Mary. It served as a catalyst for me to start interviewing Catholic women in the region, to hear what they themselves say and experience.

Marianismo as a source of women's oppression

The Virgin Mary as a harmful symbol for women has been presented by Latin American feminist scholars, principally social scientists and not theologians. The simultaneous under- and overestimation of religion in gender studies, which I referred to in the Introduction, is clear also in the Latin American context. There, this narrow interpretation of religion acquires special intensity and is crystallized in the case of the Virgin Mary, who (rightly) is seen as the main cultural model, interpreted as sexist and anti-female. Women's intense love for and devotion to the Virgin Mary is (wrongly, I argue) seen as alienation.

The tendency in feminist Latin American studies to see all established religion, including the popular type of Catholicism in Latin America (*religiosidad popular*), as harmful and alienating for women, may lead to a situation in which feminist scholarship produces hierarchies, differences and images of women, which might turn out to be very problematic in the light of women's concrete life experiences.

The term *marianismo*, widely used in feminist research on Latin American women, originally comes from an early article by Evelyn P. Stevens (1973a). She delineated two different moralities and sources of identity for Latin American men and women: *machismo* for the first, *marianismo* for the latter. According to Stevens, *marianismo* is a 'secular cult of femininity drawn from the adoration of the Virgin Mary,' which

> … pictures its subjects as semi-divine, morally superior and spiritually stronger than men. This constellation of attributes enables women to bear the indignities inflicted on them by men, and to forgive those who bring them pain … Men's wickedness is therefore the necessary precondition of women's superior status.
>
> (Stevens 1973a: p. 62)

Machismo is the 'other face of *marianismo*,' together they create two opposite moralities for Latin American men and women, 'a stable symbiosis in Latin American culture' (Stevens 1973a: p. 63). Women are deliberate perpetrators of the *marianismo* myth, which is characterized by the female ideals of semidivinity, moral superiority, spiritual strength, abnegation, an infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice, self-denial, and patience. All this 'a considerable number' of Latin American women freely choose and support. Both *machismo* and *marianismo* are syndromes, fully developed only in Latin America (Stevens 1973a, 1973b).

Even though Stevens's article is outdated and the term *marianismo* has been criticized, it has been widely used, repeated and reproduced, and appears in one form or the other in several subsequent social scientific studies of Latin American women (e.g., Brusco 1995; Chaney 1979; Craske 1999; Eckstein 2001; Fisher 1993; González and Kampwirth 2001; Melhuus and

Stølen 1996; Ready 2001). It has been criticized for oversimplifying the realities of women in the region (Browner & Lewin 1982); for reflecting only a middle-class reality (Bachrach Ehlers 1991); and for being essentialist, anachronistic, sexist, and ahistorical (Navarro 2002). I suggest some additional critical points, particularly from the perspective of the study of religion.

I pay attention to the difficulties in maintaining a causal link between the image of the Virgin Mary, theological teaching about her, *marianismo* as a concept, and women's subjugation in Latin American societies. The importance of multidisciplinarity for feminist research is delegitimized if there is a serious lack of critical dialogue between social scientists who create semi-religious constructions, such as *marianismo*, and theologians and anthropologists of religion. The latter delineate the role of the Mary symbol and myth in Latin American culture very differently, particularly from women's point of view.

The relationship between the figure of Mary – both as a cultural and religious symbol – and women's social status is presented in terms of cause and effect in the *marianismo* model. How exactly women's submission follows from either the general cultural importance of the Virgin Mary figure or its use as a tool for women's submission is not clarified. Claiming a direct causality between religious teachings and symbols, women's devotional practices and their social and religious status is problematic. Such generalizations omit both feminist theological critique of different religious traditions and women's own religious experiences and interpretations.

One obvious tension, specific to Latin America, remains unexplained and unresolved. On the one hand, the oppressiveness of the Catholic tradition for women, especially in the figure of the Virgin Mary, is taken for granted. On the other, the crucial role (even if contested and contradictory) played by the Catholic Church in organizing women in Latin America, including early feminism, is acknowledged by feminist scholars (Baldez 2002 on Chile; Alvarez 1990, 1994 on Brazil). In many countries, this role of the church was related to its wider role in the defense of human rights through the space it offered to the threatened civil society during the military dictatorships.

The church as an institution was a concrete home for Latin American women's movements in their early stages, but it was and remains the institution which maintains rigid teachings on issues of sexuality, family, and reproduction. In order to understand the multifaceted relationship between women and Catholicism, all these realities should be taken into account.

I will take a few examples of some of the difficulties that may surface with the use of the *marianismo* model. Lisa Baldez criticizes another widely used binary model in feminist Latin American studies, dividing women's political organizing into feminine vs. feminist movements (*movimientos de mujeres* vs. *movimientos feministas*). According to her, in reducing women's interests to two categories, the approach obscures more than it explains. Many movements do not fit easily into either category (Baldez 2002).

Nevertheless, she takes the other widespread binary of *marianismo* vs. *machismo* for granted:

> Framing mobilization in terms of conventional gender roles may seem to be an obvious or inevitable move, especially for women in Latin America, where *machismo* and *marianismo* (the cult of Virgin Mary) run deep and appear to constitute an essential component of the culture. (Baldez 2002: p. 15)

From a slightly different perspective, Lynn Stephen, an anthropologist, points out how scholars who have analyzed 'motherist' movements in the region have all pointed out the links between Catholic images of femininity and their use by repressive states to control women (Stephen 2000). Without using the term *marianismo*, she says that 'images of the various incarnations of the Virgin Mary portray an idealized woman who is an obedient, self-sacrificing mother, subordinating her needs to those of her children. The Virgin Mary obeyed the wishes of her son, Christ, and of other men including the disciples and God himself' (Stephen 2000: p. 35). According to Stephen, repressive states use this extension of the Catholic imagery to constrain women's deviation from the proper roles assigned to them.

Women in human rights movements such as *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Argentina) and *Co-Madres* (El Salvador) thus not merely repeat or reinforce the Catholic female imagery but also use it for their own ends and even subvert it, turning their motherhood into 'political motherhood' or 'subversive motherhood'. For Stephen, as for many other scholars, notions of proper female behavior, particularly in relation to motherhood, are 'tied to the Catholic Church' (Stephen 2000: p. 283). More concretely, the model is the Virgin Mary: 'If women were not living up to the traditional Catholic image of the Virgin Mary as an obedient, pure, and self-sacrificing mother, then they could be interpreted as the opposite – as a whore, an aggressive, impure, sexual object' (Stephen 2000: p. 283).

Obviously, the formal teaching and theology on Mary contains much of what are recognized as the cultural female ideals. Nevertheless, failing to analyze the relationship between these ideals and women's concrete everyday lives, their own self-understanding as Catholic women and their often deviant interpretations of the Virgin Mary, stemming from the richness of Latin American popular Catholicism, leaves both the imagery of the Virgin and women's understanding of it largely unexplained.

Stephen is critical of traditional notions of womanhood and wants to present alternative cultural discourses on motherhood. Certainly, the changed roles of women, as mothers who are also active in human rights organizations, are such alternative discourses, and by pointing them out, her analysis is not as abstract and vague as of those who merely use the *marianismo* term. Nevertheless, the causal link between women's roles, the Virgin Mary and the Catholic Church begs questions: How exactly they

are tied together? How do Catholic women themselves see, live, comprehend, and conceptualize the relationship between their roles as women and the importance of the Virgin Mary and the Catholic tradition for them? It is largely because of questions like these that I decided to interview Catholic women in the region on their relationship with the Mother of God.

At the beginning of the book *Gender in Latin America* by Sylvia Chant and Nikki Craske, there is a 'Glossary of Latin American terms,' in which *marianismo* is explained as the 'cult of the "Virgin Mary"', idealizing motherhood, and chaste and decorous behaviour in women' (Chant with Craske 2003). When *marianismo* is understood in this way, which is not how Stevens originally used it, two different phenomena are conceptually confused: religious devotion to the Virgin Mary, widespread with different forms in Latin America and elsewhere, and women's supposed idealization in their role as mothers and the (supposedly related) cultural expectations for their behavior, especially in the area of sexuality.

In an earlier book, Craske (1999) makes extensive use of Stevens's *machismo-marianismo* thesis, tying it into the very core of her theorizing. She claims that Stevens's essay may be exaggerated in its examples, but nevertheless 'the basic underpinnings of the construction of womanhood, and thus gender relations, hold true' (Craske 1999: p. 12). Without arguing for this claim, she assumes a line of thought that combines *marianismo* (á la Stevens) with an understanding of women's identification with (and their love of) the Virgin Mary as something harmful, and then combines these two with motherhood as framed by the traditional gender constructions of the Catholic Church (Craske 1999). It is this combination that I try to disentangle in my book.

In spite of the criticism directed at *marianismo*, the notion appears in another text by Craske as late as 2003:

> It is difficult to separate gender and sexuality given that dominant ideas of gender rest on privileging heterosexuality and reproduction – particularly for women. In Latin America this has been mediated by notions of *machismo* and, to a lesser extent, *marianismo* which still have cultural weight. Although these bi-polar conceptions do not describe reality, they offer an understanding of the parameters within which people can negotiate their own gender positions.
>
> (Craske 2003: pp. 201–202)

Craske does note that the terms are no longer considered positive attributes. Still, she uses them and claims that they have cultural weight – whatever is meant by that.

These examples represent some of the most problematic uses of the *marianismo* term since they never explain how women's idealization (as mothers), their subordination, and their supposed desexualization follow from the veneration of the Virgin Mary. In Latin America, Marian piety

includes a variety of local practices and devotions, many of them syncretistic, not referred to by scholars who claim that the cult of Virgin Mary is the ultimate source of women's sufferings.

I am not denying entirely the link between a cultural symbol such as the Virgin Mary, a given culture's moral codes, and people's everyday lives, but I am questioning the (simple) causality between them, presented principally in negative terms. These sorts of assumptions are unfortunately often based on an inadequate understanding of the history and nature of Marian devotion in Latin America, Catholic theology of Mary and, most importantly, Catholic women's own interpretations of the meaning of Virgin Mary for them. For example, an image of Mary inspired by liberation theology pictures her as the poor *campesina* woman, losing her son to death while fighting alongside of her people, but nevertheless chosen to be the Mother of God and thus symbolizing the church of the poor. This image ties motherhood and political struggle to the figure of Virgin Mary, but with quite different qualities than the *marianismo* type of imagery.

Women such as the Argentinian *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* are not necessarily 'subverting marianist notions of motherhood' (Craske 1999: p. 12) but, instead, identifying with Mary and her earthly lot. They may also be asking for her help and protection, because she is not merely an ordinary woman like themselves but a transcendent being with supernatural powers. Throughout this book, I call this the both-and character of women's devotion to Mary: she is both like (to be identified with) them and radically different (to be prayed to for help and protection). This, I believe, is the very core of the radical sense of empowerment so many Latin American Catholic women claim to gain from their devotion to Mary. It is quite different from *marianismo* interpretations of motherhood, Mary and the women who love and follow her, which too easily assume that religion is always and everywhere, without any further qualifications, detrimental and restrictive for women.

I hope to offer aspects of women's popular Marian piety as a critical corrective to an ahistorical *marianismo* type of feminist research (especially in the Latin American context) that reduces both Mary and women's devotion to her into an abstract concept that does not really illustrate, explain, or even do justice to the richness of the tradition and to an understanding of Mary as worthy of (women's) devotion. Mary as a religious symbol – not *marianismo* as an abstraction or ideology – can be empowering for women in their political and everyday struggles, as I will show in the next chapter.

Theologian Jeanette Rodriguez, of Ecuadorian origin, is one of the few scholars besides myself who has interviewed Catholic women about their relationship to the Virgin Mary. I believe it is no coincidence that she too is a theologian who can see beyond the construction of the Virgin as a mere cultural (and oppressive) symbol. In her interviews with Mexican-American women, Mary stands out as someone who 'knows how I feel and I can talk to her woman to woman, mother to mother' and 'a person with whom the women relate on a daily basis, a person with whom women

can be intimate, honest and frank about their lived situation.' She concludes that 'from a psychological point of view, Our Lady of Guadalupe is for these women someone with whom they can identify. They confide in her, for she is consoler, mother, healer, intercessor, and woman' (Rodriguez 1994: p. 121, 127, 138). Rodriguez found that the way women speak about Mary is experiential, profound, affective, and reciprocal – the latter because they also see her as intercessor, as one who listens to and responds to petitions, which usually have to do with marital problems, issues with children, pregnancy, family, friends, or husbands (Rodriguez 1994). The core to their worldview is relationship, the interrelatedness of human life.

The earlier mentioned polarity between 'feminist blindness', on the one hand, and 'religion-as-a-lens' on the other, is clearest in social scientific studies of women and gender. Religion is considered and presented in more varied ways in anthropological research, which is probably due to its ethnographic method. When women's religious practices and beliefs are in focus, feminist theologians may be able to hold a more substantial and in-depth dialogue with feminist anthropologists and folklorists than with social scientists, who tend to see secularization as inevitable and feminism as opposite to religion.

A critical feminist analysis of the formal teaching on women and the Virgin Mary in Christianity is of course central, but it has to be done with adequate tools. Theologians are trained to do this. Scholars from other fields could and should take feminist theological analyses as their point of reference instead of vague and often unfounded theories such as the *marianismo-machismo* configuration. Feminist theologians, for their part, could use anthropological research as empirical evidence of the ways women negotiate with their religious traditions. Feminist theorists in different fields and disciplines – for example, theology, anthropology, and sociology – should not omit each other's insights.

If scholars are to understand and analyze the complex relationship between women and their religious traditions, identities, and beliefs, they need to recognize that women have different ways of opposing the cultural stereotypes they face, including some of those represented by feminists. The image of women as passive victims of religious indoctrination is one of the most common ones, omitting women's agency altogether, as in the *marianismo* thesis.

Real women may be caught between these various discourses. I have paid attention to a triangle of tensions between, first, the formal, official Catholic teaching on Mary and women; second, the feminist disgust and suspicion of Mary and Catholicism, as described earlier; and third, ordinary Catholic women who claim that both the church and the Virgin Mary are important for them. Feminism, in practices and theory, may be deaf and blind to religious women and their self-understanding. This kind of anti-religious feminism may in fact even deprive women of their most important source of comfort and understanding, the Mother of God. This is an especially crucial question in the case of poor and marginalized women, as will be shown in the next chapter.

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3 Costa Rican Catholic women and *La Negrita*

The Virgin Mary as Queen of the Americas

Hispanic colonization of America was Marian colonization. The cult of the Virgin Mary was systematically encouraged as a way of 'civilizing' the indigenous peoples of America. The Spanish and Portuguese conquerors even saw Mary as the one who carried out the colonialist enterprise, *La conquistadora* (González Dorado 1988; Hall 2004; Remensnyder 2014). There were several Marian apparitions and miracles during the first years of the conquest. For indigenous people, the Virgin Mary must have appeared as the principal symbol and protector of their enemies. The Virgin Mary became one of the most central and controversial symbols of the conquest of America (Hall 2004). The cult of the Virgin was embedded consciously as a replacement for pre-Columbian female deities. According to historian Amy G. Remensnyder,

> The Madonna herself could take up arms in these battles against New World idolatry. Yet in Mesoamerica, the conquistadors would also draft Mary and her images into the service of a calculated politics of friendship. Even when the 'war of images' coincided with military campaigns against Maya and Nahua armies, the conquistadors would describe their introduction of the Madonna into Mesoamerican temples as the foundation for bonds of fraternity between victors and vanquished ….
>
> (Remensnyder 2014: p. 239)

Mary came to incorporate the attributes of pre-Columbian feminine deities, as had happened earlier in Europe and the Near East with the pre-Christian goddesses. In the Andean region, the parallel cult of the Virgin Mary and *Pachamama* still exists today.[1] The pre-Columbian roots remained closer to the surface in the Andes: Andean ideas and symbols merged more significantly into reverence for Mary than was the case in the conquest of Mexico (Hall 2004). In various regions of Latin America, the most popular Virgins often have clear continuity with their predecessors, not just visually but functionally.[2] In many places, the missionaries themselves actively

promoted syncretized Mary cults to replace the pre-Columbian goddess cults and prevent what they perceived as idolatry.

Interestingly enough, these same Virgins became some of the main symbols of *mestizo* nationalism in America. The most important of them have been declared patronesses of their respective nation-states. In 1810, the Virgin of Guadalupe of Mexico, the best-known and widespread of all Latin American Marian personifications, was declared the Patroness and Queen of the Americas (*Nuestra Señora de América*). (See Figures 3.1, 3.2) In some places, the Virgin Mary became the symbol of nationalism and independence. José de San Martín in the south declared the Virgin of Carmen to be a general of his army. In Mexico, it was two Catholic priests, Fathers Hidalgo and Morelos, who started the first independence rebellions. They declared the Virgin of Guadalupe the protector of their rebellion and patroness of Spanish American independence. Their slogan was '*¡Viva Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe! ¡Viva la Independencia!*'.

These 'Latin-Americanized' Virgins thus play a national(ist) role: since they are not mere copies of Spanish Marian cults, they have served as representatives and symbols of *mestizo* culture, as opposed to Spanish culture. Mary became the primary symbol of cultural adhesion (Zires 1993). As early as the seventeenth century, the Virgin also served as 'proof' of the level of Christianization in America. If the indigenous people venerated Mary, they could not be pagans. The numerous apparitions of Mary to ordinary, humble

Figure 3.1 Statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Behind the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico City. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Figure 3.2 Statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The basilica of Guadalupe, San José, Costa Rica. Photo: Elina Vuola.

people must be a message from Mary (and God) herself – she has chosen to speak directly to them, not through European missionaries and priests. This fact is emphasized in those cases when Mary supposedly spoke the local indigenous language, not Spanish or Portuguese. Also racially, she identifies with the dark-skinned *mestizo* of mixed blood, being often dark-skinned herself. According to González Dorado, it is Mary's maternity that creates the affective and vital bond between her and her Latin American children. Mary has adopted the *mestizo* through her appearances. She is the universal mother, *La Morenita,* the Little Dark One (González Dorado 1988).[3]

However, there are competing Virgins. The Virgin Mary has served as a national and military symbol for independent nation-states practically all over modern Latin America. Since the wars of independence, she has also been a symbol of revolution or rebellion. In a military and political context, Mary's traditional role as intercessor between God and humanity received new connotations: it is as if she would mediate orders directly from God. In many battles, Mary was the only woman present – be it among the *zapatistas* in the Mexican Revolution or in the rebellion of the 1990s, guerrilla movements or highly repressive national armies and military dictatorships of the 1970s.

Margarita Zires finds the figure of Mary most controversial in her function as the dominant symbol in Latin American culture - thus she is capable of carrying multiple, even contradictory, meanings simultaneously and being a point of convergence for different social groups.

> The dark against the white, the indigenous against the Spanish, the Virgin without the child against the Virgin with the child, the one of Tepeyac [the hill where the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego in 1531] against the one of the Cathedral, the one of the people against the one of the powerful.
>
> (Zires 1993: p. 81)

In several places in Latin America, Mary has replaced pre-Columbian goddesses, who live on in her in a syncretized form. The most famous and widely loved of these is the aforementioned Virgin of Guadalupe, who appeared ten years after the conquest of Mexico at a pilgrim site of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin, where the actual *Basílica Guadalupe* now is situated. The dark-skinned Latin American Virgins were encountered by simple people – often children, women, slaves, and indigenous persons – in situations of oppression and chaos (see Schmidt 2015 for Cuba).

The American Mary replaced not only pre-Columbian female deities whose attributes were fused into her, but also African deities, with the import of African slaves to American lands. The various representations of Mary in Latin America are a fusion of European, African, and indigenous American elements. This is clearly discernible in the popular religiosity of the region even today. The 'official' and the 'popular' live side by side, blended into each other, and should not be too sharply separated. Popular practices and beliefs exist semi-officially as part of more recognized devotion, sometimes creating a distance between what is formally accepted by the church and what are seen as customs of the common people. This is also the case of *La Negrita*, one of the many specifically Latin American Marian personifications and devotions, to which I will turn soon.

Mary and liberation theology

One influential, specifically Latin American interpretation of Mary was elaborated in the context of liberation theology. I will not give an account of the history of liberation theology here, since there is abundance of scholarship on it, from different perspectives. Since I consider the theological analysis of the Latin American Mary important, I will present a short overall view of how Mary has been interpreted in the context of liberation theology, in which I include Latin American feminist theology.

In many countries, Mary is the patroness of the nation-state – in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, not just of Mexico but all America. During the military dictatorships of the 1960s–1980s, these nationalist Mary symbols often became the patronesses and protectors of the most repressive military governments and armies which terrorized entire societies with their human rights violations, ending in forced disappearances, political murders, mass displacement and refugees. For example, in Argentina, the patron saint *Nuestra Señora de Luján* was used as the protector of the armed forces. This 'General Mary,' the commander of troops, was robbed of her original

meaning as the symbol of all Argentinians, even though her naming as patroness of Argentina in 1930 was a state project of constructing a homogenous national identity around Catholicism (Hall 2004).

The context of the birth of liberation theology, *teología de la liberación*, was the repressive situation of the 1970s. As theology of the poor, its context is obviously broader, but this alternative interpretation of Christianity and Christian theology was created especially during the military dictatorships. The Virgin Mary holds an important place in liberation theology. She is interpreted as the poor *campesina* woman that she was, according to the New Testament. She is a point of identification for many poor people, especially women, and a prophetess who announces the Kingdom of God. Here, the main source is the *Magnificat* (see Chapter 1).

In the *Magnificat*, Mary appears as the traditional personification of the church, but interpreted as the church of the poor and oppressed. She announces, 'He [God] has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.' She becomes the symbol of the struggle of the poor and marginalized.

I have been somewhat critical of certain gendered interpretations of Mary in liberation theology, based on an essentialist and complementary understanding of gender and a lack of interaction with the popular religiosity of the region, including indigenous cultures. This results too easily in a romanticization of both women and indigenous peoples and cultures (Vuola 2002, 2011). However, the Virgin Mary's most important role in liberation theology was that of the mother of the people and the personification of the church – both her traditional roles, but the people are understood as the poor and marginalized, not the nation, and the church as the church of the poor (*iglesia de los pobres*).

Particularly in women's popular Marian piety, inspired by liberation theology, she became the sorrowing mother who loses her son to death at the hands of the oppressors and the powerful. Even though these interpretations were new because of their context, they focused on the Biblical Mary of Nazareth rather than subsequent Catholic Mariology.

Latin American feminist theologians interpret Mary in the broader context of liberation theology but are often critical of its constructions of gender which essentialize women (e.g., Aquino 1993; Gebara & Bingemer 1989). However, they do not create their feminist liberation Mariology in dialogue with the popular devotions of Latin America either.

Indirectly, during the military dictatorships the Virgin Mary also became an identification point for women's human rights organizations, especially the groups of mothers of the disappeared people. In many countries, such as Argentina, El Salvador, and Guatemala, these women's groups were practically the only public defenders of civil society that openly challenged the human rights violations in their countries. Their gender, and possibly age, protected them from repression to a limited degree. The groups were

not feminist – rather, they were a result of women losing the most important role in life into which they had been raised, that of the mother. They embodied the *Pietà* and the *Mater Dolorosa* in a new context. Since most of the disappeared people were young men, the link to the Virgin Mary is obvious: just like her, they had lost their children to a violent death. They, too, were desperately searching for their loved ones.

Next, I will move on to my own ethnographic work in Costa Rica. Here, my interest is in filling a vacuum that I see in both theology and gender studies: the lack of the concrete voices of Catholic women in the context of local Marian devotions.

La Negrita of Costa Rica

Our Lady of the Angels, *La Virgen de los Angeles*, commonly referred to as *La Negrita* – the Little Black One – was declared the patroness of Costa Rica in 1824. The basilica dedicated to her is situated in the city of Cartago, the former capital of the country, about 25 kilometers from the current capital, San José (see Map 3.1).[4] The statue placed at the main altar of the basilica is tiny, only about 20 centimeters high, somewhat clumsily carved of black greenish stone. It is one of many 'black madonnas' of the Americas. The figure is round and maternal, the Virgin holding the baby Jesus on her left arm.

Map 3.1 Costa Rica.

According to the legend, written down in its contemporary and official form as late as 1934, she first appeared on August the second, 1635 to a young *parda* (mixed Spanish, Indian, and African heritage) woman, Juana Pereira, on the outskirts of Cartago where she was collecting firewood. She found a little stone image of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus in her arms on a rock, took it home, and placed it in a basket. The next day, she found the image again on the same rock. She thought it was another statue, but at home, she noticed that the basket was empty. This time, she locked the basket after having placed the statue there again. On the third day, she found the statue at the same rock once again. Frightened, she ran home to check the basket and found it empty. She then went to the local priest, gave the image to him, and told the whole story.

According to the legend, the priest did not pay much attention to the young peasant girl and her story, but he did guard the statue. When he wanted to take a closer look at it, it had disappeared from the place he had put it. After some searching, he found it on a rock in the forest. This time he put clothes on the image and brought it to the church. The next day, when he was saying mass, he again noticed that the statue was gone. After the mass, he and another priest went to look for it at the same site as earlier. And there she was, standing on a rock, supposedly because she wanted that a church dedicated to her would be built in that very place, which is what happened.

August the second is still dedicated to *La Negrita*. On that day each year, thousands of pilgrims from all over Costa Rica go to Cartago, many by foot, some walking for days from different parts of the country. According to what I read in the local media in 2007, more than half of Costa Rica's four million citizens participated in the *romería*, as the pilgrimage is called in Spanish. The highway from San José to Cartago is closed every August the second, filled with people journeying on foot to the basilica, in which they proceed on their knees to the altar where the statue is placed. (See Figure 3.3)

The cultural history of *La Negrita*, related to Costa Rican nationalism, class and racial conflicts, as well as tensions between the state and the Catholic Church, has attracted the interest of some scholars, if not many (Sharman 2006; Zuñiga 1985). The history of her veneration is a story of how a fringe cult of marginalized people become a national(ist) symbol that supposedly unites the Costa Rican nation. One of the national myths of Costa Rica is that the country is both 'whiter' (European) and more egalitarian than its neighboring nations. However, Costa Ricans of African descent – who live mostly on the Caribbean coast – and indigenous people such as the *bribri* still suffer racism and marginalization. For them, the image of an egalitarian Costa Rica is a nationalist myth, created by governing elites to form a unified nation. The common interpretation of the story is that *La Negrita*, who herself was dark-skinned and appeared to a person of despised race, had a clear message: that both 'whites' (*blancos*) and 'blacks' (*negros*) are God's children and thus equal.

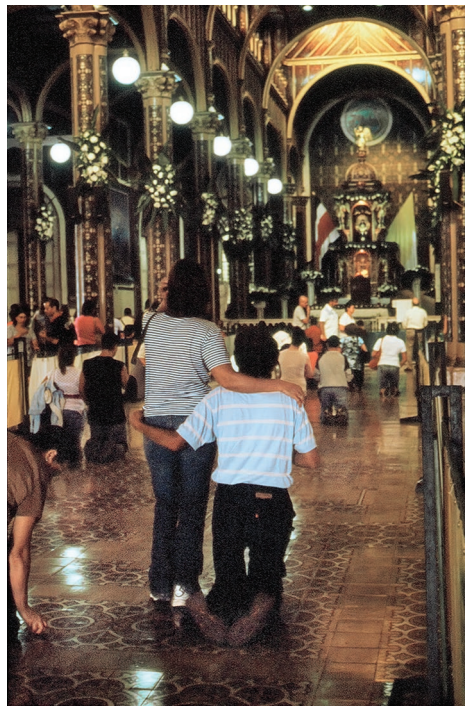

Figure 3.3 Costa Ricans of all ages approach the altar of *La Negrita*, Cartago, Costa Rica, 2007. Photo: Elina Vuola.

The cult of *La Negrita* has similar elements to other personifications of Mary in Latin America, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, but is specifically local in some of its meanings. Like *La Negrita* and Guadalupe, in Latin America Mary has often appeared to lower class people, racially and otherwise marginalized, Indians and slaves, in times of turmoil. The church authorities have not believed them at first but the apparition and the symbol itself have finally convinced them. Marian apparitions have been explained both as the motivation for evangelizing and controlling indigenous and black people, and as a story of their empowerment and greater social and racial cohesion – in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, even as the core of the Mexican *mestizo* identity (Paz 1959). *La Negrita* appeared as a concrete object made of stone and not 'in person' as is the case in most other apparitions of the Mother of God, in Europe and elsewhere. Nor did she have any specific message to impart (Sharman 2006).[5]

In the basilica itself, the little image is surrounded by nationalist symbols of the Costa Rican state such as the flag, reflecting her contemporary meaning principally as an 'invented' symbol of what it is to be Costa Rican,

changed (made) into this from a marginalized local cult of segregated black people, over the centuries. Racial oppression, including slavery and a ban on black people traveling from the 'African' Caribbean coast to the 'Hispanic' central valley of Costa Rica until the 1930s, are not remembered and recounted in the current interpretation and official version of the legend. Instead, the nationalist myths of a 'whiter' Costa Rica, on the one hand, and racial and ethnic equality, on the other, are contradictorily combined in the current interpretation. Even her popular name, *La Negrita*, which literally means black (*negro/a*), is emptied of its original meaning of a black Madonna appearing to a poor black woman and given a more *mestizo* sort of meaning: that the Costa Rican people are one and the same, united, and with a commonly shared national identity.

The lower level of *La Negrita*'s basilica is where the more popular (not necessarily as opposed to nationalist or hegemonic) materialization of the devotion is expressed, mainly in the form of small ex-votos, devotional objects, locally called *milagros* (miracles) or *promesas* (promises). They are tiny metal carvings given as signs of thanks or request to the Virgin. Most often they represent the human body, everything from a full-size human figure – child or adult, male or female – to lungs, eyes, breasts, or legs. Besides these, people bring her clothes, toys, and even trophies of soccer teams who supposedly won their matches due to *La Negrita*'s help. (See Figures 3.4, 3.5) Behind the basilica, there is a built-in fountain

Figure 3.4 *Promesas*, ex-votos, for *La Negrita*. The toy cars and planes are brought to the basilica in order to thank for being saved from a traffic accident. Cartago, Costa Rica, 2007. Photo: Elina Vuola.

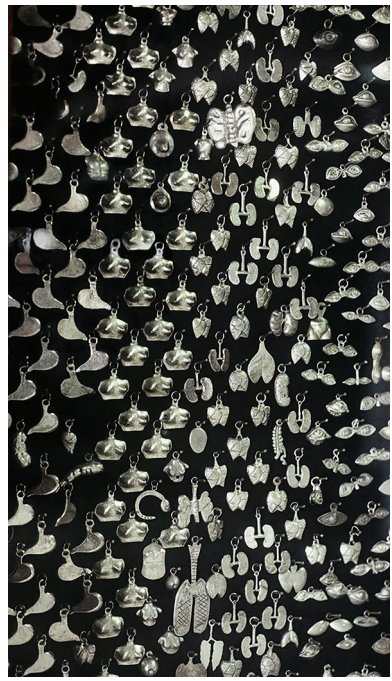

Figure 3.5 *Promesas*, ex-votos, for *La Negrita*. Most *promesas* represent different body parts or full human figures. Cartago, Costa Rica, 2007. Photo: Elina Vuola.

believed to contain *agua bendita*, water blessed by the Mother of God. Worries related to health, economic uncertainty and human relationships seem to be the focus of the *promesas*.

Both men and women, young and old, participate in *La Negrita*'s devotion. (See Figure 3.6) She is obviously not the only personification of the Virgin Mary even in Costa Rica. When my informants spoke of the Virgin Mary, they mostly did so in the broad sense (*La Virgen María* or *La Virgen*) as did I, since my interest was not specifically *La Negrita* but the meaning of the Virgin Mary in general. However, since I conducted my interviews in Costa Rica, my informants often spoke of *La Negrita*, not interchangeably with the Virgin, but as a specific, local personification of their devotion. Several of my informants pointed out that of all the different personifications of the Virgin Mary, *La Negrita* is known for being especially miraculous. According to 79-year-old Doña Elisabeth,

> She is very miraculous, she bestows everything if asked from the heart, she is very miraculous. The *promesas* do not have any weight if not asked from the heart.

Figure 3.6 Men carrying the statue of *La Negrita*. Cartago, Costa Rica, 2008. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Differences between the official and the popular, the elite and the common people, were visible at the mass of August the second in 2007 which I attended together with thousands of *ticos*, as Costa Ricans are called in popular parlance. The open-air mass was held in the plaza facing *La Negrita*'s basilica, presided over by the archbishop. Members of the local political and social elites had reserved seats to which they walked through a pathway demarcated by cords. The rest of the audience either watched them (like in a local Oscar gala) or waited in line to receive blessed water from the fountain behind the church. The line was long in the heat of the sun. Young and old, women and men, entire families, had brought bottles to be filled with water and taken home. (See Figures 3.7, 3.8).

Figure 3.7 At the fountain behind the basilica. Cartago, Costa Rica, 2008. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Figure 3.8 Young man selling a statue of *La Negrita* in one of the shops around her basilica. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Jalane D. Schmidt has emphasized similar tensions in another Latin American Marian devotion, that of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre (*La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*) in Cuba. Quite similarly to the case of *La Negrita*, the Cuban cult has gone through a process of invention and creolization, in which race and the history of slavery play a central role. According to Schmidt, 'the Virgin of Charity, whose cult was previously the preserve of lower-class blacks in the nation's poor eastern region, was coming to be viewed as a religious figure that was emblematic of the Cuban nation as a whole' (Schmidt 2015: p. 66). Schmidt does not have a particular gender perspective, but as I argue in the case of *La Negrita*, the intersections of race, class, and ethnicity are crucial for understanding the cult's gender-specific aspects.

Costa Rican women and La Negrita

> Para mí [La Virgen] como madre, como mujer que es, entiende bien a las mujeres. Nos entiende bien a nosotras porque es igual a nosotras. Sólo que es elegida entre todas las mujeres para ser una mujer pura, limpia, para ser ese primer sagrario, donde Jesús se formó …
>
> For me, [the Virgin] as mother, as the woman that she is, understands women well. She understands us well because she is like us. Only that she is chosen among all the women to be a pure woman, a clean woman, to be the first sanctuary, in which Jesus was formed …
>
> (Laura, 61)

*

> …ella [La Virgen] al haber sido mamá, al saber las preocupaciones de una mamá … es más fácil para uno cuando uno ha vivido algo poder entender a otra persona, que lo está pasando. La Virgen ya pasó por todas estas cosas y ella me puede entender mejor que es lo que estoy sintiendo.
>
> … because she [the Virgin] has been a mother, having known the worries of a mother … it is easier for someone who has lived through something to understand another person who is going through the same. The Virgin already lived through all these things and she can understand me better, understand what I am feeling.
>
> (Eugenia, 45)

These are excerpts from interviews that I conducted with Costa Rican Catholic women in 2006 and 2007 on what the Virgin Mary means to them. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 women in San José and the surrounding cities of Alajuela and Heredia in January and February 2006 as well as one group conversation with a mixed group of men and women at the Biblical Center of the Claretian Brothers in San José. I did another round of eight interviews in March 2007 in both urban and rural settings in Costa Rica. I observed and documented the celebrations of *La Negrita* during the

first week of August 2007, including the pilgrimage. I conducted all interviews in Spanish, and all the translations from Spanish to English are mine.

My informants in Costa Rica were Catholic self-identified devotees of the Virgin Mary, something that many of them expressed in terms of being *muy marianas*, very Marian. They were both urban and rural, most of them lower middle class, some with very little formal schooling, but some of the younger ones held a university degree. Their ages ranged between 30 and 79 at the time of the interviews. I found my informants mainly through my existing contacts with local Catholic parishes and organizations in the country. All the names of the interviewees have been changed into pseudonyms.

I have lived in Costa Rica for altogether approximately three years, in 1991–1993 when I was working on my dissertation on liberation theology (see Vuola 2002) and again in 1999–2000 for half a year. Since then, I have made shorter visits to the country, including the fieldwork for this research.

In Costa Rica, I was an outsider not only as a non-Catholic but also as a foreigner who speaks Spanish with an accent. Usually my informants had no idea about either Finland or Lutheranism. I told all of them that I am not Catholic but the very absence of the Virgin Mary in the Lutheran Church has made me curious about her in other Christian churches. For most of my informants, even the most educated ones, Lutheran equaled 'Evangelical' (*evangélico*), which by and large refers to Pentecostal and other neo-Protestant churches, which have grown rapidly in Central America. Anita, one of my eldest and best informants – in the sense of being a very creative thinker – commented: '*¿Qué? ¿No tienen María? Ay, pobrecitas, son huérfanos.*' 'What? You don't have Mary? Oh, you poor ones, you are orphans.'

The above quotations express something that I heard in one way or the other in most – if not in all – interviews: that the Virgin Mary is both like me, another woman, and unlike me. As said earlier, I call this interplay of identification with and differentiation from Mary in women's devotion to her the both-and character of Mary in women's piety. My informants' identification with Mary was intense, especially in difficult situations and on issues concerning motherhood, health, and income.

The ordinary as women's everyday, often primary, sphere in which they needed Mary's help was expressed by my informants in a variety of ways.

> The Virgin is like a telefax [laughs] which arrives to us just like that [snaps her fingers]. It is she who intercedes to her son for us. As the woman that she is. As mother. As helper. She with her merciful heart, full of love, affection, and tenderness. As we women are.
>
> (Olivia, 59)

The mundane or ordinary issues, from finding a parking spot or a spouse to having a difficult labor, are not too lowly to express to Mary. She is not judging, she wants to help and comfort. She is miraculous and has power. Above all, she understands.

According to 45-year-old Eugenia,

> It is really strange that, well, I always drive the car and my mother talks like crazy to her [Virgin Mary], really, "Ay, *Virgencita*, I need a parking spot, but a big one," you know I am not that good a driver, well, "find me a space," or if I am running late, my mother says "I need a favor, why don't you ask the Virgin to do it."

She also narrated how

> … she [the Virgin] has always been on my side in the most difficult moments. I had a really difficult labor … and I remember that I just surrendered myself, or, in fact I thought 'If you did it, I can do it.' … It has been very, very special, in the most difficult moments of my life, I have felt her tremendously by my side.

Or, as middle-aged Gisela explained:

> I feel that she helped me. Well, I cannot say it was a miracle or what is a miracle, but I, for example, I have felt – well, her accompaniment, or, let's say, I am used to asking "Little Virgin, help, so that dad's operation will go fine," or that my baby would be fine, and so on, that her intercession always has worked. Well, is it faith or what is it, right?

Laura, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, told the story of her ectopic pregnancy and how the Virgin, *Mamita María*, helped her when she was in great pain and close to death.

My informants' relationship to the Virgin Mary in general, and to *La Negrita* in particular, was that of intimacy, trust, love, and help. Women both internalize the teachings of the church, including its official Mariology, and negotiate with them. In my informants' experience, Mary is primarily a channel between humanity and divinity. The human side is strongly gendered – women approach Mary, the holiest of women, as women.

Clara (47) worked with women's groups in her local Catholic parish and told me how she had learned about the Virgin Mary from these often very poor women, and how an openly (secular) feminist discourse may alienate women whose devotion to the Virgin Mary and faith are important for their survival.

> Women in conditions of poverty need to look for transcendence, to be able to maintain hope. People are very religious and very Marian [*marianas*]. … The more intellectual women, feminist women, reject that, and in a way condemn women when they say "How can you believe that…when the church is like that and Mary this… and the priests…!" But what happens is that they rob them of their hope, through presenting everything in only negative terms without giving them anything

> new instead. … The truth is that women think theologically, they are theologians in their own right. They reflect on things, they think of their faith from the perspective of their lives and their life from the perspective of faith.

Interestingly, Clara said that the theme of Mary's virginity and purity usually does not emerge in her groups.

> At least in the groups that I have worked with this theme [virginity] has not come up. It catches my attention. As if it wouldn't be important at all. It is more about their motherhood, being often single mothers, that is important in their relationship with Mary.

In some of the interviews, however, women did reflect on Mary's virginity and purity, including two elderly women who both said they did not believe it. Anita, in her seventies, said that *son cosas de los curas*, 'that's the priests' stuff,' and Rosita (60) said three times consequently 'I don't believe it, I don't believe it, physiologically I don't believe it.' According to her, Mary had to be a virgin because of the church's view of sexual relations as sin. For her, virginity is about choosing if one wants to become a mother or not. Mary's motherhood is like any woman's motherhood, and this is why women identify with her.

Elena (30) said that she does believe in Mary's virginity but that it does not mean that it is the most important thing:

> I feel that there are so many important things about her [Mary], her values, everything she did. Her great love for Jesus and all humanity. She continued, really, with the apostles and was the first woman to receive the Holy Spirit. Thus, all those things are important, too. Sometimes one forgets that.

I asked Elena – as I did many other interviewees – if she thinks that Mary is more important for women than men. She said:

> We women are always seeking the spiritual things. More than men, who tend to be more materialistic … women's spirituality is different from men's … I think that the woman identifies more with the Virgin, because she is the model for us as a woman, a model of life… and it is often easier to trust another woman than a man, don't you think so?

Anita was one of the women who, even with very little education, presented deep theological thoughts. She was open-minded, intelligent, and warm (she is the one who pitied me for not having Mary as a Lutheran). I dared to ask her, the mother of seven, what she thinks of Mary's virginity. She said: 'Elina, you told me that you are a mother of two. I am a mother. So you know, all women know, that it cannot be true [*no puede ser*].' After that she

added that the physiological virginity of Mary is important for the men of the church, not for her or us as mothers. She did not stop there. After her outright rejection of Mary's virginity based on women's real life experience, she continued with alternative interpretations of virginity. While listening to her, I thought that she has no idea that some highly educated feminist theologians have come to the same conclusions. She stressed how virginity is not only about something physiological. It is an attitude and state of mind. It is about moral integrity and independence. Anita thus both affirmed the teaching of the church of the value of virginity and rejected it in the narrow sense, which speaks against people's common sense and experience.

Miraculous Mary

One of the most important aspects of *La Negrita* is the belief in her miraculousness, as I already mentioned. This aspect of her devotion becomes clear to anybody who visits the basilica and sees the number of *promesas* brought there. The *agua bendita*, the blessed or holy water, is also considered as particularly powerful. The shops around the basilica sold bottles in the shape of *La Negrita* for people to fill at the fountain. (See Figure 3.9)

Figure 3.9 Woman filling her *La Negrita* –shaped bottle. Cartago, Costa Rica, 2008. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Water and its healing powers is related to many Marian cults around the world. In the original legend of *La Negrita*, it plays no role. I asked an elderly woman if I could take a picture of her when she was filling her bottle. She said yes and came afterwards to talk to me. When I asked what she is going to do with the water, she replied: 'I will pour it into the glass of my alcoholic husband, and the rest I will sprinkle in the garden around our house.'

In general, people turn to *La Negrita* either in order to participate in the shared national(ist) fervor of certain days or at times of great anxiety and special need for miracles. The *promesas* are brought to *La Negrita* either to ask for a favor or thank her for a miracle, sometimes both. Most often these have to do with health issues, relationships, family problems, unemployment, and poverty. They are all gender-related but in order to understand the full meaning of *La Negrita*'s cult, it is also necessary to take class, ethnicity and economics into account.

Olivia (59) pointed out how *La Negrita* is especially important to those who tend to believe in miracles and need them, for one reason or another:

> I am not of *promesas*. … Just once, I brought something for the Little Virgin [*virgencita*], when we had a problem … When I got married, I took the bouquet to the Virgin of the Angels so that she would always watch over my marriage – which she has done! [laughs]. But a *promesa* … that I promise this and that, is not for me. It is not my way of thinking. … I am not very fanatical. It is also a question of personality.

According to Anita,

> When my oldest son was still small, he got sick and had convulsions and became all purple, purple, purple, I offered him to the Little Virgin. When he got better and everything and we could go to Cartago, I gave the Virgin a small boy [*un chiquito*, in the form of a *promesa*], but that was, let's say, because of a conceded favor … So you can either do it when asking something or when wishing to thank, both things.

Both Olivia and Anita were well aware of the possibility of magical thinking or 'paganism' related to these little artefacts in form of a baby, a limb, or an eye and that this is not encouraged either by the church or by the secular society. However, it is obvious to anybody who visits the basilica how common it is to bring *promesas* to *La Negrita*. The most common business around the basilica, besides small restaurants, is selling *promesas* and other religious artefacts. Olivia framed the whole custom as fanaticism, even when simultaneously admitting having once brought a *promesa* and given her bridal bouquet to the Virgin. Anita stressed that the miracle had happened just by praying and that the *promesa* was given only afterwards as a sign of gratitude. Almost all of my informants said that they turn to *La Negrita* and trust in her help at times of anguish – be it sickness, a husband's alcoholism, infertility, or lack of money.

They were well aware that the church does not accept Mary's divinity, she is not a goddess. At the same time, their lived religiosity blurs the line between her humanity and divinity. Mary is considered as the (sometimes ultimate) source of help. The devotion to *La Negrita*, in this sense, reflects the ambiguity of the official and the popular, institution and lived religion, doctrine and personal faith.

The uncertainty about the *promesas* and the blessed water are an example of a built-in tension in the cult. *La Negrita* is simultaneously a national(ist) symbol; the patroness of the nation-state; the highest symbol for formal Catholicism and its links to the Costa Rican state; and an object of people's greatest fears, hopes and losses, which become visualized and materialized in the form of the *promesas* and the blessed water, and are simultaneously experienced as potentially some kind of excess, magic, heresy, or backwardness.

Marta (29) from the Costa Rican countryside told me:

> My child had a really bad cough which did not go away. They found out it was pneumonia. I decided to give an offering [to *La Negrita*]. I paid for this little baby [*promesa* in the shape of a child]. *La Negrita* helped and the child was cured. The Virgin can help in any sickness. And who else would help at other difficult moments in life if not the Virgin … She suffered so much for her son Jesus, as so often happens us mothers. She is like us, similar to us, and not just as a mother but as a woman.

Elena, from the same region and of the same age, told me about her 17-year-old relative who had experienced health problems continuously since she was a small child. When she caught a lung disease, the doctors told her that she might die.

> Her mother called and told me that she had done the *romería* [pilgrimage] to the *Virgen de los Angeles*. She prayed there from the bottom of her heart. When the girl then went to see the doctor, he said that ninety percent of her lungs are working just fine. The mother visited the Virgin twice, full of faith, first to ask for help, then to give thanks. … The girl now has only one lung, but she is alive. It was a miracle, truly a real miracle.

Victoria (72) also shared a story of a miraculous healing rendered by *La Negrita*. Her mother was paralyzed because of the bad condition of her legs and had to sit in a wheelchair. One August, at the time of the annual pilgrimage, the mother asked Victoria, then middle-aged, to go to *La Negrita* on her behalf. Victoria said:

> I bought those small legs [*promesas* in the shape of a leg], two of them, and brought them to the Virgin. I told her: "*Virgencita*, these are my mother's legs. I leave them with you. Help me, ask help from your holy son for my mother, he can't deny you anything." I then stayed

> and meditated on *La Negrita* for a while. … My mother venerated the Virgin deeply. When I told her what I had done, she said: "Be it according the will of God that he would comply to his mother's request, because you asked for it." My mother drank coffee and soon said that she wants to walk. … And she walked in the living room that very same day! … You see, Elina? *Virgencita* helped. God helped through her.

Doña Elisabeth (79) had raised three children alone. When they were small, she had to go to work and often leave the children by themselves. She told me:

> I asked the Virgin to cover them with her holy mantle. And nothing ever happened to them, although I left them all alone in order to go to work. Nobody treated them badly, none of them was hurt. … What is special about *La Negrita* is that she is miraculous. Very miraculous. You saw all those hearts, legs, arms and babies in the church…

Here Doña Elisabeth refers to our visit to the basilica which I had offered to make with her. She wanted to go but did not dare to go alone because of her old age. There, she asked me to hold her umbrella while she crawled on her knees on the hard, stony floor all the way from the door to the altar where *La Negrita*'s statuette is placed. (See Figure 3.10)

Figure 3.10 Doña Elisabeth at the basilica of *La Negrita* in 2007. Publication with her permission. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Another interviewee, academically trained Eugenia in her mid-forties, told me that she can even ask Mary for a parking spot. The huge jeep bought by her husband took a lot of space and was difficult to park for Eugenia. She said, 'Can you believe, I am this crazy' but explained that you really can ask Mary anything. No petition is so small, awkward, or ordinary that you could not turn to Mary:

> It is really strange that, well, I always drive the car, and I talk like crazy to her [the Virgin Mary], really, "Ay, *Virgencita*, I need a parking spot, but a big one." You know, I am not that good a driver, well, "find me a space."

To God through the kitchen

Practically all my informants emphasized the role of Mary as *Mediatrix*, the mediator or intercessor, which is also one of her important roles in official Catholic Mariology: *per Mariam ad Jesum*, through Mary to Jesus. In this role of intercessor, Mary's both-and character becomes crystallized: Mary both like other women (human, immanent) and as different from them (divine, transcendent). When praying to Mary, my informants emphasized her mediating role not only as something between divinity and humanity, but also as active: she is the *intercesora* who has the power to act, to intercede. Since she is experienced as being closer to human beings, especially women and mothers, than God and Jesus, my informants – like Eugenia – felt that they could talk about anything to her without having to 'control' themselves or ponder whether some mundane everyday worry was too insignificant to express.

Anita compared this role of Mary as the *intercesora* with a metaphor from her own life: if you need to talk to the lawyer son of your friend, you approach him through the mother. It would possibly not be appropriate to contact the lawyer son directly, and at least the outcome is more secure. Just like Jesus, earthly sons cannot deny their mothers anything:

> My way of asking something of Mary sometimes is that I say "Little Virgin, intercede with your beloved son," you see? I am not sure if I do it well or not, but yes, you can ask Jesus and know that he listens to you … But you know, if you have a friend and that friend has a son who is a lawyer … that friend is then closer to the lawyer, so you also ask that she would intercede for you so that the lawyer would listen to you… It is not that I wouldn't have asked the lawyer, but that I also resort to the mother, so that she would help me, and so that God, let's say, or in this case the lawyer would have, like, more power … It is like having a stronger commitment. And that is what you do when you ask the Virgin to intercede with her beloved son.

Thus, Mary's place is clear in the divine nuclear family, which according to my informants consisted of the father, the mother, and the son. Here, feminist critique of Mary may seem to hold some truth. My informants' understanding of the holy reflected their everyday experiences as subordinate. In their own families, their place was as clear as Mary's in hers. However, it is important to remember that they talked about their own lives when talking about Mary: one of them even said that Mary was an *ama de casa*, housewife, like her.

Anita, too, said:

> He [Jesus] does what you ask of his mother. Because she is the intercessor with her son … She intercedes with her beloved son for the miracles, for whatever is being asked of her, right?

The crucial experience is Mary's understanding, based on shared similarity. A continuum forms between the women and Mary, in which all ordinary worries can be expressed without fear of belittling. My interviewees felt that they were being heard and understood, possibly unlike in their lives otherwise. For most of them, their roles as mothers and wives were very important.

Fiona, in her late sixties, said:

> What happened at the wedding in Cana, you know, she [the Virgin] interceded, right? We can make this comparison with our mothers, especially when the fathers are a little bit difficult to, eh, to persuade, right? So, "Mom, talk to Dad, make a deal, but help me" … The mother always intercedes in many things. So I think, I suppose that when we ask Mary … we ask her but knowing that she alone has no power. Though she does have the great power of intercession, right?

Mary may be even more than the intercessor for the women. It is her most important role, but the direct relationship women have with her – and only her – is as meaningful. Intimate issues, such as motherhood, sexuality, giving birth and love life, are shared with Mary. She understands them better, because she is a mother and a woman herself. In these most intimate issues, I noticed, my interviewees did not ask her to intercede with God or Jesus. The women felt that Mary helps and supports directly in issues that they felt only another woman can understand.

Birth-giving Mary

When I asked my interviewees if they have had moments in their lives when Mary has been particularly important, many mentioned giving birth or the loss of a child. Most of them were mothers. For Sandra (32), the loss of her

newborn and the subsequent infertility were experiences that brought her back to the church. She cried when she told her story:

> When I was seven months pregnant, my blood pressure went up. I had to go to the hospital several times. When the time to give birth came, the baby was born with heart failure. They could not operate on the baby and he died. It was Saturday three o'clock in the afternoon, when my family came to see me at the hospital. They did not tell me anything about the baby, even though they knew. I was not told. They knew I was exhausted. When I woke up and opened my eyes, I saw the Virgin standing next to me. She touched my hand. I turned and said; "Oh *Virgencita*, little Virgin, I guess I have to go through the same you had, because you are there with me." She disappeared and did not answer.

The baby died at the age of ten days. Sandra pointed out that Mary gave her the strength and ability to bear the loss, although at the baby's death she also felt that Mary abandoned her for not fulfilling her ardent hope that the child would survive. About a year later, these contradictory experiences condensed in a feeling that it was precisely Mary who could understand the magnitude of her loss. Mary became the model for endurance of sorrow for Sandra.

When I asked her if she thinks there are differences between men and women in their relationship with Mary, Sandra said:

> I don't know, but I think men see her [Mary] in their own way, we women in our way. Men tend to see her as the mother, the woman that she was, the mother of Jesus. We women see her as someone like us. A human being, a person like us, who has the same organs we have. It is different. Men don't experience her as similar to them. I see her as like myself. She is like me. I identify with her, because she is a woman, and not only because she is a mother.

Another interviewee, Eugenia, told me about her difficult labor abroad, where she did not speak the language:

> At the worst moment, I could nothing but surrender. In fact I thought: "If you [Mary] did it, I can do it." I have experienced Mary's presence tremendously at the most difficult moments of my life.

This is a clear example of what was said in the previous chapter about Mary's miraculous, exceptional labor as a possible point of identification and empowerment, not alienation, for women in labor.

When I asked more closely about Mary's role as a helper in birth, my interviewees said for example, 'she helps at birth if you ask' (Laura) or that an intense prayer to Mary took away the pain (Gisela).

Human and divine in Mary: women's ally

The aforementioned both-and character of Mary in women's devotion was present in many ways in my interviews. As said, in my informants' experience, Mary understands women because she is a woman herself, but at the same time powerful and miraculous, who helps, consoles and supports. This dual character of Mary makes it possible for many women to both identify with her and ask for her help. It was astonishing for me to realize how real this relationship seemed to be: my informants talked about a reciprocal relationship, which helped and empowered them. For example, Dora (71), described her love for Mary in this way:

> I pray the rosary [to Mary] all the time – when I wake up, sometimes already at four in the morning. It is my custom. When I go to the bathroom, when I go from one place to another – the Virgin is on my mind all the time … I am not a fanatic, no, no. But I say in my mind "Oh mother Mary, you are so great, I need this or that, I have this kind of a problem" or I thank her for something … every May I build an altar for her in our garage. So that she is at the center of everything.

I asked Dora how Mary's ability to intercede shows in her life, she replied:

> Oh, all the time! There is not a shortage of problems. There are problems in the family – and in other situations, too, I ask her to intercede. There can be sickness or economic problems in the family. And right now I need her, when my husband has been very sick.

Dora, like my other interviewees, spoke to Mary like to a female friend, often without any formula but using tender names of her: *Virgencita*, the little Virgin, *Mamita* or *Madrecita*, the little mother, or *Mamá María*, Mother Mary. None of these names exclude the experience of her being powerful and dignified. My interviewees also used expressions such as heavenly mother, my/our mother, accomplice, protector, and divine woman/mother (*mujer/madre divina*). Terms such as *Virgen Poderosa* (Powerful Virgin), *Reina del Cielo* (Queen of Heaven), and *La Milagrosa* (The Miraculous One) speak of the other aspect of Mary's meaning: not merely another mother, sister, or friend but the powerful celestial female protector.

Anita said that Mary is 'our ally,' *nuestra aliada*. Other interviewees used the same or similar terms: 'women feel supported [*respaldadas*] through Mary' (Rosita, 60), and 'she is like an ally [*aliada*], our accomplice [*alcahueta*]' (Eugenia, 45).

The experience of Mary as mother is related to what I mentioned earlier about being pitied for not having Mary in the Lutheran tradition.

According to Anita, 'we [Catholics] are not orphans. Even if our earthly mother dies, we always have our spiritual mother [*mamita espiritual*].' She continued:

> … it is often easier to trust another woman than a man … women trust Mary, because she is a woman. She too had a family, she too had to take care of children and struggle. She had to undergo very difficult things in her life … in a way, she is like a sister, eh?

Elena said that she identifies with Mary and thinks she should be like her. However, she had a clear opinion about the wrong image of Mary as submissive and silent. Because of *machismo*, women have to endure a lot of bad treatment and not to express their thoughts and emotions. Anita saw Mary as a model for women's appreciation:

> Women's worth is not in their being like men. Women have to know themselves, value and love themselves, respect themselves and others as we are … I think Mary reflects this … In that, Mary is a model to follow. Women should aspire to be like her. They should be like her.

According to Olivia,

> I become calm when I think that Mary's motherly love is always with me – and with my children and husband, with all my loved ones. She also gives me strength. She herself was strong in her pain, and she supports me in my difficult moments, so that I can go forward. She also gives relief and peace that I will need at my last moment. Because she is not only the beginning of life, but also a path along which I can walk towards God … It occurs to me that in a way my relationship with Mary is sometimes more real – awful to say – than with God.

Olivia told me of her difficult relationship with her mother. The relationship had lacked tenderness and warmth. She related this to her yearning for Mary.

Closeness with Mary was expressed also by Elena. She said that there was a time in her life that she had big doubts about the church. At some point, she was attending a meeting at the local parish – the theme of the meeting was the Virgin Mary. There, she felt her presence in a very concrete embodied way:

> I felt a special presence and started to see roses around me. I knew that it was Mary, I even felt how she hugged me … it was like a forgiveness of my doubts, it made me stronger in my faith … after that, I don't experience her as someone above me, distant, but someone to whom I have personal relationship. Like a mother.

As becomes clear from my interviews, the women did not talk about some oppressive ideology like *marianismo*, but of real lived experiences and a relationship, which was an important sustaining center of their religiosity and everyday life. As Clara expressed earlier, even feminism, which does not understand this meaning of Mary, can rob women of their hope and support. Clara's words, more than anybody's, are a direct counter to the claims made based on *marianismo*.

Conclusions

My informants' accounts of what the Virgin Mary means to them can be described not only as religious agency but also as a source of empowerment. I agree with Saba Mahmood's (2005) critique of understanding agency only in terms of political agency and resistance. For Mahmood, understanding women's agency only or principally in political terms is too narrow. A binary logic of submission versus resistance is based on a teleological understanding of emancipation, which easily omits other kinds of agency. She pays attention to women's religious and ethical agency, which is also reflected in the title of her book: the politics of piety.

In my experience, interviewing offers more varied meanings to feminist concepts such as empowerment. How do we study what women experience as alienating and empowering? By asking them. How do we know what women in different parts of the world and in different religious traditions experience as patriarchal oppression? How do we get to know what women themselves think of their religion and, more importantly, how they interpret it? By asking them.

Another important concept from feminist theory which can be applied to religion is intersectionality (for more about religion and intersectionality, see Vuola 2012, 2017). Even theories of intersectionality that explicitly pay (self-)critical attention to the blind spots in feminist theory and the myriad of differences between women have by and large not been able to see religion as an important factor in women's lives. Thus, religion may have remained the last way of 'othering' women – especially those of a different culture or subculture – in feminist theory (see my critical reading of this in the light of global feminist theology, in Vuola 2017). In the case of *La Negrita* and her followers, it is important to critically analyze what kind of difference religion makes in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, and class.

At least the following tensions or intersections can be traced in *La Negrita*'s cult. First, the tension between the 'official' and the 'popular' is particularly important in those religious traditions that are constructed along gender lines, as is the case of Catholicism: certain duties are reserved for men only, and women are always laity. This tension should not be too strongly maintained because of the pejorative use of the term 'popular' in much of the study of religion (Orsi 2002, who prefers to use the term lived religion instead). Some of my informants seemed to be aware of how 'popular religion'

is easily understood in terms of heresy and paganism. Thus, they expressed this hesitation as part of their narrative about the miraculousness of *La Negrita* and the power of the *promesas* and the blessed water.

Second, the line between the secular and the religious is practically impossible to draw in the devotion to *La Negrita*. She is simultaneously the main symbol of a secular state and the most important religious symbol of Costa Rica, as are so many other Latin American Marian cults.

Third, the difficulties with including religion and religious identity in feminist theorizing about identity, intersectionality, and empowerment are another example of a tension present in *La Negrita*: feminism can paint a negative and one-sided picture of an important source of empowerment and selfhood for Catholic women. Even though both men and women participate in the cult of *La Negrita* and other Virgins, there are gender-specific elements in Marian piety.

It is possible to summarize the way my informants spoke about Mary and her significance for them in their everyday lives as a form of empowerment, which has a divine source. Because of its transcendental and supernormal origin, it is not surprising that this sort of understanding of empowerment has not gained a lot of popularity in secular feminism. These empowering aspects may be – and in fact, often are – in tension with the formal teaching of their church. This was probably clearest in how women questioned and rejected Mary's virginity as a physiological fact. Academic feminists, including feminist theologians, may see the emphasis on Mary's virginity as one of the most problematic aspects of Marian devotion. At the grassroots, women seem not to care, or, when asked, they mirror it with their own life experiences and see it as 'priests' stuff'. It is Mary's human motherhood, combined with her powerful potential for intercession that is important for them. Women identify with Mary as another woman and mother, not as a virgin.

Fourth, the ideal of an equal Costa Rica is in clear tension with the class aspects in *La Negrita*'s cult. Even though she is loved by both elites and lower classes, it is especially the poor and marginalized who turn to her in their concrete needs. The elite tends to see her as a symbol of Costa Rica, the imagined and idealized nation. For ordinary people she is a source of help, understanding and miracles, which gives a horizon of hope in ordinary life so often filled with real worries of income, health, and family relations. She is both the patroness of the nation state, used for political ends, and the dark-skinned mother of the lower classes. It is often women from low-income spheres who hold onto an image of a miraculous Virgin Mary: she is someone who may be able to help when all safety nets are gone. Even for middle-class people there is a lot of economic hardship. The examples of people dying because they do not get adequate treatment for pneumonia or high blood pressure during pregnancy reflect a non-functional health care system, even though in Costa Rica the situation is better than in many other Latin American countries.

Turning to *La Negrita*, even with hesitation, is a culturally sanctioned channel for people's desperation. Costa Ricans with very secular and even anti-Catholic opinions may visit *La Negrita* in times of crisis. At least for those who grew up Catholic, the option is right there when needed. I discovered this after having done my formal interviews. I had many discussions with my Costa Rican friends, acquaintances, and academic colleagues about my research, which they were very interested in. Several times, at some point, people – men and women – started to tell me of their personal experiences. The theologian from abroad, interested in their culture, was a perfect channel for opening up about something that was a little bit shameful for an educated, secular person to admit.

Fifth, it is clear that *La Negrita* combines elements from both European Catholicism and more indigenous, possibly pre-Columbian, beliefs: she is American, African, and European, as are so many of her followers. Even though this has not been adequately researched by anthropologists or archeologists in the case of *La Negrita*, it is important to remember that there were conceptions of female divinities in the Americas 'only' 500 years ago and that in places, the level of Christianization was quite superficial. In that sense, *La Negrita* and other Latin American Virgins stand at the intersection between the different cultural backgrounds of the region's contemporary religious field, particularly Catholicism. (See Figures 3.11, 3.12).

Figure 3.11 Women carrying the Virgin Mary in Easter week processions. Antigua, Guatemala. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Figure 3.12 Women carry Mary, men carry Jesus, in Guatemalan Easter processions. The mother follows her suffering son. Antigua, Guatemala. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Sixth, the history of racial and ethnic conflicts in Costa Rica is explicitly present in *La Negrita*'s cult, even in the visual form of the statue itself. The colonial roots of the devotion are often forgotten, both in the sense of her being a European, Christian figure, and her having appeared to a person representing the lowest in the colonial society: a young black peasant girl. The common interpretation of the story is that *La Negrita*, being herself dark-skinned and having appeared to a person from a despised race, is a unifying and reconciling symbol. This image of an egalitarian Costa Rica is a nationalist myth, created by governing elites to form a unified modern nation. Ironically, *La Negrita*, as the symbol of that myth, does not hold much meaning for the contemporary ethnic and racial minorities of the country.

Jalane D. Schmidt (2015) comes to similar conclusions in her analysis of the Virgin of Charity of Cuba, which suggests that other understudied

Marian cults of Latin America may have similar patterns, especially in terms of the intersections between religion, race, ethnicity, and class. Schmidt describes how the cult of the Virgin of Charity has been creolized and institutionalized, which has tended to erase its racial and ethnic origins to create a history of a nation as related to a specific religious symbol (Schmidt 2015).

In the case of *La Negrita*, the hierarchical intersections of race, gender, religion, and class are intertwined in this one specific form of Latin American Marian devotion. *La Negrita*'s cult is one example of how these intersections are always local and should not be too easily universalized. At the same time, the local examples can shed light on how the complicated legacy of colonialism is still very much present in different Latin American societies, even in countries such as Costa Rica where there the indigenous population, and cultures are not prominent, and which is difficult to label as a 'developing country' using formal indicators. Questions of race, ethnicity, and class – and how these intersect with gender and religion – are far from established as a field of research in Latin America.

Notes

1 *Pacha* (in *Quechua* and *Aymara*) means all vital space and time, Mama means Dame (*Señora*), a woman with family. Thus, the usual translation of *Pachamama* as Mother Earth may be too limited. According to Irarrazával, it could be translated as 'the globality of existence, life itself.' This totality is experienced as feminine and maternal (Irarrazával 1989). *Pachamama* does not merge into Mary. Rather, they co-exist and share common elements, but also have characteristics of their own.
2 Well-known local and national Marian cults in Latin America include the following. *Nossa Senhora Aparecida* (Brazil), a dark-skinned Virgin, appeared in 1717 to a poor fisherman called Juan Alves. She even contains elements of African female deities. The legend of *Nuestra Señora del Rosario de Chiquinquirá* (Colombia) goes back to the end of the sixteenth century. The cult of *Nuestra Señora de Luján* (Argentina) is dedicated to a black slave called Manuel. *Nuestra Señora de Copacabana* (Bolivia) has her shrine at the site of an ancient pre-Columbian cult place at Lake Titicaca. She, too, is dark-skinned and has close affinity to *Pachamama*. *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* is Cuba's patron saint who appeared at sea in 1612 to three men, of whom two were indigenous and one an enslaved black boy.
3 It is important to note that in Latin American Spanish, the diminutive (-ta, -to) is not a sign of belittling but rather of affection, tenderness, and closeness. Thus, *La Morenita* or *La Negrita*, instead of *La Morena* or *La Negra*, refers to a close and familial relationship with the Mother of God.
4 By 1639, the first shrine of *La Negrita* was under construction. The church built in 1912 was destroyed in an earthquake in 1920. The current church, *La Basílica de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles*, was built six years later.
5 See de la Cruz (2015) for Filipino apparitions of the Virgin, which contain similar elements (non-European and colonial context, the statue as an agent moving around, and appearance to an ordinary fisherman or *indio*).

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4 *Jumalanäiti*, the Mother of God in contemporary Finland

Like many other areas between competing superpowers, the borders of Finland have been constantly changing over the centuries, and the region has formally belonged both to the West (Sweden) and the East (Russia) while managing to maintain its distinct culture and language. The area which is now Finland belonged to Sweden until 1809. After that, Finland was formally an autonomous part of the Russian Empire until 1917, when it gained its independence in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.

The Orthodox tradition has been present in the southeastern parts of today's Finland ever since it was first Christianized. A few years after Finland's independence, the Finnish Orthodox Church decided to change its jurisdictional position and became autonomous under the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1923. The Orthodox Church acquired the status of a national church alongside the Lutheran Church. Today, the Orthodox Church has about 62,000 members, accounting for 1.1 percent of the population of Finland (Kupari 2016; Trostyanskiy 2011).

Before the Second World War, a great majority of the Orthodox citizens of Finland were living in Ladoga Karelia and North Karelia. During the period when the Grand Duchy of Finland was part of the Russian Empire, the religion of Orthodox Karelians was a fusion of Russian Orthodox and older ethnic traditions, with many pre-Christian features surviving up to the twentieth century (Kupari 2016).

After the war, Finland lost significant parts of its easternmost territories, including most of Karelia, where most Orthodox lived, to the Soviet Union (see Map 4.1). Over 400,000 Finnish Karelians became internally displaced people who were evacuated and resettled in other parts of Finland. Among them were about 55,000 Orthodox Christians, two-thirds of the then Finnish Orthodox population. The Orthodox Church lost about 90 percent of its property (Laitila 2006; Kupari 2016). Its monasteries were evacuated and some of them refounded in Finland. The best-known is the monastery of Valaam (Valamo in Finnish), which today functions both in its old locations on the Russian side of the border and in Heinävesi, Finland, as the monastery of New Valaam. At least half of the members of the Finnish Orthodox Church continue to have some Karelian ancestry.

Map 4.1 Areas of Finland ceded to the Soviet Union in 1944.

The Finnish evacuees included 500 Skolt Sámi (*sä'mmlaž* in Skolt, *kolttasaamelaiset* in Finnish) from Pechenga (Petsamo). The Sámi are an indigenous people that have historically inhabited northern Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula. They are divided into several tribes of which the Skolt Sámi is one. The traditional home area of the Skolt Sámi, which includes Pechenga, is situated in the northwestern Kola Peninsula. The Skolts are traditionally Orthodox by religion, Christianized in the sixteenth century by Russian monks. This, besides language, customs, and history, sets the Skolts apart from the rest of the Sámi. The Skolts are a small minority both within the Orthodox Church (linguistically and ethnically) and among the other Sámi (linguistically and religiously). They are thus a minority within two minorities in contemporary Finland. It is estimated that there are about 1,000 Skolts, of whom about 600 are in Finland, while the rest are in Russia and Norway. Of the Finnish Skolts, today only a little more than half speak Skolt Sámi as their mother tongue (*Kolttasaamelaiset*).

The postwar period was difficult for both Orthodox evacuees and the church as a whole. Their religion was often regarded with suspicion. At least until the 1960s, the public image of the Orthodox Church in predominantly

Lutheran Finland was stereotypically and openly negative: 'The Russkies' church' (*ryssänkirkko*) points to both postwar Russophobia and the view of Orthodox Christians as 'image worshippers.' Besides marriages to Lutherans, this is one reason why many Orthodox Karelian evacuees converted to the Lutheran Church (Kupari 2016). Since the 1960s and 1970s, the tide has been almost reversed: there are more and more Lutheran converts to the Orthodox Church, often considered more sensuous and embodied than word-centered Lutheranism. In a short span of time, the Orthodox Church has changed from the despised Other to the favorite Other in the Finnish cultural and religious landscape.

The Orthodox tradition, gender, and the Mother of God

The Orthodox tradition is less studied from a gender perspective than other Christian traditions. This includes both ethnographic and theological research (see, however, Dubisch 1995, 2009 for ethnography in Greece). There is a considerable and recognized meagerness or even lack of feminist theology in the Orthodox tradition. One result is that there is not as much research available for a critical analysis of Orthodox theology, tradition, and Mariology from a conscious gender perspective as there is in the Catholic tradition. It also means that there is a wider gap between women's interpretations of their tradition, their self-understanding as Orthodox, and academic theology than in the Catholic and Protestant churches. Representatives of male clergy are often the ones who write on topics related to women, gender, sexuality, and family (e.g., Farley 2012; Seppälä 2013), confirming traditional teachings with little critical distance to sexist elements in it. Some Orthodox women write explicitly from women's perspectives, even when they do not necessarily call their work feminist, such as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Valerie A. Karras (Behr-Sigel 1991; Behr-Sigel & Ware 2000; Karras 2002, 2006).

Because of the meagerness of feminist reflection in the Orthodox tradition, it is possible to gain more insight into Orthodox women's self-understanding and theological reflection through ethnography and interviews. In a country like Finland, ordinary believers, including women, are well-educated and informed about their Church's teachings. Some of the Finnish informants had even studied theology. Although they cannot be ordained or do not have high positions in academic theology, their reflections on Orthodox Mariology are theologically well informed. In that sense, they can and should be taken as representatives of not only ordinary, lay women but also as theological thinkers (Kalkun & Vuola 2017).

It is important to take into account the theological reflection of informants who come from a religious tradition such as Orthodoxy, in which theology plays a crucial role in the understanding of the church (ecclesiology), the human being (theological anthropology), and the Mother of God (Mariology). This theology is thoroughly gendered. Those active in the church are usually

very knowledgeable of its official teachings. Thus, when interpreting their views, it is important to keep in mind that lay people, including women, always negotiate with those teachings and reflect on their lived experiences in relation to the tradition and the authoritative practices of the church. In this sense, ordinary people are theological agents and subjects whose interpretations, even non-normative ones, are based on intellectual, spiritual and embodied reflection, which should not be considered in a binary opposition to the institution and its teachings (Kalkun & Vuola 2017).

In her dissertation, unfortunately only in Finnish, Orthodox theologian Eeva Raunistola-Juutinen analyzes Orthodox views on women in the context of the World Council of Churches. She identifies some inconsistencies in Orthodox views of the immutability of tradition and obvious changes in it and how they are related to cultural differences within the Orthodox world. For instance, teaching on women's impurity is presented in the canons but the practices vary. The position against women's ordination was earlier justified by women's impurity, but this is no longer the case in most Orthodox churches. There are several arguments against women's ordination, but the single most important today is the notion of the iconic resemblance of the priest and Christ, exclusive for men, but this view is not present in the tradition. The discussion on the status and place of women in the Orthodox Church is claimed to originate from Protestant churches and feminist movements, foreign to the self-understanding of Orthodoxy (Raunistola-Juutinen 2012).

As problematic as the idea of the resemblance between a male Christ and male priest are from the perspective of Christian theological anthropology, shared basically with all Christian churches, I am not going to analyze it here. However, it is important to remember that the debates concerning women's position are historically older than contemporary feminism. Nor is feminism something that resides outside religions and churches, in the supposed secular realm. As said earlier, globally seen, most of Christian feminism in both theory and practice is in fact Catholic, not Protestant.

Behr-Sigel writes that Mary is beyond her gender. Mary's gender is significant in that she enhances the value of her own gender and grants it a deep theological significance. Mary, a woman, and her gender are set as the model and measure for humanity. Mary's motherhood and status thus have more weight in the Orthodox tradition than in Protestant churches (Behr-Sigel 1991).

Mary and Marian theology in the Orthodox tradition are both different from and similar to the Catholic tradition, as was explained in Chapter 1. In terms of gender, one difference is the emphasis on Mary as the model for all humanity, independently of gender: she is the holiest (*panagia*) person, a model of *theosis*, deification, for both men and women to follow. The Orthodox churches do not present Mary as the ideal model only for women, compared with the Catholic understanding, which ties Mary more to women as a gendered model. Further, in Orthodox liturgy and stories of miracles attached to certain icons, the role of Mary is that of the leader

in battle, a powerful woman who protects, which was also noted by some of my interviewees: they did not recognize the meek, submissive image of the 'Western Mary.' In Orthodox Mariology, there is a strong emphasis on incarnation, which makes human deification possible: incarnation is not possible without Mary, thus she is and should be at the center of the church, liturgy, prayer and spirituality. All these notions were reflected in the interviews.

Finally, it is important to understand the theological meaning of icons in the Byzantine tradition, which Vera Shevzov (2007) has called iconic piety. Icon veneration is about true relationship and presence. The importance of icons came up in almost all interviews.

Icons and iconic piety

The Virgin Mary is depicted extensively in the iconography of the Orthodox Church. The most common types of these icons are the *Hodegitria* (the one who shows the way) in which Mary points with her right hand towards the Christ child on her arm; *Eleusa* (tenderness), depicting the human relationship between the mother and the child, and *Orant* (prayer) in which the Mother God stands her hands raised facing the viewer, the Christ child in a *mandorla* on her chest. (See Figures 4.1, 4.2)

Figure 4.1 People during liturgy at the church of the Lintula monastery, Finland. The Virgin Orant icon at the altar. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Figure 4.2 Theotokos. Icon presumably from the Old Valaam Monastery. A combination of Eleusa (Tenderness) and Hodegitria (Who shows the Way) types. Photo: Elina Vuola.

In some of these icon types, the relationship between Mary and Jesus is central, in others Mary stands independently. The oldest of them is probably the *Orant*, a type encountered in early Christian catacombs. Besides these, Mary appears in other kinds of icons. All the icons of Mary include the Greek letters MP ΘY, an abbreviation of the words *Miter Theou* or *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. In icons in which Mary sits on a throne with the infant on her lap, she functions as Jesus's throne. This parallels with the Western Church's *Sedes Sapientiae* model, where Mary is depicted as the seat of wisdom.

Since I conducted many interviews in my informants' homes, the home altar and icons were presented to me almost without exception. (See Figure 4.3) One of my questions was if there are certain icons of the Mother of God that are particularly important to them. As will become clear, most of them also described their relationship to the Mother of God through a specific icon. One of my interviewees came to our meeting at my office with her most important icon of the Virgin.

Amy (28), from Helsinki, began the interview by taking an icon of the Mother of God of Valaam from her bag and placing it on the small table between us. It stayed there for the entire interview. She told me how she and

Figure 4.3 The home altar corner of an informant. The handmade cloth is Karelian *käspaikka*. Photo: Elina Vuola.

her husband had been suffering from infertility. They had gone to the New Monastery of Valaam in Heinävesi, where the original icon is placed, and prayed together in front of it, having heard of miracles especially in cases of infertility. They now have two children. When the first one was born, Amy's relative had brought the small icon to the hospital, and ever since, it has been on their bedroom wall.

> My most important experience with the Mother of God is from a time when we tried to conceive with my husband. The project took years, causing pain and sorrow. On a visit to the Valaam monastery I dropped by the church. There was a monk explaining to someone else about the icon of the Mother of God of Valaam. Suddenly I knew that childless couples pray in front of it. The monk confirmed this. I burst into tears and prayed that we would get a child. When nothing happened, we visited Valaam monastery together with my husband and prayed in front of this icon. After the birth of our first child, we visited the monastery to give thanks. Even though there are many inexplicable reasons for infertility, we experienced a kind of miracle and response to our prayers … We just recently visited Valaam with our family and we told our children about this.

Amy's story is one personal account of the old cross-cultural vision of Mary helping especially in situations of infertility, pregnancy, and childbirth. I heard it in several interviews both in Costa Rica and Finland. The miraculous icons of the Mother of God are well-known among the Orthodox in Finland, but they are not often talked about with such intimacy and openness as Amy did.

This icon is considered as one of the greatest treasures of the Finnish Orthodox Church, said to work miracles. It was originally placed in the Old Valaam Monastery Church of the Dormition, in the region ceded to the Soviet Union after the war and later transported to safety in Finland. It now occupies a prominent position in the main church of the New Valaam Monastery. (See Figure 4.4)

Amy's way of speaking of the icon and her story related to it was not uncommon among the women I interviewed. Most of them had an icon of the Mother of God which was particularly dear to them, even though not all had experienced a miracle related to the icon. Orthodox spirituality is impossible to understand without understanding the central role of the icons and their veneration. This may be called visual piety (Morgan 1999) or, more specifically, iconic piety (Shevzoz 2007), which is not merely visual, since the relationship with the icons includes prayer, body movements like bowing, touching, kissing, lighting candles, smelling (the wax, the incense), decorating the icon, and so on.

Figure 4.4 Woman decorating the icon of Mother of God of Valaam. Kovero, Finland. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Iconic piety is about a true relationship with a holy person. It is a face-to-face interaction in the context of prayer and silence. The gaze goes both ways. In the words of David Morgan, '… a face receives one's attention and returns it. Like a face, an icon is both a surface and a depth, which combine to create a sense of presence' (Morgan 2012: p. 89). At the same time, the icons are thought of as making the divine present, as being the locus of divine presence, mediating the divine to the person in front of the icon. Icon veneration is thus not only about visual communication; it is about relationship and presence. In front of an icon, a space is created in which worshippers believe that human and divine relate to each other and communicate in a shared presence, which is always both individual and communal.

In the words of Vera Shevzov,

> … icons are not merely depictions of persons or events in sacred history; they are also thought to convey the presence of that which they depict. In this sense, icons can be considered a means by which the faithful can know God and participate in the sacred reality that the images manifest. The stories surrounding icons are intimately connected to this theology of presence, telling of an individual's or community's perceived encounter with 'the holy' by means of a particular icon.
>
> (Shevzov 2000: p. 616)

Iconic piety implies the possibility of wordlessness and an inability or unwillingness to put issues into words. This notion came up in several interviews, when the women were asked about their devotional practices: that one can just go in front of an icon, whether at home or at church, light a candle, kiss the icon, stand there in its presence, and not say or think anything, just be. Many of them called this 'resting.'

Icons are a sign of divine presence in the world. The incarnation serves as the foundation of the theology of icons. They are theology in images (Damian 2011). Icons play an important role in mediating theological truths. All the different types of Marian icon convey theological ideas.

Most of the icons considered miraculous are icons of the Mother of God, at least in Finland. Besides Amy, a few other women described miracles they had experienced because of their prayers in front of a specific icon. It is interesting that in general presentations of Orthodox faith and spirituality (e.g., Damian 2011; McGuckin 2008), the miraculousness of icons is not usually touched upon at all, although it is shared and general knowledge among the faithful that some icons are believed to be miraculous.

Mother of God and Finnish Orthodox women

Amy was one of the interviewees in a research project in 2013 and 2014, when I conducted semi-structured interviews with 62 Orthodox women in different parts of Finland, including North Karelia, close to the Russian border, the stronghold of the Orthodox faith in Finland, and northeastern

Lapland among the Skolts. The women were born between 1917 and 1986. Twenty-six of them were born and raised Orthodox, 17 were converts, mostly from the Lutheran Church. Nineteen of my informants belong to the Skolt Sámi people, all cradle Orthodox. I published a call for interviews in all major Orthodox media, both printed and on the Internet. Further informants came to me through my contacts with local parishes and some key informants, especially among the Skolts. Most of my informants were married and mothers, but there were also single and divorced women as well as women who did not have children. All the interviews were conducted in Finnish, and all translations from Finnish to English are mine. All the names of the interviewees have been changed into pseudonyms, and no other information that would reveal their identity is presented.

In this book, I will not analyze the Skolt Sámi at all (however, see Kalkun, Kupari & Vuola 2018). They constitute a special case that needs to be treated and analyzed in detail separately. My focus in this book is on women and the Virgin Mary, and one broad result of my interviews with the Skolt Sámi is that the Mother of God does not seem to be as central for the Skolt women as for the other Orthodox women I interviewed. The local saint, St. Tryphon of Pechenga, who converted the Skolts to Orthodoxy 500 years ago, is the most important saint for the Skolts, including the women.

Another restriction in my analysis is related to conversion. There were more responses from converts than I had expected. As I said, conversions from the Lutheran Church to the Orthodox Church have grown steadily in Finland. In the process of doing the interviews, I started asking the converted women somewhat different questions from those I asked women who were born and raised Orthodox. For some converts the presence of Mary in the Orthodox tradition had been a pulling factor. For others, the rich Marian devotion in liturgy, prayer, iconography, and Orthodox theology had come as a surprise, which they slowly embraced. A few of them recounted how the centrality of Mary in the Orthodox Church had been a source of suspicion even as they felt drawn to convert for other reasons. This was accentuated in the narratives of women who had been active participants and believers in the Lutheran Church, in which the absence of Mary is notorious. Since conversion is a complicated theme, I do not deal with it explicitly in this book: it too would demand an analysis of its own. All my direct quotations from the interviews are from cradle Orthodox, unless stated otherwise.

Given the history of evacuation and relocation of the large part of Finland's Orthodox population and its effects on entire families, I prefer to have a third category between the cradle and converted Orthodox. Some of my informants had returned to the faith of their grandparents or one parent. Without exception, they were descendants of Karelian Orthodox evacuees who had converted to Lutheranism after the war or who had raised their children Lutheran. Conversion is not a correct word to describe these interviewees,

but rather return. In the case of these women, embracing Orthodoxy at some point in their lives was a process of very concrete return to family history, extended family, and religious customs they were familiar with, at least to some extent. I will mention this when quoting these informants.

A third restriction is that I decided not to interview Orthodox women with a background outside Finland. Some of my informants, however, were not of (fully) Finnish origin but they had lived a long time in the country, were able to speak Finnish and had extensive experience of Finnish Orthodoxy. Interviewing Russian, Ethiopian and other originally non-Finnish Orthodox would make for fascinating research, but I decided to keep my pool of informants restricted. Also, the recent history of Finland and Orthodoxy are so tied together especially regarding the loss of Karelia, that I thought I am better able to understand the shadow of war and displacement in my interviewees' lives.

In the call for interviews, I stated that I am interested in how Finnish Orthodox women experience their relationship with the Mother of God. I found about half of my informants through this call: the women contacted me directly expressing their willingness to be interviewed. I also received 19 written responses, which I had offered as an alternative. I ended up interviewing two of the women who had first written to me – thus, from them I have both an interview and an autobiographical narrative. For some reason, all the written stories came from converted women. They were born between 1937 and 1986.

Geographically, I interviewed women in Southern Finland, both in cities and rural areas, several of them in the Helsinki region. I spent time in North Karelia on two occasions when I made several interviews in different locations. Besides the Skolt Sámi, I interviewed two non-Skolt Orthodox women in Lapland. In Helsinki, most of the interviews were conducted at my office at the University of Helsinki. Elsewhere, it was mostly at my interviewees' homes. In four cases, the interview was conducted on the premises of the Orthodox Church and in one case at the hotel where I was staying. Two women called me, and I made notes but did not record our conversation. One of them I interviewed later, and she also called me twice after the interview.

All the interviews were semi-structured. Like in Costa Rica, I had a rough outline of questions, which I modified according to the interviewee. My main question was: What does the Mother of God mean to you? Other questions included: Is the Virgin Mary somehow linked to women's position in the church? Do you think Mary is more important for women than for men? Have there been situations or times in your life in which Mary was of special importance or your relationship with her has changed? Particularly the first two issues came up often in one way or the other without me directly asking. The third question proved to be crucial because it elicited the most personal and emotional answers – often related to difficult pregnancies and deliveries, infertility, abortion, divorce, issues of health, and stress about income.

This is also related to the commonalities and differences between my two groups of informants, Costa Rican Catholics and Finnish Orthodox women. Whereas personal experiences of Mary helping in issues related to pregnancy, family, and intimate relationships were strikingly similar ('Mary understanding women'), issues concerning economic insecurity and Mary's help came up practically only in Costa Rica. To a lesser extent, the same goes for health issues. This reflects the differences in social security in situations of sickness or unemployment between the two countries. I will discuss the similarities and differences at the end of the book.

Sometimes my interviewees talked a lot about being Orthodox and/or of Karelian ancestry, but not so much about Mary, and I had to guide the interview back to my main interest. Loneliness and the need to talk to someone came up in some interviews. However, in most cases, my expressed interest in their relationship with the Mother of God made them focus on her. Nevertheless, as I already said, talking about Mary with women for whom she is important is a surprisingly direct route to talk about everything else in their lives – sometimes directly related to their religious identity, sometimes less. Issues such as purity regulations came up in so many interviews that in the process of interviewing, I started to ask about it – something that I did not ask in the first interviews, because I did not consider it so important.

Being an outsider in the sense of not belonging to the Orthodox Church probably made a difference, but how, I am not sure. In at least two interviewing situations, this was shown in the interviewee 'teaching' me about Orthodoxy and the role of Virgin Mary in it. On the other hand, talking to an outsider may have created more freedom for my interviewees. Several of them knew me by name and had read some of my work, especially my book on the Virgin Mary on which this book is partly based (Vuola 2010). Without exception, the comments from those interviewees who knew my work were positive, and it was even expressed as one reason for their decision to participate. I found some of my informants through my long and close contacts with the Orthodox Church. I have Orthodox friends, I attend many Orthodox events, and I am a board member at the Orthodox Cultural Center Sofia in Helsinki, by the invitation of the former Metropolitan Helsinki.

One specific long-lasting relationship I have to the Orthodox Church is my frequent participation in processions in North Karelia, which sometimes cross the Finnish-Russian border, sometimes just move right next to the border on the Finnish side. Participation in these long-distance processions, which can be done by foot, boat, and skis, has resulted in a book published as a bilingual Finnish-English edition. It contains about 100 photographs and four articles (Hentinen & Vuola, eds. 2018). (See Figures 4.5, 4.6, 4.7) I have also participated twice in the most important annual event of the Skolt Sámi, the pilgrimage of St. Tryphon of Pechenga, in northeastern Lapland (see Kalkun, Kupari & Vuola 2018).

Figure 4.5 Orthodox woman lighting a candle at the grave covered with a wooden *grobu*, 2015. Pörtsämö forest cemetery, Finland. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Figure 4.6 Orthodox long-distance procession, Hoilola, Finland, in August 2015. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Figure 4.7 Orthodox skiing procession about to start, Hoilola, Finland, in March 2017. Photo: Elina Vuola.

The position of a researcher – whether one is an insider, outsider, or something in between – is not reducible to easy opposites. Even as researchers we are positioned in a myriad of ways – whether according to nationality, age, religious affiliation, gender, or ethnicity. This became clear in a two-day seminar on the study of Orthodoxy in Finland where I gave a talk on my research. An Orthodox priest from the audience commented on my results: 'The women probably talked to you, a Lutheran, differently from if you were Orthodox yourself.' After my own response about positionality and its meaning, a woman whom I had interviewed stood up and said that in our conversation it did not make any difference that I was not Orthodox. What made all the difference for her was that I was another woman.

As in Costa Rica, I was surprised and moved by the trust and confidence with which my interviewees talked to me – in many cases, they spoke about very intimate issues, which also caused tears and emotions. This, besides their thoughts, confirmed my idea about the intimacy of the relationship between them and the Mother of God. This emotionally laden closeness with Mary was reflected in our dialogue: since Mary grew more important in painful and otherwise important life situations, talking about her meaning obviously meant sharing intimate accounts of their lives. Sometimes the life experiences were very traumatic, and in those cases, I did not guide the conversation back to the Mother of God if my interviewee did not do it herself.

Several interviewees thanked me for my research. Some said that the theme – the Mother of God and women – was very important. One interviewee said that after having seen my call she had thought 'Finally!' Many other women said after the interview that it had made them think more consciously of something they knew was central but had not put into words before. An elderly woman from Joensuu told me after the interview at her home: 'It was so nice to talk with you, I became so glad. You are the kind of person that I have to believe that the Mother of God herself has something to do with this' (Hanna, 79). Many interviewees thanked me for making women's voices and thoughts heard in the Orthodox Church. One of them said how both the Mother of God and women are at the heart of the church but that they are seldom talked about, even less so together. I have also been invited to several local parishes to talk about the results of my research.

I was able to gather extensive data, which I cannot analyze here in detail. For the sake of my argument in the entire book about women's everyday Marian piety, which sustains and empowers women but also functions as a channel of critique of the church, I will concentrate here on the following four broad themes, which came up practically in all interviews. They are first, women's identification with Mary as another woman and women's protector; second, motherhood; third, sexuality and woman's bodiliness; and fourth, women in the Orthodox Church. Sometimes the themes overlap, as in the case of women's participation and the purity laws, sometimes not, but they were always to some extent related to the Mother of God. The themes are transversed by the overall both-and-dynamic of women's Marian piety, which I claim to be central: Mary both like and unlike me, as another woman and mother who understands and as a powerful transcendental female figure.

Based on my earlier research in Costa Rica, I assumed that rather than asking women how they see their role and position in the church, asking about Mary would be an easier, less tendentious task that would provide a richer window or lens on women's lives. Indeed, this is exactly what happened. Almost without exception, at some point in the interview, the women started talking about issues of gender hierarchy, sexism, and women's position in the church, exhibiting a variety of opinions and positions on these issues. Talking about Mary rather than about women's roles opened up the entire spectrum of issues in women's lives – relationships, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and spirituality – often by reflection through the meaning of Mary for women and the broader theological framework in which Orthodox Mariology is presented. This also confirms my argument about the gender-specific meaning of Mary for women: she is linked to almost everything my interviewees said about their lives as women, in the (Catholic and Orthodox) Church and beyond it.

Thus, the Mother of God – or the God-Bearer or Birth-Giver of God (*Theotokos*), the more common terms used in the Orthodox tradition – is not only an icon to be venerated as a window to transcendence, but she is also a window to immanence: talking about Mary with believing Orthodox women was to open a window onto the entirety of their lives.

The Finnish Orthodox tradition has not been much researched ethnographically. Two recent empirical studies, however, focus on women and Orthodoxy (Honkasalo 2015; Kupari 2016). According to Kupari, who interviewed elderly Finnish displaced Karelian Orthodox women, the Mother of God was not mentioned very often by her interviewees. She thinks that this may be because she is Lutheran and did not explicitly encourage the women to talk about Mary (Kupari 2016). While it is certainly true that many older Orthodox have learned to 'downplay' the Mother of God in a Lutheran environment – given their experiences of the Lutheran suspicion of her – I myself as a Lutheran researcher did not experience this. My explicit focus of interest was Mary, and some of my informants did mirror their thoughts with the Lutheran stereotypes, but by and large I did not encounter any hesitation among my interviewees to talk about their relationship to Mary. Honkasalo (2015), whose primary interest lay in experiences and narratives of suffering as well as intermarriage among Karelian women, encountered the importance of the Mother of God in these women's domestic religion.

Mary as a point of identification and women's shield

I will first give two examples of how Mary is simultaneously experienced as another woman and as a source of protection among my Finnish informants. The following two quotations are from single mothers, which is not accidental: it was due to their situation that these two roles of Mary were felt with special intensity, which was also reflected by the fact that both women cried while talking.

The identification with Mary's earthly lot was expressed with special intensity by Saara (65) whom I interviewed at her home:

> I have this thought [about Mary], it is maybe awful to say it, but I am a single mother, I gave birth to my son alone, and somehow … when Mary learned that she is pregnant, she too had to suffer the anguish of being a single mother, the shame and things like that [cries]. So it is also because of this experience that Mary is so human, so very close to me … that I have experienced all these things in my own life … I prayed [to Mary] for strength: *you who have gone through the same*.

Saara's identification with Mary was a source of great comfort to her. This understanding and lived experience of Mary as someone who not only shares the lot of other women but also understands and protects them was expressed by another single mother, Helen (53):

> If you live as a single mother or have a child outside marriage or you are a manless woman … you have to be really strong. You feel rejected even by people you would never believe that they would. [When I was pregnant with x] the story of Mary comforted … But then on the other

> hand it was difficult for me to approach the church from this position of the sinful woman. X [son] was baptized in the church, but I could not even think that I would have invited all my family there. Because of the shame … But Mary protects women, she is good to women. She is a compassionate mother. She is like a shield between me and the patriarchal world, the church too. That's how I experience her. She is women's shield... I think she shields, and it is easier to go behind her, slip behind her than someone else, like Christ *Pantocrator* [Ruler of All] or something like that who are, to say it directly, quite unfamiliar.

Helen's view of Mary as women's shield is almost identical with how several of my Costa Rican informants described Mary in relationship to other women: 'Women feel supported through Mary,' she is like an ally, our accomplice.' Similarly, it is easier for women to approach Mary than God or Christ, especially in issues that most directly touch women, their bodiliness and their worries related to motherhood, sexuality, children, and family. Mary understands and supports because she is a woman and a mother herself and went through it all.

The understanding of Mary as protectress of humankind is central in both Eastern and Western Mariology. There are many visual traditions depicting this: for example, the Mary of the Protecting Mantle (in Western art) and the icon of the Protection of the Theotokos, and the concomitant feast of *Pokrova* (in the Eastern tradition). Helen joins this old tradition, but gives it a specific gendered meaning: the Mother of God protects women especially or in special ways. Interestingly, Helen also offered an explicitly feminist interpretation of Mary's protection: she protects women from being downplayed in the society and the church.

Tina (55), who converted from the Lutheran Church as an adult, expressed Mary's protection in a more quotidian way:

> I have icons of the Mother of God, she has pretty much taken over my home in that sense … When I enter my house, there is an icon of the Mother of God on the opposite wall. I cross myself when I enter, and when I leave home, my last prayer there is always crossing myself, bowing to the Mother of God, and asking her to take care of my home while I am gone. So, yes, she lives there. The relationship is sort of practical.

Tina also concretized what I described earlier as iconic piety in the Orthodox Church (Shevzov 2007). In front of an icon, there is no need for words. Rather, it is a material, bodily, spiritual, and holistic relationship that matters. Tina said:

> I was thinking about bodiliness, it is something that makes everything easy in Orthodoxy. In the state of tiredness, I just stand in front of an icon of the Mother of God. I may cross myself or bow, likely both, but I don't have to have any words. … I just rest there.

Ann (28) expressed the empowering identification with Mary in this way:

> It is like … *well, Mary, you know*… I don't have to explain. Jesus is like a big brother for me, but Mary, she went through the same things as I did. It is like, here I am – going through something that she already did, before me.
>
> *EV: You mean that it is easy to identify with her?*
> Yes, and it is easy to ask for help, and you don't have to necessarily even say anything … Yes, you kind of identify with her, and you kind of think hey, *you pulled through this too.*

The thought that Mary understands better and is easier to approach than Jesus came up in many interviews. In my understanding, it should not be understood as some kind of relativization of the importance of Jesus for these believing women, but rather as one concrete example of the deeply gendered nature of Christianity. Women's issues and worries, as women themselves experience them, have not been central to much of Christian theology or church practice – not even in sexual ethics. The existence of a heavenly female friend, sister, and mother compensates for this lack. The masculine hierarchy of Christian theology where God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son are at the 'top' is so internalized by both men and women that it is understandable that ordinary women find it more comfortable to approach someone who is a little bit closer to them. (See Figures 4.8, 4.9)

Figure 4.8 Orthodox procession by boat, Hoilola, Finland, in August 2015. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Figure 4.9 Orthodox procession, Hoilola, Finland, in August 2015. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Martha (39), a mother of five, said:

> She [the Mother of God] is such a basic mother that she is the one I most pray to. She is the closest of all the saints of our church … It has to do with motherhood. She like understands … Christ feels so masculine to me. He is not the kind of person I would approach in my prayers if they have to with motherhood or even generally womanhood … He is like, how could I say, like a kind of Superman [laughs]. That when I pray, the Virgin Mary is like more down to earth.

Beverly (68) said that she became truly aware of the meaning of the Mother of God when she became a mother herself:

> When I became a parent, I sort of understood it all. Oh my gosh, the world's most important mother. The most important mother … you pray more to her in issues concerning the children, like more everyday issues … that the Mother of God has been a human being who has experienced pregnancy and all.

Dorothy (74) described the difference between Jesus and Mary in terms of protection: 'I relate protection strongly with Mary. In other issues you pray to Jesus.' She emphasized that the thought of Mary's protection is central in Orthodoxy. The feast of *Pokrova* is important for all. Protection is the most important quality of the Mother of God. She protects individuals, families, and entire nations from all evil.

According to Rita (34):

> It has a lot to do with bodiliness and gender. They mean a lot … The Mother of God as an example has to do with goodness, compassion and humility. In our culture, we confuse humility with submission and do not dare to talk about humility, which means fulfilling one's mission. And love. It is about extreme acceptance.

Mary and motherhood

The single most frequent point of reference for the interviewed women in relation to the Mother of God or the Birth-Giver of God, was, maybe obviously, motherhood. Most of the women were mothers themselves, but even those who were not talked about motherhood, about having a mother. The younger ones, still without children, brought up thoughts about possible future motherhood. As in other contexts, talk of motherhood included talking about not being able to become a mother (infertility and miscarriages), the difficulties of being a mother (including being a single or divorced mother), not wanting to become a mother (including abortion) and the importance of motherhood to one's identity as a woman. Many interviewees mentioned that the Mother of God had become closer and more important to them after they became mothers themselves – in the words of Cathy (59), 'she is the mother of all mothers.'

Quite similarly to my Catholic interviewees in Costa Rica, the Finnish Orthodox women also stressed how the Mother of God is an example and intercessor for them, especially in issues that have more relevance and urgency in women's lives, motherhood being the most important. The idea of being able to talk about anything, without shame and self-control, to the Virgin Mary seems thus to be central in women's devotion to her, in both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Women's closeness to Mary was often expressed in terms such as: 'She understands especially us women and mothers,' 'she is a woman and a mother herself,' 'she is closer to me than God or Jesus,' 'she is the mother of all mothers,' and 'she is women's shield.' These are all my interviewees' words.

Hanna, mentioned earlier, told me in a phone call how she understood the role of the Mother of God in her life, when there was sickness and worry in the family:

> I was standing in the church, on the left [women's] side, looking at the Mother of God in the iconostasis. I suddenly understood, like in a flash, that if the Mother of God herself had sorrow, the greatest sorrow that any mother has had, because of her child, why not the rest of us? … After that, it was much easier to deal with the worries of my children and grandchildren.

She said that although she had known all her life that the Mother of God as a woman understands women and their concerns, she needed the repetition and a difficult situation in her life to really grasp this. She also told me about her mother-in-law who had taught her to venerate the Virgin. The old woman had said that the Mother of God understands all women's hardships, and you can always ask for her help. She had given birth to seven children in the sauna (as was common until at least the 1930s). The most difficult birth had been that of a dead baby, who died in the womb. Hanna said that 'I got the impression that she was praying there, in the sauna, she was taken care of by the Mother of God there.' For Hanna, the Mother of God becomes closer and stronger with age.

Some interviewees said the importance of Mary is not in motherhood or womanhood. For example, Rachel (80) said that 'it is not really related to motherhood. I venerate her as a saint.' Others said that she is the All-Holy and gender has nothing to do with it. According to Vera (47, converted), 'the Virgin Mary is the deepest and the highest in the human person … Jesus, the Mother of God and many holy people are rather genderless. They have all human attributes in a broad sense.'

Infertility as a painful experience surfaced also in some other interviews besides that with Amy. For example, Birgit (52) told me about her thoughts related to those icons of the Mother of God which are considered miraculous. She first thought that praying in front of them was unnecessary, as she would conceive if it was God's will. The miracle would happen without her having to travel somewhere, to go to some specific icon. She described an experience after having children, however, of visiting one such icon:

> We were in one church in Greece and there was one such icon of the Mother of God. There were big statues made of wax in the form of a baby. People had brought them there as signs of a miracle. My son asked what they were. And after explaining it to him, he asked if that is what happened when he arrived [becomes moved], and I just said yes, that is what happened... I have not been traveling after miracles but praying in front of such an icon is however … [searches for words], I do that, too.

Mary, sexuality and women's bodiliness

Finnish women discussed the purity regulations of the church as well as Mary's virginity and its meaning – both theologically and more practically, in relation to their own experiences as sexual beings. The most critical voices questioning sexism and certain practices considered patriarchal came from the cradle Orthodox. Sometimes the critique was explicitly linked to the Virgin Mary. For example, Ann commented on the virginity of Mary:

> In the Orthodox liturgy we have a completely male priesthood who then sing about the Virgin Mary, the eternal virgin … I start to think

> about the inner life of those monks and church fathers. They have like some thousand years ago in their cells been thinking about it, denied women and female company in their lives, and it all came together in this, the virginity … Like, I have given birth to three children – well, if she was virgin throughout the process, where did Jesus come from? Through her stomach? Or what is meant by virginity?

Ann's comment is reminiscent of Costa Rican Anita's view of the centrality of Mary's virginity as 'priests' stuff,' which does not reflect women's real bodily experiences and is not a central issue for women in their relationship with Mary.

The Orthodox tradition maintains certain gendered practices of purity, most importantly the idea of the impurity of a woman after childbirth and while menstruating. At least in a country like Finland, these practices – and the teachings concerning them – are vanishing without public theological discussion. At a deeper level, however, this ancient understanding of women's impurity is a part of the Orthodox image of women.

In my interviews, issues related to (female) purity were not taken up at all by the oldest generation, women over 70, probably out of modesty. I did not ask them either. Nor did purity issues surface among the youngest generation, women under 35, probably because they do not see them as having any practical relevance. It was the women in the middle generation who mentioned purity regulations. Most of them grew up with the teaching but they are the generation who broke with it in their own lives. For example, according to Cathy, when I asked if she is familiar with the purity regulations:

> Well, they are in a way in your subconscious, because they live in all those prayers. Like when I had my last child, in 1992, I remember going to the church a week after the baby was born, and thinking that maybe I can go. I did, but it crossed my mind.
>
> *EV: Where did you learn it?*
>
> I guess from those prayers … I think it is the prayers, not people – everybody knows if you are still bleeding. It is like from the times before good sanitary towels.

Lena (55), when asked if she had learned any of these regulations, answered:

> Well, I did church [*kirkottaa*][1] my baby, but then I did not think about it. Someone else brought the baby to the church because the mother was still bleeding. I know the regulations, but I go to the church when I want to. Is it then better not to go? …
>
> If I want to go to church, I am not staying at home because of that.
>
> *EV: Did I understand you right – you followed the custom but you thought that you could go if you wanted to?*

> Yes, if I want to go to church, I am not staying at home because of that … Like when we think that it is a woman's task to give birth, why would it then become something evil when you do it and life goes on?

In the last sentence, Lena uses the traditional view (of all Christian churches) of motherhood as a woman's main and most important role against another long-held view of a woman's body as polluted and impure, and thus unsuitable for occupying sacred spaces. Her way of thinking is a good example of how women use the tradition for 'their own ends' but also of how women's lived experience can reveal inherent contradictions in the tradition: a woman's ability to become a mother is biologically tied to her bodily functions such as menstruation – you can't celebrate only one part and demonize the other (Kalkun & Vuola 2017).

Ann and Helen, both quoted earlier, 15 years apart in age, interpreted the circumstances of the birth of Jesus and Mary's pregnancy from a point of view that emphasized Mary's closeness to women and not something against them. According to Ann,

> She [the Virgin Mary] is maybe like a model for me – when I have thought about my own womanhood and my own choices … at some point, I got really pissed off with the image of the Virgin Mary, oh yeah well, is that then how we women should be? Always kind, patient, eternal virgin, no physical desires and like that … like the holy mother that she has been amputated to. But, then really, historically … what she did and what were her choices... She must have taken a lot of shit, in the society of her time. Young girl, teenage mother. Unwed mother … Doesn't it make the whole story somehow even greater if Jesus was conceived in like really wretched circumstances?

And, Helen:

> I think she [Mary] was made pregnant and the pregnancy was hidden, it was an illegitimate pregnancy. So I don't believe in the virgin birth, that much scientific is my world view.
>
> *EV: Does it mean something in your relationship to the Mother of God?*
>
> No, it does not mean anything to me. She is not less holy or more holy because of that, quite the contrary – it makes it even easier to identify with her … It is a very radical thought that an unmarried woman without a man/husband gives birth to a new king. I think the whole story would collapse if Mary had been married. It must be like this … Mary's story comforted me when I was pregnant alone. It comforted me a lot. But it was also difficult to approach the whole Church from this position of mine as the sinful woman.

Helen went on commenting very personally on motherhood and purity in relation to Mary:

> I am a single mother of a son. The song *Maria Herran piikanen*[2] was important for me when I was pregnant. It comforted me in the most sensitive condition of my youth, by the most beautiful thing in the world. I was going to have a small innocent baby [cries]. A single mother is perceived a whore and a bad woman. The sensation of purity came from the song: also my pregnancy and child are valid, pure.

This view of the historical Mary and what she must have gone through, like Helen, is expressed again by Ann:

> She was an unwed woman, she must have been called all kinds of names and people would have been talking, making guesses … somehow it makes me question the halo around her … who knows if it was all just something totally earthly? Does it matter? Her son was God on earth anyway … It touches me, you know, that she may have been rejected, that she was a fallen woman. The failed one. That she failed in the only function women had at her time. And then, then you are raised to be the Queen of Heaven. And then these men, the ones in power, who can be really misogynist, fall on their knees before her two thousand years later.

Not only the women who were single mothers mentioned that it is something that Mary understands. Dorothy said that Mary not only helps at birth but in all issues related to children and having children, be it infertility or having a child outside marriage. She related this to Mary being a woman and mother herself.

Ellen (56), a convert to the Orthodox Church, whom I interviewed besides receiving a letter from her, said:

> What I tried to describe in my letter to you is how some of the church mysteries have slowly been opening to me. I think that there is a message there that Joseph did not kick Mary out in spite of her being pregnant. You don't have to be the child's father to show fatherhood. The woman is not necessarily a bad woman, even when she became pregnant with someone else but you. There is something very universal there. If you think how in our times some Muslim women are stoned when they have had an extramarital affair, it is totally insane. This message [about Mary and Joseph] is strongly gendered, but for men also. Has it worked, I don't think so, because there is so much violence in the world, but the message is there.

Motherhood and bodiliness in relation to Mary was very concretely present for Kaija (27), a returnee to the Orthodox faith of her mother's family:

> I felt nausea when I was pregnant and I had started in a new job and didn't dare to tell anyone [at work] about my pregnancy. So I went every now and then to the bathroom to throw up and had this experience, or a thought came up, that the Mother of God has experienced the same, and somehow it was such a comforting thought. I remember that I was somewhere, almost the first day at this new job, in some training, and I felt so miserable, I thought I couldn't stay on my feet. But I started to pull myself together in the situation. I have an icon next to the cross around my neck, an icon of Mary. I held on to it tightly. In a way, I was silently praying "help me in this." It was then that it became clearer to me that it is Mary I want to turn to. As a woman and a mother she knows my situation … Then I also had these somewhat contradictory thoughts about some church songs – I don't remember which ones – in which it is sung that Mary gave birth without pain. And I thought about it so much – is it then so that if she did not experience any pain, she did not have any nausea either? [laughs]. It just was so concrete, these thoughts around my own situation.

Several interviewees reflected on their relationships with their own mothers and how these had to do with the Virgin Mary. Especially if one's own mother had been distant or absent, the acceptance and warmth of the Mother of God was important. Two women, both converted, wrote about this in their letters to me:

> For me the Virgin Mary has become to mean a second mother, through prayers. We all have a mother, but the relationship can be inadequate. My relationship to my own mother has always been little tense and strained. She has not understood my way of life, because she has so much ambition for her children … I feel that the Virgin Mary is such a mother that we all should have.
>
> (Paula, 41)

For her part, Daisy (65), wrote:

> The Mother of God is related to my personal history in ways that are impossible to separate from my relationship to my own mother and her family. She was somehow closed to me, she died quite young, at 64 … I do not remember much of my early childhood … I was a lonely child, and I became a religious seeker. Somehow my relationship with the Mother of God – as private and secret as it was – became a refuge for me.

She joined the Orthodox Church at 35. The Mother of God became close and familiar for her. She writes how the Orthodox Church for her is 'a Mother's Church.'

It is difficult to say how much their conversion had to do with this lack of adequate mothering. It is interesting, though, that this theme of a 'substitute mother' or a better mother came up more frequently among the converted informants. For my cradle Orthodox interviewees, the mother, the grandmother, or in one case the mother-in-law was the person from whom they had learned the meaning of Mary for women and mothers. The absence of Mary in the Lutheran Church, from which most of my interviewees converted, possibly combined with a distant mother, and the motives for conversion would make an interesting theme to explore.

Mary and women in the church

The women interviewed had different ways of negotiating the gendered teachings of the Orthodox Church as women, and Mary was an important part of this negotiation. As said earlier, due to the lack of feminist theology in the Orthodox tradition, ordinary women do not have a similar theological basis for their critique of certain practices and teachings to women in the Catholic Church and most Protestant churches. This does not mean that no theologians reinterpret the Orthodox tradition from women's perspectives, but a systematic de- and re-construction of the gendered nature of Orthodox theology is still quite lacking.

In a country like Finland, the surrounding society and the majority Lutheran Church serve as mirrors for the Orthodox Church in issues of gender equality. Most of the interviewed women were educated, working women, who sometimes saw the interviewer as a representative outsider who would hold a stereotypical view of the Orthodox tradition as especially patriarchal. This added a certain defensive tone to the way some of them spoke about gender issues in their church. One of the most frequent comments in this respect was comparison between the Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church in a way that emphasized the more masculine and anti-feminine character of the Lutheran Church, in spite of it ordaining women to the priesthood. The centrality of the Mother of God; the importance of a variety of female saints; and the over-all more sensuous, embodied liturgy of the Orthodox Church were contrasted with the wordiness, the meagerness of emotion, warmth and the senses, and the lack of Mary in Lutheran liturgy and spirituality. Women's ordination did not serve as a yardstick for gender equality for these women, who claimed that the all-male priesthood does not pose any problem for them.

This kind of contrasting and comparing was especially accentuated among converted women, who thus justified their decision to convert from the more gender-equal Lutheran Church to the more traditional Orthodox Church. Some said one of the most frequent questions they were asked by others following their conversion was: how could you convert to such a patriarchal church after the Lutheran Church has finally opened up ordination for women? Those who were born and raised Orthodox did not have

a similar point of comparison of traditions and thus framed the issue of women's roles and gender issues in the church somewhat differently.

Sheila (66) commented on the all-male priesthood:

> We don't have female priests… I have been thinking about it sometimes, but on the other hand I think that this is how it must be – that we have men as priests, as fathers in the church, as we say. The fathers of the church and then this mother, Mother of God, as the female side. That this is why I think we don't have female priests. And it is not a problem for me.

Cathy mentioned the practice of gendered division of space in the church, not strictly followed in all parishes:

> I think the practice of having men's side and women's side in the church is in fact quite fine. Maybe a long time ago it meant putting women in the corner or aside … but for me it is also a kind of protection that you are among other women. I don't have to think if there is some guy behind me when I am bowing, or if my hair is fine.

Helen took up the issue of gender discrimination several times during the interview.

> I don't understand the exclusion of women and gays from the priesthood, for me it is … a human rights violation and discrimination, forbidden by Finnish law. I simply don't understand it … Right now I am in a calmer situation concerning the church. At some point I felt that I will go and shut the door loudly behind me and leave the church. That I come out of the closet and tell everyone that there are feminists in the Orthodox Church who can't stand it … But I will probably always belong to the church – and then Mary is someone I will always explore, in literature and so on. She is such an interesting figure. I am interested in her as an archetype. Of all the churchly figures she is the closest to me.

Tina, who is converted and works in a leadership position, made the comparison between the secular society and the Orthodox Church:

> It would be enough for me to have secular [gender] equality first. Let's talk about women's ordination after that. Women's ordination in the Orthodox Church does not solve anything. We all have the priestly calling in a way in our own lives – if I have the office or not is not the point. And then as Orthodox people we also have spiritual mothers and female saints and so on. As Christians we should not strive for positions of power but to live life according to God's will – so no one is

> hindering me from developing myself on that road to whatever I want to … And in this, we have a great example, the Mother of God.

She also said that it is not women's exclusion from priesthood that bothers her so much in comparison to some other practices of the church:

> I don't feel discriminated against in the church – but I do pay attention sometimes to the outer forms. For example, the lack of female priests does not bother me as much as when children are baptized, given their name, the boys are carried all the way to the altar, but the girls only until the door … These practices are age-old, and they bother me much more than not having women priests. It is like, femaleness can be there, but it is like until a certain limit … Bringing both boys and girls to the altar door and not inside the altar would be a much more important sign of equality. Our female cantors – of whom we have a lot – cannot enter the altar, but male cantors can – so all these are much bigger issues, I think, than women's ordination.

Emily (63) said,

> If we think that we as women cannot identify with Christ … We can't, in the same way, even though we strive to be Christ-like, because that is our duty as Christians. But the life of Christ and the life of the Virgin Mary were so different, that we [women] cannot identify with them in the same way. In all situations of life, be they happy or sad, we always find the mirror in the Virgin Mary … For example, when you are singing about Mary's pain when she sees her son on the cross, the church offers you the possibility to cry over all your own sorrows. The icon *Mother of God, Joy of All Who Sorrow* – all you need is just cast your thoughts to it … Because you can cast all the sorrows of the world, of women and families, onto her, so that you don't have to carry them in yourself.

Here, again, it is possible to detect the interplay of both-and: Mary both as myself, a human woman, and as a divine powerful figure. By and large, the women interviewed stressed the importance of Mary for Orthodox women also *qua* women in the church. Some of them pointed out the contradiction between the centrality of Mary and the marginalization of women. Most – but not all – of them did not link women's position and roles in the church only to the priesthood. It was not the yardstick of equality for most of the women interviewed. Women who saw themselves reflected in the Mother of God, as gendered and bodily beings, also felt supported and valued by her – and through that, also in the church. And if not, Mary served as a reminder of the value of women which the church should take more seriously. (See Figure 4.10)

Figure 4.10 Skolt Sámi women during liturgy at Sevettijärvi Orthodox Church, Sevettijärvi, Finnish Lapland, in August 2017. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Thus, in the lived experience of Orthodox women, Mary gives worth to women in the church in spite of the exclusive male leadership and priesthood. Because of the Mother of God and other female saints, these informants considered the Orthodox Church 'more feminine' than the Lutheran Church. There is a strong female presence at the heart of the liturgy and spirituality. However, this does not exclude a critique of male dominance in the church, even though this is not necessarily or only related to all-male priesthood (Kalkun & Vuola 2017; Vuola 2016).

The most critical voices questioning sexism and patriarchal practices came from cradle Orthodox. Some of the women interviewed were daughters, sisters, or wives of priests and had thus a very down-to-earth view of priesthood. For example, Laila (44) commented:

> Well, we have this institution, this Church, and it has certain rules and norms. I think all members should be equal, as they are before God. Men can talk to male priests, we women also have to talk to male priests, and

> I think we should have the opportunity … People are just so used to it and do not question … OK, I will comply, but don't give those stupidities as reasons to me. I have a right as a person to my opinion.

And again Helen, quoted earlier:

> They always say this [that Mary gives women worth] and that women have their important role and duties in the church, which are valuable. But I don't believe it, because you always see that women do not have the same position as men. There are women who would like to be priests, like a friend of mine, who then became a flight attendant … Well, at least she got to the heavens [laughs]. And I think *I* would make a good priest.

A different kind of comparison between churches concerning Mary came from Birgit, who was active in the ecumenical student movement in her youth:

> When I went to ecumenical meetings, I did not understand what Protestant women were talking about when they said Mary is a model of submission … It was an aha experience for me – that my image of her in the Orthodox Church as the God-Bearer was something totally different … I was thinking about her images, the icons. I see a strong and independent woman, not a meek young girl. I don't recognize the submissive image of Mary.

And finally, Cathy's is one example of the answers given to the question as to whether and how devotion to the Virgin Mary is related to women's position in the church:

> The Mother of God is important for women's position in the church. It is difficult to say how, but it is something empowering, also for us as women. If you want like a comment on why women can't be priests because we have Mary … it is a quite distant thought for me, like we could get some compensation. But the Virgin Mary is the All-Holy [*Panagia*], she is a woman and she is the most holy person.

As becomes clear from the interviews, Mary *de facto* functions as a reflecting mirror of women's experiences. These are related to how women perceive the church and its teachings on women. This mirroring is both about identification and differentiation – in the first case, the women identified themselves with the Virgin Mary as another woman and mother. In the latter case, they saw Mary as different from ordinary women – and this as the reason, not the obstacle, for and the source of her empowering and protective role. (See Figure 4.11)

Figure 4.11 During a break at the Orthodox long-distance procession, Hoilola, Finland, in August 2015. Photo: Elina Vuola.

Conclusions

The Mother of God is extremely important in the Orthodox tradition and theology, but it seems that she is especially and differently important for women: Mary is easy to approach on issues such as maternity, family, sexuality, and everyday life. This is based on women's strong identification with her as another woman, sister, and mother. She is believed to understand women by being a woman and mother herself. However, she is also believed to be stronger and holier than any other human being. She thus functions both as a mirror of human identification and a source of divine protection. The experience that it is often easier to approach Mary than God or Christ is theologically based on her role as intercessor. She is seen as close to humans, being human herself, but also closer to God and Christ, bringing the petitions of her believers to them, praying for humans before God.

Finnish Orthodox women negotiate with the gendered teachings and practices of their Church in multiple ways. Many of the women interviewed for

this project expressed critical views, on the basis of their lived experience as women, which could be seen as feminist. Their critique was aimed at the church as an institution, which holds and exercises all kinds of power – not just internally but also in the broader society and culture. In all this, the Mother of God serves as a divine mirror in which women can see themselves reflected.

However, the Orthodox Church is a minority church in Finland, which is why the majority Lutheran Church often served as a mirror and point of comparison. The societal influence of the Lutheran Church is obviously much greater. The secular society with its ideals of gender equality was another point of comparison: for example, all-male priesthood was not necessarily seen as a problem even though gender equality outside church was taken for granted. Those women who were most critical of sexism in the church, all cradle Orthodox, tended to think that the church should not be an exception in society and that broadly shared gender equality should be extended to it as well (Vuola 2016).

The Mother of God is important for Orthodox men, too. She is the model of humanity and personification of the church, and the protector and helper of men. In fact, one man approached me with a letter saying that he knows I am looking only for women to be interviewed, but since the Mother of God is so important for him, he wanted to tell me about it. Another man, who helped me to find informants through his work in the church, also wanted to share his thoughts and emotions about the Mother of God. After a talk I gave at a local Orthodox parish, the theme came up again: men in the audience did not question my selection of only women but emphasized how important Mary is for all Orthodox people, including them. Focusing on men could be a wonderful theme for further research. However, my focus on women is based on the simple fact that the Orthodox Church, its theology and liturgy, are thoroughly gendered, and it is women who are excluded from different positions on the basis of them being women. That the Mother of God is a woman herself is not insignificant. It is for these reasons that it is relevant and important to study the gendered nature of the Orthodox tradition, particularly from the point of view of women, whose thoughts, voices, and experiences are not much reflected in it.

Theology, including feminist theology, is not only academic, but also an individual and communal way of reflecting intellectually on one's faith and beliefs. This always takes place on a continuum of tradition – and continuum includes both continuity and change. This kind of scholarly attentiveness means locating theology and theological thinking in speech when it occurs. Mariology is a case in point: even less educated laypeople in different Christian churches are usually aware of theology concerning Mary. The women interviewed in the course of these research projects, first Catholic and then Orthodox, both maintained a distance from these teachings and at times affirmed them, always reflecting upon and negotiating with them.

The feminist critique of Mary as the great exception among women, making her an impossible point of identification, can be read and interpreted

in a different way in light of my data: it is *because of* her difference from other women that she can be the source of divine protection and help. She is a human being, a human woman, even though an exemplary one, in the teachings of all Christian churches, but her central role in the incarnation and the multiple legends about her divine intervention also make her a somewhat liminal character between humanity and divinity (Kalkun & Vuola 2017).

The interplay of Mary as both like another human woman and a powerful protective figure happens in relation to traditional Orthodox Mariology and the gendered practices of the Orthodox Church. Ordinary believers who, in the case of women, are always lay people, demonstrate a lived experience of Orthodoxy, which both affirms and departs from the more formal theology and the institutional Church. Moreover, my research illuminates women's experiences, their theological and ethical thinking, and the role of the Mother of God in their lives both within the church and beyond it. Any claims concerning women's position in Christianity, whether in the Catholic or Orthodox Church, should be made on the basis of women's actual experiences, and not only through theological and textual analysis.

Notes

1 By churching the interviewee means the custom of bringing the baby to the church. The Finnish Orthodox Church gave up the custom of bringing the male baby to the altar and the female baby outside it in 2002. My informants talked of churching in two meanings: the aforementioned concerning the child and the other concerning the purification of the mother after childbirth. The latter has been a practice of all Christian churches.
2 The song is the Finnish translation of the well-known German advent song *Maria durch ein Dornwald ging*.

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5 The first of mothers, the eldest of wives

Mary in Finnish-Karelian folklore

The Virgin Mary belongs to the folk piety and oral folklore of Finland and neighboring regions, mostly in the Orthodox and Karelian traditions. Mary is the 'first of mothers,' who shares the daily and mundane experiences of ordinary women, such as pregnancy and giving birth, and at the same time is the transcendental mirror of the holy and a powerful intercessor.

In what follows, I rely mostly on the pioneering work of some Finnish folklorists, who have applied a gender perspective to analyzing vast collections of oral folklore collected mainly in the nineteenth century in Finland and the surrounding areas.[1] The research of Senni Timonen, who has worked most explicitly with material on the Karelian Virgin Mary (Timonen 1994), has been most important for my own work. My interest lies in combining the different sorts of materials – theological, ethnographic, and folkloristic – in dialogue with each other.

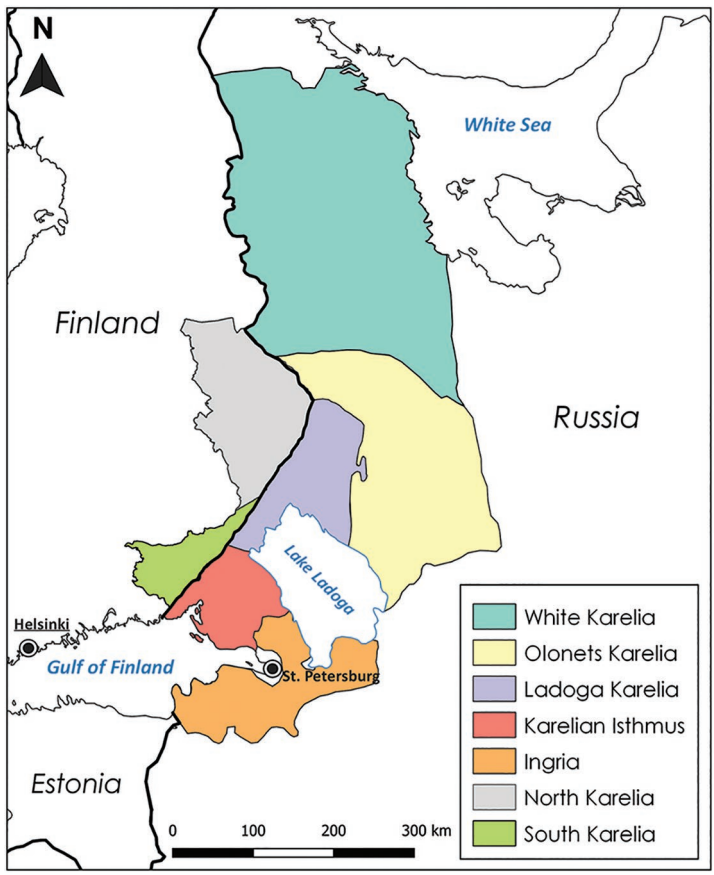
Because of its geographical location, Finland has been an area of encounter and conflict of two great religious currents. The southeastern part of the country, Karelia, is home for many of the Orthodox faith even today, whereas the western part has been Protestant since the sixteenth century. The Catholic Church prevailed approximately four centuries before the Reformation.

Before that, today's Finland was a non-Christian region with an indigenous religious system, which it shared with other Finno-Ugrian peoples.[2] Shamanism was integral to the pre-Christian religion of the Finns (Siikala 1994). The impact of Christianity on Finno-Ugrian peoples varied, depending on whether a particular group came under the influence of the Western or Eastern Church. Russia converted to Christianity in the tenth century. The Orthodox Church showed more tolerance of non-Christian beliefs and practices than Catholicism first and Lutheranism later in the western parts of Finland. Christian beliefs, doctrines, and missionaries reached different groups in different times and ways. The survival of non-Christian beliefs, myths and ritual alongside official Church doctrine among speakers of Finno-Ugrian languages is an illustration of

the co-existence of great and little traditions (Michael Branch in Honko et al. 1993). Different belief systems lived side by side and mixed up to the nineteenth century. The pre-Christian religion of the Finns was never a defined system, but rather a set of beliefs. The late arrival (and success) of Christianity in Finland explains why so much of the pre-Christian religious culture survived into the nineteenth century. This is also why understanding the influence of the ancient religion for women's devotion to Mary is important.

Parts of what is called Karelia never belonged to Finland whereas other parts that did were lost to the Soviet Union in the Second World War, and a small part still belongs to Finland today. I refer to all of these as well as to Ingria. (See Map 5.1)

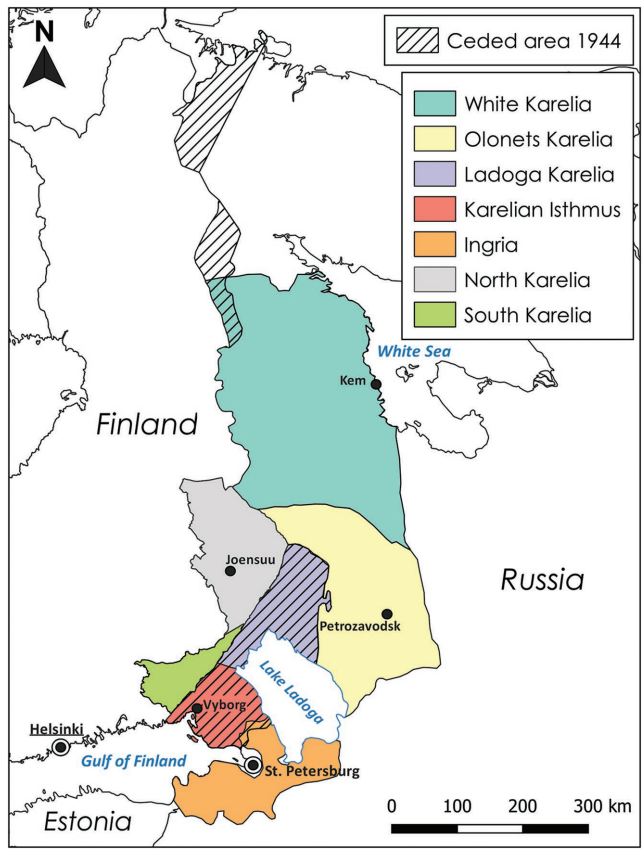
In many ways Karelia was, until 50 years ago, unique. Just before the Second World War, poetry, incantations, and ritual laments were still being



Map 5.1 Regions of Karelia and Ingria.

recorded by folklorists in the area. In terms of religion, the Ladoga Karelians (around the great Lake Ladoga) belonged to the Orthodox Church, although in many ways their being Orthodox was intertwined with elements of pre-Christian folk religion (Heikkinen 1998). The ancient Finno-Ugrian ethnic groups, the Ingrians and the Votes, settled in Ingria, on the southern side of the Gulf of Finland. The similarity between the culture of their descendants and that of the Karelians is noticeable. The culture of this area, including its religion, has been shaped by influences from both East and West, and its rich heritage has diverse origins (Ilomäki 1998). However, as was said before, Finland had to cede large parts of Karelia in the southeast and Pechenga (Petsamo) in the northeast to the Soviet Union after the Second World War. (See Map 5.2)

Most of the ancient Finnish-Karelian folk poetry, including the materials in the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, was collected in Karelia and



Map 5.2 Combined map showing the regions of Karelia and Ingria along with areas ceded to the Soviet Union in 1944.

Ingria, largely in the nineteenth century. The oldest layer of the oral tradition was collected for roughly a century, between the 1820s and 1920s. This oral material, only partly published and even less translated into other languages such as English, is housed in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki, one of the largest folklore archives in the world. Parts of this poetry are pre-Christian and reflect the ancient Finnish religion, other parts have Christian, primarily Orthodox, influence, even though often in syncretized form. Karelia preserved elements of an indigenous non-Christian belief system for much longer than neighboring regions in Finland (Timonen 1994).[3]

What is of interest for me as a scholar of religion with a specific interest in the Virgin Mary is that she is central to this material – in poetry, incantations, laments, and songs. According to Timonen, in the Karelian prayers, spells, and narrative poems recorded from oral tradition, the Virgin Mary is mentioned more often than any other person. She occurs about 1,500 times in recorded incantations, which besides prayers are the most common context for Marian themes and motifs. One typical feature of incantations addressed to the Virgin Mary in Orthodox Karelia is the focus on aspects of life traditionally considered feminine: childbirth, sexuality, care of children and livestock, and tending wounds (Timonen 1994).

Whereas the appeals to the Virgin in prayers and hymns performed in church are theological and abstract in content (seeking her protection in general), folk prayers are always clearly defined, relating directly to practical concerns and anxieties; they beseech the Virgin to appear as a living person to help them:

> The placing on the same level of the mundane and the sublime, the past and the present, the Virgin and the ordinary woman in the Orthodox Karelian prayers to the Virgin, reflects the fact that at the time of collection these prayers were still founded in a living faith.
>
> (Timonen 1994: pp. 303–304)

It is possible to distinguish pre-Christian influences on the Karelian Virgin Mary. In Orthodox Karelia many pre-Christian ideas and beliefs have lived on, just as the earliest conceptions on the Virgin Mary 2,000 years ago and in Latin America 500 years ago have. According to the late professor of folklore studies at the University of Helsinki, Anna-Leena Siikala, the parallel existence and interaction of Christian and ethnic traditions is characteristic of Baltic-Finnic cultures in general (Siikala 2016).

The language in the folklore material is archaic Finnish and in the original Finnish *Kalevala* meter. The vocabulary is at times difficult to understand even for a native speaker and in often impossible to translate into English. The poems and incantations have been transmitted orally, recorded and written down only by folklorists. This is why I include the

Finnish version alongside the English translation: these words were meant to be said and heard. The rhythm can be captured only in the original Finnish. The *Kalevala* meter is a form of trochaic tetrameter, used in Finnic (Estonian, Finnish, Karelian) folk poetry, thus the rhythm is essential in the original poem, but it is unfortunately lost in the translations. According to Laura Stark, Professor of Ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, a native English speaker but fluent both in ancient and contemporary Finnish, most of the material I am presenting here has not been translated into English. Some of the translations are mine, a few have been translated earlier (e.g., in Kuusi, Bosley & Branch, eds. 1977; Timonen 1994).

Stark believes it is not possible to reproduce the archaic rhythm and vocabulary due to the huge difference between Finnish and English syllable structure, and the types of vocabulary that general English-language audiences are still familiar with – for instance, they are not familiar with agrarian terms anymore, whereas a Finn probably would be, since Finland was still largely agrarian still into the 1950s and 1960s (Stark, personal communication, January 25th, 2018). Based on my own reading of the poetry, I would say that this is largely true, and when not, one can guess the meaning of many words, either because of their closeness to modern Finnish or because of the context, or both.

In this chapter, I will use the term 'folk religion,' which is not without problems (see Orsi 2002 on 'popular religion' in the Introduction). Keinänen (2010) states that the terminology used reflects disciplinary divisions in the study of religion. Indigenous religions, 'popular' and 'folk' religions, have been the domain of anthropologists, whereas (pre-Christian) 'folk piety' or 'folk belief' were allotted to ethnologists and folklorists.

Even recognizing this history and the problems related to all those terms, the designation 'folk religion' best captures both the type of material (oral recorded folklore) and the ways in which folklorists have discussed its nature and meaning in Finnish-Karelian culture. Academically, the study of religion (comparative religion) in Finland has always been closely tied to the study of folklore. As Kupari (2016) notes, conceptualizing lived religion in the United States reflected a new-found interest in ordinary people as religious subjects, but in Finland this is not a new area of research due to the intimate relation between Finnish studies of religion, folklore studies, and ethnology.

The material I am presenting here consists principally of epic metric poems, prayers, and incantations or charms. In it, Mary has at least three roles, all of which may be relevant to understanding contemporary women's relationship with her. I will give examples of each of the three roles: first, the young woman becoming pregnant, giving birth and losing her child; second, the cosmic midwife who comes to help; and third, the general transcendental helper in various situations.

The Song of Mary: how she experienced it all

A large cluster of epic poems on Mary, called *Marian virsi*, The Song (or Hymn) of Mary, published for the first time in 1831, relates the birth and suffering of Christ from the perspective and experience of his mother. Each of the component songs highlights a turning point in Mary's life, which the singers, for one reason or the other, understood as fundamentally important. At the core of the song is not only the event itself, but Mary's attitude to it (Timonen 1994). The poem includes Christian and pre-Christian elements, as well as a fusion of Eve and Mary, and many elements of what we might call an enculturated or syncretistic Mary.

Whereas, for example, the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe supposedly spoke *Nahuatl* when appearing to the indigenous man Juan Diego, and the Finnish-Karelian Mary walks or even skis in the Finnish forests and is impregnated by a lingonberry or by eating a handful of the bright orange berries of a rowan (mountain ash) in the middle of winter, when the tree has neither leaves nor berries.

The Song of Mary is a very long poem. After the story of Mary's impregnation by the berry (See the poem on page 164), the song continues with her different hardships: how she looks for a sauna to give birth in (the primary birthing place until the first half of the twentieth century), how she is considered a whore even by her own mother, and how she loses her son but also finds him and helps him to come back to life.

The various nativity poems from Karelia, which scholars call 'The Search for a Sauna,'[4] present three aspects of Mary: first, Mary's existential loneliness; second, the cosmic overtones of the event and her ability to transcend the ordinary and human; and third, Mary as the divine mirror of women's experiences. According to Timonen, the Mary epic could also serve as a myth in a rite. By telling of the first impregnation and birth, its performance in a ritual around childbirth conveys strength to women in childbirth, likening them to Mary and at the same time leading up to the request to the 'oldest of wives' and 'the first among mothers' (*emoloista ensimmäinen*) for help. The story of the first birth is a sacred model to which all subsequent births can be traced (Timonen 1994).

In the epic, Mary is left alone, rejected. The landscape through which Mary wanders is the *Pohjola* (Land of the North), the place to which the worst diseases are sent to join the 'other murderers' and 'evil-doers.' Mary is in every respect outside the boundaries of the human world, but even there, in the dark North, she retains her confidence and has the strength to seek her child. This landscape is mythical and combines different images of this world and the otherworld, reordering the universe. The hill where Mary stands can be simultaneously the place to which diseases are exorcized, the stony hill of *Pohjola*, the cosmic mountain, the berry hill where her impregnation took place, and Golgotha (Timonen 1994).

Other Biblical themes acquire a new layer of interpretation as well. Mary's flight to Egypt is described from her perspective almost as going off to war: 'Dressed for war, put on her armor.' She marches across the fields and marshes, in some versions defined more specifically as being in the otherworld, with the baby. For dramatic purposes, the figure of Mary is a mixture of the traditional warrior hero who departs for battle and the Mary praised in the Byzantine *Akathistos* Hymn, 'Our leader in the battle,' preparing for a catastrophe, the loss of the child. Different from the purely Christian story, it is Mary who, against all odds, prepares herself for a dangerous journey to find and save the lost child. Nothing can get in her way: she proceeds in giant steps over the hills, seeking the help of those she encounters on the way – the road, the moon and a star, sometimes a tree and the wind, and finally the sun (Timonen 1994).

> The idea of losing a child is every woman's nightmare and for this reason alone almost an archetypal image; as in many other songs and legends, it acquires mythical dimensions and the appropriate manifestations. Mary seeks Christ in exactly the same way as other mothers seek their children in Karelian songs.
>
> (Timonen 1994: p. 317)

When Mary descends to *Tuonela*, the land of the dead, the story, coincidentally or not, has several elements from other stories of mythical mothers who save their sons from death (e.g., Isis putting together the pieces of her son Horus and then marrying him). Mary sides here with another archetypal mother in the Finnish folklore: the mother of Lemminkäinen in the *Kalevala*. The woman who raises the hero from the dead is demonstrably a supracultural figure. The figure of Lemminkäinen's mother has been influenced by the Christian Virgin Mary (Timonen 2002). The role of the woman is the same: 'Mary's acts in *Tuonela* acquire cosmic proportions: victory over the otherworld enemy' (Timonen 1994: p. 318).[5] The singers simply considered that evil (i.e., death) robbed Mary of her child, that Mary herself overcame evil and snatched her child back, and that she saved the child for herself and placed him back on her knee. The child did not go to heaven or to God (Timonen 1994).

Those singing the Song of Mary believed that evil had robbed her of her child, but that the mother could conquer evil by retrieving her child and returning him to life. In Mary, then, the traditional Mother of God is combined with a female *Kalevala*-type shamanistic hero. Mary's actions in *Tuonela* are on a cosmic scale. In some variants, Mary not only redeems her son but also contributes to his resurrection. Timonen sees these roles as closely related to the songs sung in the Orthodox tradition on Holy Friday and Holy Saturday, in which Mary expresses both her pain and agony, and her desire to see her son resurrected: she 'screams wailing,' wanders 'with her hair disheveled,' 'like a sheep who sees her lamb being taken to

slaughter.' At the same time, she directs her grief into hope and action: 'O Son without beginning, in ways surpassing nature was I blessed at Thy strange birth, for I was spared all travail. But now beholding Thee, my God, a lifeless corpse, I am pierced by the sword of bitter sorrow. But arise, that I may be magnified.' In the Song of Mary, bringing the son back to life is described as his returning to his mother's bosom, rather than an adult Jesus ascending to heaven. This is expressed following the pattern of the birthing poems.

Since the Marian poems were normally performed by women, it is possible to see how Mary functioned as a point of identification for them but also as someone of heroic, mythical, and divine powers who could achieve victory even over death. The Song of Mary was probably regularly performed when women came together in the evenings to pass the time. These were occasions for communal activities, such as handicraft work, conversation, and singing about topics of common importance. Some women from whom these poems have been collected said that they also sang about Mary while performing solitary tasks, such as spinning or milking (Timonen 1994). Another link between the song and its performer concerns the ritual roles of women as midwives, healers, and lamenters – that is, as specialists in crisis and separation rites.

It is also possible to identify some direct links between this Marian epic and death rites (Timonen 1994). Telling about the first mother who lost her baby supports mourning women. At the time the oral traditions were transcribed, child mortality still was high, and losing one or more children was a common experience. This is true even today in many regions of the world, which may explain the power of the symbol of the *Mater Dolorosa*, or *Pietà*, as we have seen it in Latin American women's devotion to Mary.

In the Karelian poetry, the central events of a woman's life take on a transcendent quality. Giving birth becomes the core symbol for the creation of new life, also in its cosmic meaning as creation of the world. Here the popular Marian traditions transmitted by women from different cultures and times touches the theme of the Mother Goddess, which describes the creation of the world in terms of a cosmic birth, found in various creation stories in different cultures, including the *Kalevala*.

Timonen concludes that the Marian epic is to be understood as part of women's tradition rather than merely as something that was sung on certain feast days. The epic is closely connected with major events in a woman's life but is at the same time firmly rooted in women's everyday (caring for children, cleaning, gathering berries, cooking, handwork, tending the cattle), and their ritualistic roles as midwives and lamenters in different moments of crisis and separation. Like the women who sang, Mary had the dual role of one who experiences – she becomes pregnant, gives birth, and loses her child – but also comforts and shares, supporting other women in

the same situations as midwives, healers, and lamenters (Timonen 1994). The association of freeing the child from the grave with freeing of the baby from the womb is also common, thereby linking resurrection to birth (Timonen 1994, referring to Tarkka). Mary of these songs is both a hero and a lamenter-mother, 'the prototype of every Karelian lamenter who guides the deceased to *Tuonela*' (Timonen 1994: p. 326). In other words, she is yet another personification of the *Mater Dolorosa*, though equipped with supernatural powers – not necessarily a goddess, but somebody who is able to move between worlds. 'The search by the Virgin for her child is the only example in the epic tradition of an active journey by a woman to the otherworld' (Tarkka 1994: p. 279).

The boundary between the ordinary and the holy becomes thinner or even disappears. The subject alternates – at times, the 'I,' the subject, is Mary, sometimes the singer assumes the role of first-person narrator. This is one of the reasons why Timonen says that the Marian epic is about a 'lived myth,' women's own hero myth. When singing of Mary's fate, women also sing of themselves and their life (Timonen 1994).

> The Marian traditions of Karelian women may be seen as one manifestation of the cosmic popular Christianity of Eastern Europe. Their myth tells how Mary receives a child from another world, from the divine being, into her womb, which is as large as heaven and as deep as the cave in the cosmic mountain; it tells how she conquers otherworld forces and speaks to the sun, moon and stars.
>
> (Timonen 1994: p. 328)

A particular theme within the epic is the 'berry miracle,' with some variation depending on the source. It describes Mary becoming pregnant by eating a berry – usually the red lingonberry. I will return to this theme at the end of this chapter.

Mary as the cosmic midwife

The second recurring role of the Virgin Mary in Karelian oral folklore is that of the transcendental helper. She is one of the most invoked saints in incantations by *tietäjät* (sages, shamans), healers, and especially midwives. At births, the actual midwife may call on Mary for help if she is afraid of losing the mother, the baby, or both. She thus becomes the supranormal cosmic midwife who intervenes when the earthly midwife is feeling powerless when faced with a difficult birth. This is functionally the same as the intercessory role of Mary in formal Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

The association of womb and grave, birth and death, in Karelian oral poetry is rooted in the belief system and ritual practices. Birth and

death meet in the woman's set of ritual roles: the lamenter woman accompanied the dead to 'that air,' the midwife the child to 'this air.' The symbolism of childbirth incantations carries a mythology all of its own backed by Marian themes. It is a concrete feminine counterpart to the androcentric cosmogony, the myths on the origin of the world (Tarkka 1994).

In Finland and the neighboring areas, like in Latin America, Mary has had a significant role as the one who understands mundane issues, especially concerns with health and fertility. She has power to make a difference or cause changes. Evidence of this can be found in Finnish folklore and its many prayers and incantations devoted to Mary. According to Siikala, Mary is a 'general helper' but especially helpful in alleviating pain. In alleviating birth pains, Mary stands next to local pre-Christian female figures such as the *Kipu-neito*, (Pain Maiden), *Tuonen tyttö* (Girl of Death), *Kivutar* (the Mistress of Pain), and *Vammatar* (the Mistress of Injury). Siikala reminds us that the notion of a mistress of pain and injury is older than Christianity, found also in other cultures. Beliefs in Mary's powers to heal external injuries probably stem from a perceived connection between milk and lotion (Siikala 1994). My understanding is that the Mother of Pain incorporates both the pain Mary herself experiences when losing her child (the most common *Mater Dolorosa* interpretation) and her ability to heal and alleviate pain (the Mistress of Pain). The title Mother of Pain (*kivun emonen*) is a sort of local translation of *Mater Dolorosa*.

Again, just as in Latin America, Mary has been important at births in Finland and Karelia. According to the folklorist Maarit Viljakainen, the Virgin Mary is the most popular transcendental helper in Finnish and Karelian incantations related to birth. The person saying the invocation has usually been the woman assisting in the birth, thus sharing part of the responsibility with Mary. The two would work together seamlessly. The incantations reveal a deep bond and fondness between Mary and the woman. In these incantations Mary is approached above all as a mother, understood as the oldest of wives and the first of mothers. This connects her personally with the woman in labor in the midst of pain. Mary is the supernatural midwife, but first and foremost, she is a woman with first-hand experience of giving birth (Viljakainen 2005).

The Finnish-Karelian incantation tradition related to Mary reflects women's shared experience of childbirth. Her birthing experience is essentially similar to that of other women's labors. Marja-Liisa Keinänen concluded this from analyzing labor customs and rituals of old Karelia. The Virgin Mary creates a continuum between women's everyday experiences – especially as birth-givers and caregivers – and the religious sphere. In light of the materials analyzed by folklore scholars, the birth of Christ posed a model for the childbirth experiences of ordinary women in old Karelia (Keinänen 2003). In other words, Mary's birthing experience did not

deprive ordinary women of their experience of miracle and holiness when giving birth to their children. Like nothing else, this is a woman-specific experience, with little recognition in formal religiosity and its understandings of holiness.

Viljakainen argues that it is crucial that Mary be called a mother in these birthing incantations: Mary is a woman who has given birth and thus shares the experience of every woman giving birth. At the same time, Mary is a supernatural midwife, who is guided to assist the mother and the baby through incantations. She is holy and timeless, and at the same time approachable as an understanding and friendly woman (Viljakainen 2005). Here, Viljakainen is describing in different words what I call Mary's both-and aspect in women's Marian piety. Women's identification with Mary both as a birth-giver and a midwife offers a concrete model and help in difficult and even dangerous moments in a woman's life.

Marja-Liisa Keinänen found that the Karelian materials mention Salome, the woman from the Gospel of James who assisted Mary at her delivery and checked her virginity after the birth of Jesus. She stands out as a mythical model for midwives and the women who bathe the newborn. Washing the newborn was an important moment and the woman doing this had a significant role. Poetry affiliated with bathing the newborn parallels it more or less with baptism. Mary is mentioned in this context:

Laps ylähäks',	Up the child
Ves alahaks',	Down the water
Pyhä Pohorotsa peän peällä!	Holy God-bearer on the top of head!

(*Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot*,[6] quoted in Keinänen 2003.)

The word *Pohorotsa* comes from Russian (*bogoroditsa*), meaning God-Bearer, who sometimes was asked to grant the infant *väki*, supernatural power and strength (see discussion of female *väki* on page 158). Significantly, the midwife was the one who performed the washing paralleling baptism, for which the holy female models were Mary and Salome. Keinänen observes how women in Karelian culture have had a central ritual role with many dimensions, the main goal being to secure the wellbeing of the family and community. This women's ritual sphere has its own specific nature, in which Mary has a significant role (Keinänen 2003).

When washing a child, the following prayer has been said to Mary, uttered either by the child's mother or another female figure in her family circle:

Neitsyt Maaria emoinen,	Virgin Mary, little mother
pyhä piika taivahinen,	Holy heavenly maid
tule tänne tarvittaissa,	Come here when needed

näille töille työntyessä,	Push yourself to our efforts
yhdeksän meren ylitse,	Over nine seas
puoli merta kymmenettä.	and half of a tenth.
Tuopa vettä tullessasi,	Bring some water when you come
vaskisella vakkasella,	In the chest made of metal
kultaisella kuppisella!	In the cup made of gold!
Tätä oikeaa kristikansaa	This true Christian folk
päästä ja puhdista	Deliver and purify
kaikista pahoista.	Of all evil.

(*Pientä lasta pestäessä*, When bathing a baby, from Suojärvi, quoted in Haavio 1946.)

Of the following two examples of birthing incantations directed at Mary, the first is calmer, possibly repeated by the midwife at any birth as a form of protection and help.

Piika piinoa pitävi	The maiden in such pain
Vaimo vaivoa näkevi	The wife in such hardship
…	…
Mistä mie anon apua	From where can I ask for help
Kusta etsin huojennusta	from whom can I seek relief
Itse neitsy Marialta.	from the Virgin Mary herself.

(From Impilahti, quoted in Viljakainen 2005.)

How does Mary help? Because Mary is a general helper, she often brings along nectar, or a special lotion that alleviates pain – it could be beeswax, slime from a fish, or supranormal tools, as in the following incantation in which Mary intervenes as if in a battle. This second birthing incantation is fierce, undoubtedly meant for situations where the baby is not coming out, and the death of both mother and child are looming. Here, the inexperienced virgin maiden of much of Christian imagery of Mary has here been replaced by a mighty cosmic warrior, mother, or midwife, who is capable of anything in order to save the life of the birth-giving mother and the baby.

Ota kultanen kirvehesi	Take up your golden hatchet
Hopiainen tapparaisi	Your silver battle axe
Jolla reikää repäiset	With which to tear out a hole
Longottelet leukaluita	To loosen the bony jaw
Aikoa lihainen aitta	Open the fleshy shed
Liha kellari keritä	Shear the fleshy cellar
Luinen lukko luikahuta!	Grease the bony latch!

(From Impilahti, quoted in Viljakainen 2005.)

Mary as the transcendental helper

In her third role, Mary appears as the most powerful general healer and helper invoked in all kinds of difficult situations. She is asked to prepare or bring milk, honey, lotion, and so on, as a healing element from the natural world, but often with supranormal connotations. Lotions were used to lubricate the birth canal so that the child would have an easy way out. Especially in incantations from Viena (west of the White Sea) and Savo (eastern Finland to the west of Karelia), Mary's role is that of mediator of ointment. Mary is urged to gather up her skirts and go into the water to retrieve the lubricant from a slimy fish (Viljakainen 2005). Mary's strong association with ointments has partly to do with her milk being ascribed healing properties (Keinänen 2003).

According to folklorist Martti Haavio, the most common holy mediator and recipient of petitions in the Finnish folk prayers is the Virgin Mary:

> The Virgin Mary, God's mother, that *virgo mater Maria*, "the matron of grace," "the chosen one among the holy maids," "the one distinguished among matrons" … arrives "among the sinful" from her home above the clouds, walks the navel of the sky, the side of the air, "from above the moon, from under the day." She comes even when the weather is foggy and cold. She walks on the ground of the Finnish land; even though she has arrived "from the south, from under the day," she has made her home here and become the highest of the saints. Just as the German *Mariendichtung* of the twelfth century praised the virgin mother in the most beautiful images and metaphors, Finnish prayers tell forcefully of her unutterable goodness and helpfulness.
>
> (Haavio 1946: pp. 23–24; translation by the author)

The Mary of Finnish folklore is above all the Mary of the Orthodox tradition. Haavio's description of Mary making her home in Finland could also be described as syncretism, the blending and adaptation of a religion in a particular local cultural context. Thus, whereas *La Negrita* of Costa Rica is dark-skinned and the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe speaks *Nahuatl*, the Karelian Mary wanders in the Finnish forests snacking on lingonberries.

The next poem is about the birth and origin of the (healing) lotion. It touches on, or possibly even repeats, the theme of Mary's miraculous milk, known to both Western and Eastern Christians for centuries.

Neitsyt Maaria emoinen	Virgin Mary, little mother,
lypsi maahan maitojansa	Squirted her milk onto the ground,
nisojansa nissutteli	Squeezed it from nipples.
Yöllä voide keitettihin	During the night she cooked up a lotion
päivällä paranteheni	During the day she healed

kattilassa kiehuvassa	In a boiling pot
peukalon mahuttavassa	Large enough for a thumb to fit
sormen kolmen mentävässä.	Big enough for three fingers to go.

(*Voiteen synnystä*, The birth of the lotion, from Northern Savo, quoted in Haavio 1946: p. 220.)

The idea of Mary as a mother milking her nipples follows the pre-Christian tradition of the mother goddess. The belief in the healing powers of Mary's milk has been strong in Christian Marian piety.

In the next poem, the healing power of Mary is related to her important role in her son's life – not just as his mother but also as someone who followed him, was present at his violent death, and tended and washed the wounds of his bruised body. Mary is the closest to Jesus not only as his mother but also in caring for his dead body. This, of course, relates to the ordinary role of women, who prepared dead bodies for burial.

Neitsyt Maaria emoinen,	Virgin Mary, little mother
Jeesuksen veren pesijä,	Washer of Jesus's blood
Herran haavan hautelija,	Bather of the Lord's wounds
voida yltä, voida päältä	Smear above, smear atop,
keskeä kivuttomaksi,	In the middle so there is no pain
alta aivan terveheksi,	Below to completely cure
päältä nuurumattomaksi,	On the top to better health
jotta saisi sairas maata,	So the sick one can lie down,
voisi voihkava levätä!	so the groaning can rest!

(*Kiven sanoista*, Of the Words of Stone, from Riistavesi, quoted in Haavio 1946: p. 217.)

One well-known incantation or charm is called *Raudan sanat*, The Words of Iron. It was used when someone had been cut with a knife or axe and was bleeding too much – even bleeding to death – or bleeding during childbirth. These incantations were often recited very rapidly, shouting. The point was to frighten and intimidate the illness agent or supernatural enemy, in this case whatever had caused the bleeding (Stark, personal communication, January 26th, 2018).

Mary is asked to bind the wound with pieces of her clothing, a ribbon, a strand of her hair or some other part of her body, which would bring protection and stop the bleeding. The following incantation and its variants have been used especially to stop bleeding:

Neitsyt Maaria emoinen,	Virgin Mary, little mother
rakas äiti armollinen,	Dear mother full of grace
tavu päästäsi tavoita,	Reach for the spindle from your head,
kultalumme luikahuta,	Slash the golden water lily

sido silkkirihmallasi.	Bind up with the yarn of silk
pane palmikoisellasi,	Put with your little plait
ettei maito maahan juokse,	That the milk does not spill on the ground,
kumpuhun urosten kulta,	the gold of men onto the slope,
miesten hempo heinikköhön!	the blood of men onto the grass!

(*Raudan sanoista*, Of the Words of Iron, from Ilomantsi, quoted in Haavio 1946: p. 222.)

Another version of the same theme is called *Veren sanat*, The Words of Blood, used in similar situations:

Neitsyt Maaria emoinen,	Virgin Mary, little mother
rakas äiti armollinen,	Dear mother full of grace
tule tänne tarvittaissa,	Come here when needed
käy tänne käskettäissä!	Come here when ordered
Sido silmäripsilläsi,	Bind [this wound] with your eyelashes
paina palmikoisillasi!	Put with your little braid
Sivallutta Luojan silkki,	Cover the Creator's silk
kaapu Herran katteheksi,	Lord's cloak to cover
tulijalle tukkeheksi,	To block what is coming
salvaksi samoajalle,	To block what is wandering
veren tielle telkkimeksi!	To bar the blood's way!

(*Veren sanoista*, Of the Words of Blood, from Kajaani region, quoted in Haavio 1946: p. 223.)

Mary is hugely significant in all Finnish-Karelian incantation tradition, not only in relation to birth and healing but also in incantations related to desire or love, tending cattle, and hunting. Mary has had a somewhat different meaning and function for women and men, because of their separate spheres, but her meaning as the great mother was important for both genders. In incantations related to forests, Mary appears as the 'matron of the forest' who both has power over its gifts and holds its keys, with the power to protect from dangerous animals. In one incantation related to men's sphere of life, the blue thread of Mary's clothing guides the hunter through the forest without getting lost (Koivula 1997). Because of the difficulty in translation, I will only present parts of the incantation:

Metsän tytti, mieli neiti,	The forest girl, dear maid
Käy sie korvet kolkutellen,	Pace the deep forest knocking
Salot synkät sylkytellen,	Embrace the dark wilderness
…	…
Neitsyt Moarie emoni,	Virgin Mary, mother mine
kesreäs sinini lanka	Loosen the blue thread

Sinisestä kuontalosta,	From the blue stack of linen
Veä läpi salon sinisen,	Draw through the blue forest
Tuosta noutoa nuoren miehen,	To fetch the young man
Äkkioutosen osata.	To the inexperienced to know the way.

(Quoted in Koivula 1997.)

In incantations dealing with gathering cattle from the wilderness, Mary may appear as a shepherd guiding the livestock home:

Neitsyt Maaria, pyhä emo,	Virgin Mary, holy mother
Rakas äiti armollinen,	Dear mother full of grace
Ota vitsa viljakolta,	Take the rod from the field
Koivu korpinotkelmolta,	The birch from the forest dell
Aja kotiin kotoinen karja,	Take home the homely stock
Metsän karja metsolaan.	To the forest realm the forest stock.

(Quoted in Koivula 1997.)

Another variation of the same theme relates to when the cattle is released from the shed in the spring. Marina Takalo, a famous singer from whom folklorists have recorded many poems, described how she went around the cattle with her mother in the spring and in the fall. They carried a sifter with an icon and a bread, twice clockwise, once counterclockwise, saying:

Neitsyt Maaria emonen	Virgin Mary, little mother
Rakas äiti armollinen	Dear mother full of grace
Kuin hoijit huonehessa	As you cared inside the room
niin hoija hongikossa	so care in the pine forest
Kuin katsoit katon alla	As you cared under the roof
niin katso katottomassa.	so care where there is no roof.

(Quoted in Pulkkinen 2014.)

From the perspective of ensuring that life and the community continue, it is understandable that incantations for Mary have also been used in 'arousing desire.' *Lempi* and its derivation *lemmennostatus* are closer in meaning to 'erotic attractiveness" than 'love'; the ability of a girl to attract suitors. 'Desire' is a good one-word translation (Stark, personal communication, January 26th, 2018).

Here, again, the Virgin Mary does not appear as foreign to human life, including sexuality, but as having the power to intervene in all crucial moments of life. In fact, given the frequency of Mary in this material, she probably was considered as the supreme understander of all aspects of life.

The possibly surprising presence of Mary in erotic incantations is related to the way Mary was seen as the prototype of womanhood (Koivula 1997).

Neitsyt Moarie emonen,	Virgin Mary, little mother
Rakas äiti armollinen	Dear mother full of grace
Tule tänne tarvittaessa,	Come here when needed
Käy tänne kutsun perässä,	Come here when called
Tuo vasta varressas',	Bring the birch whisk with you
Tule lempii nostamah,	Come raise desire
Pane lemmen liehumah,	Make desire flutter
Kunnivoni kuulumah!	Make honor resound!

(Quoted in Koivula 1997.)

One more example of this rich Marian folk tradition concludes this section. In ancient Finland, a flatfish was called Mary's fish (*maariankala*) or even the Virgin Mary's lustfish. The latter name is probably based on the everyday experience of pregnant women craving odd foods. In the saying, it is linked to the Mother of God herself having the same experience:

> A flatfish is lopsided. When the Virgin Mary was heavy [pregnant], she craved fresh fish. And she went to the seashore and called the fish and loosened the topmost rib. Ever since, that fish has been swimming on its healthy side, and that is why it is called Mary's lust fish.
>
> (from Liperi, Haavio 1946: p. 33, translation by the author)

Professor Laura Stark, who revised my translations, noted how the Finnish word *toispuoleinen* that is used of the lopsidedness of the fish in the previous story means literally 'with other side.' This, according to her, refers to the supernatural. The fish is 'coming from the other side,' the 'other side' being variously heaven, the world of the dead, or the world of the spirits. It is a standard term in Finnish magic and folklore, but never actually defined, because everyone just knew what was meant by it (Stark, personal communication, January 26th, 2018). Thus, the special and curious form of a flatfish, swimming on its side, would here be connected to the supernatural – and again, to Mary's intermediating role between the spheres.

In this folklore material, then, the Virgin Mary is simultaneously a hero, a healer and a grieving mother, the prototype of every Karelian wailing woman, who brings the dead to the land of death. Just as at a birth, the first mother is called on for help, the story of the first mother who lost her child supports and consoles other women in grief. Here, Finnish folk religion connects with a larger tradition of the suffering mother, common also in Latin America. In the Karelian Mary tradition, women can again experience Mary both as 'like me,' an ordinary woman, and 'unlike me,' a mythical otherworldly figure to whom one can turn in distress. Mary both shares and transcends – and in a way sanctifies – woman's central life events, as the holy mirror of women's common experiences.

For instance, giving birth to a new life is an ordinary occurrence, but can also be life threatening. On an experiential level, it offers an association

with the creation of everything new. Here the Karelian Mary tradition is closely related to pre-Christian beliefs about goddesses, which could describe the creation of the world as a cosmic birth event. At the same time, the maternal figure who has lost a child continues to be prevalent: Mary is also the Karelian *Pietà*.

In Mary, both the this-worldly and the other-worldly come together; the mundane and the divine meet; and Mary unites, mediates, or intercedes between the two (*Mediatrix*). A woman's concrete bodiliness, especially as a mother, unites the Karelian Mary with classical notions of Mary discussed earlier: Mary's body is the space between, which connects and shares, and the space for the holy.

Woman's body as a passageway between worlds

Finnish folklorists' gender perspectives on folk poetry, laments, and songs, has brought to light material that was not previously seen as relevant. Here, I will make an excursion into the work of some of these folklorists, who do not necessarily make the direct link to the Virgin Mary but whose findings reveal a pattern of interplay between women and religion, women's bodies and the sacred.

Female bodies in Finnish-Karelian magic rituals, folk beliefs, and taboos were depicted as traversing and negotiating symbolic boundaries. Women's bodies have female *väki*, which Stark defines as a dynamistic power believed to be released through women's sexual organs (Stark-Arola 1998a: p. 37).[7] The specifically female *väki* could be used to protect from or to cause harm. The power was released when women exposed their genitalia.

The concept of *väki* can be likened to the idea of a mobile force whose transference and effect on other entities, as well as the corresponding reactions it receives from other forms of *väki*, were central. Different entities were believed to possess *väki* in Finnish-Karelian folk thought, such as cemeteries, forest, water, earth, fire, and the sauna steam (Stark-Arola 2002).

A specific term, *harakoiminen*, relates the female *väki* to women's ability to protect and destroy, which could be performed by jumping or stepping over the person or animal to be magically affected (in late nineteenth-century rural communities women did not usually wear undergarments beneath their skirts), by standing over the 'target' or by lifting one's skirts and/or bending over so that the pubic area or buttocks were visible.[8] One of the most common forms of *harakoiminen* was protecting cattle in the spring when the animals left their shelter: the woman stood with her legs apart and without underwear above the cowshed door and let the cows go out to pasture underneath her spread legs (Apo 1998; Stark-Arola 1998a).

Women were also known to sometimes milk their cows with their lower body area exposed to increase the effectiveness of *harakoiminen* (Apo 1998;

Stark-Arola 1998b). A woman could also perform *harakoiminen* over her small children or her husband when he went hunting. Or, *harakoiminen* could be perfected when the wife touched her genitals with a finger and made the sign of the cross with it on the child's head, a transfer of power from the mother to her child (Stark-Arola 1998b). The act of *harakoiminen* itself was performed on things or beings that crossed the boundary from the 'inside' to the 'outside' (such as men and cattle leaving the farm household) or to defend against magical harm coming from the 'outside' in (Stark-Arola 1998a). There is also a substantial body of folk belief material in which female *harakoiminen* is represented as negative, harmful, and destructive, when used inside the area of the farm household associated with male activities or outside the farm household unit (Apo 1998; Stark-Arola 1998a).

Satu Apo, the professor emerita of Folklore Studies at the University of Helsinki, relates female *väki* and *harakoiminen* to 'transgressing situations' (Apo 1998). Conceptions of force concealed in a woman's vagina can be seen in the kind of folk poetry, sung by men, in which genitals are separated from the rest of the body and personified. The vagina may fly through the air and land on the fence, or it may walk through the forest and climb up a tree. The vagina is also described as so powerful that one man cannot be sufficient for it (Apo 1998). Parts of this poetry are incantations used to calm or cure 'the vagina's wrath' (*vitun vihat*),[9] that is, the harm or illness caused by the female genitals (Apo 1998; Stark-Arola 1998b). For example,

Ulos ukko uunilta,	Get off the oven, old man
pätsiltä pätevä herra	Capable gentleman, from the furnace,
kierosilmä kiukuulta	Cross-eyed one from the stove
viemään nyt vitun vihoja	To now take away the vagina's wrath
kyrvän reikään syvään	Into the deep hole the penis
johon kyrvät päin putos	Into which the cocks fell like trees
mulkun latvat lankiil	The tops of the pricks toppled over
- phui –	[healer spits]
vie sie vittu pois vihas …	Vagina, take away your wrath …

(Quoted in Stark-Arola 1998b.)

As was said, *harakoiminen* was given as magical protection in situations where a visible or invisible boundary was crossed. Interestingly, in the Finnish-Karelian folk poetry material the man, not the woman, is depicted and understood as an intact vessel, with closed boundaries (Apo 1998). The 'human' and the 'animal' were joined in the woman's lower body, as was 'this world' and the 'other world.' In their description of the origin of the female genitals, eastern Finnish singers related women's sexuality to 'nature.' The vulva itself is described as made from parts of animals, such as the clitoris from the tongue of a fox.

The sung poetry also describes the pleasure and enjoyment that the female body can offer. Together with the vagina's wrath, it leads to male respect for the vagina:

Pojat kaikki polvillah	The boys all go to their knees
Vittua kumartamah.	To bow to the vagina.
Vatsallah miehet vanhat	The old men on their stomachs
vittua kumartamah	bow to the vagina,
tuota tervehyttämäh.	give it their greetings.
Pappi nosti partoah	The priest raised his beard
kuningas kypäriäh	The king his crown,
tuota tervehyttämäh.	To give it their greetings.

(From Uhtua 1836, quoted in Apo 1998.)

According to the shamanistic belief system, a person who has a strong connection with nature, especially with animals, belongs to the category of supernatural and 'otherworldly.' Thus, at least in one incantation, the female body is conceived as a passageway through which it is possible to come from the other world to the world of humans and to go to the other, the 'lower' world. Women had a prominent role in traditional Orthodox death and memorial rituals as lamenters (Apo 1998), mentioned previously in the discussion of women's songs about Mary. Through lamentation, women are seen to convey to themselves and others that women's role and burden is to be both sufferers and social actors responsible for coping with everyday life. A woman's selfhood shows as clearly intersubjective, this intersubjectivity of lamentation coming to the fore in the ways in which lamenters construct a perspective on time which unites the past and the future, mother and daughter, death and life (Nenola 2002; Utriainen 1998).

In the Karelian folk poetry – as among my Costa Rican informants – the Virgin Mary is both one of the lamenting women and the (two-way) *Mediatrix*, not only of grace but also of suffering, negotiating the boundaries of immanence and transcendence, the mundane and the sacred. Again, this is a woman's role of marking, being the boundary, reflected and crystallized in the Virgin Mary, the premier female sufferer, and her body. *Harakoiminen*, with all its potential for amusement and vulgarity for people today, has been a very concrete way of marking this transgression of boundaries with a woman's body.

Here we can possibly think of Mary's intercessory role in classical Mariology, as well as of the view of woman (Eve) as the devil's gateway (Tertullian). Mary's body, like all the other female bodies, is the 'passageway' between the divine and the immanent, which we may also interpret in terms of transgressing boundaries. This can be interpreted as either positive or negative, but in both cases, it is about specific female power, which the ancient Finns called *väki*.

In fact, Apo makes this comparison with the Christian myth herself:

> The Christian story of the Son of God, who descends from Heaven and comes into the world through the body of a woman presumably strengthened … notions that beings on the earth surface had their origins in the other side … in particular situations, a woman really was more powerful, she had more *väki* than the man. The conceptualizations of the female body as a passage between worlds is a glorifying image; even the Christian God sent his son into the world of humans using this means.
>
> (Apo 1998: p. 78, 84)

This power is a woman's power to protect or to harm, which in fact is a concept of power usually associated with pre-Christian goddess figures and monotheistic male gods, as well as with Eve. The material dealt with by Finnish folklorists reveals the ambiguity of a woman's power, which relates her to transcendence in a way that males are not related, but also makes her vulnerable and does not necessarily bring socio-political and economic power.

There was no strong cult of virginity in Finnish-Karelian peasant culture (Apo 1998), which means that the reverence for female power and sexuality is not only about fertility. The vagina and the concomitant female *väki* were potential points of contact between antithetical spheres – not only between the 'inside' and 'outside' but even between nature and culture (Tarkka 1998). Thus, they linked female sexuality and bodies to wider cultural contexts beyond reproduction. Like the phallus, *vittu*, the vagina, of old Finnish folk culture did not refer simply to a physiological organ but also to a higher symbolic abstraction. According to Stark, this reflects more 'vaginocentric' thinking than is found in most other Western European cultures (Stark-Arola 2001).[10]

In more general terms, Anna-Leena Siikala observes how Karelian-Finnish mythology differs from the neighboring traditions in its description of women and their status. Besides the young maidens, there are several strong female figures who act independently and hold power – for example, *Louhi* who fights the male heroes in the *Kalevala*. Further, the story of the creation of the world is told in female terms. Female figures are closely related to natural events or compass points: Lady Day (*Päivätär*) and Lady Moon (*Kuutar*) master the sun and the moon, and both have qualities which later were identified with the Virgin Mary. Women in Baltic-Finnic mythology are considered as the governors or guardians of the other world. The combination of womanhood, nature, and the otherworldly is presented as a counterforce to the male heroes. As mothers, women can cross the border between life and death, Women also guard the border between this world and the other world. Thus, shamanistic skills were not exclusively the domain of men. This is also true of the Virgin Mary in the incantations, who is often assisted by the bee, believed to be an animal able to move between worlds. Other mythical women also usually become pregnant without men who are replaced by the berry, the apple, or the wind. Siikala concludes

that when two mythological systems encountered, it was natural to replace positive figures with models from the new religion. This is clear in the case of the Virgin Mary who received a central role as women's helper and point of identification (Siikala 2016).

The most powerful woman of Christianity, the Virgin Mary, who came to Finland from both East and West, was assimilated and mixed with earlier understandings of female power. The Christian interpretation of Mary as intercessor and Queen of Heaven was introduced into charms and incantations, calling for an all-powerful female divine figure to intervene. This becomes clear in all the poems and incantations presented in this section.

The virgin, the tree and the fruit

Is there a continuum or a link between the official Mariology that sees the Virgin Mary as the privileged mediator between the human and the divine, and the aforementioned examples from folk religiosity? At least, the doctrine of incarnation itself is centered around a pregnant, birth-giving, lactating, sexual female body. Traditionally, this has not meant the affirmation of human bodiliness and its goodness: only the maternal body of Mary, needed for incarnation, is sanctified and in opposition to the bodily experiences of other women. As said earlier, this separation of Mary and other women has been a major focus of feminist theologians and other critics.

In women's Marian devotion, however, there are elements that do not separate Jesus's incarnation (Mary's motherhood) from ordinary human reproduction (all other women's motherhood), and which connect rather than separate the two events, bridging some of the oppositions or dualisms created by the same tradition: Eve-Mary, male-female, human-divine, body-soul, and so on.

To illustrate this, I take a myth which has different variations in different cultures, but seems to live in one form or another in popular piety. It is the story of the virgin impregnated by the fruit.

Before that, a word of reservation. It should be mentioned that comparing myths from different cultures and times may turn out to be problematic. Strictly speaking, I cannot make affirmative claims about the connections between the contents of the themes under discussion. I am not claiming that there is a direct causality between certain characteristics in women's devotional practices and their social and religious status. Nor am I making direct comparisons between disparate materials (collected oral poetry, contemporary ethnographic data, mythology, theology, etc.). However, as I said in the Introduction, I have been informed by Wendy Doniger's 'bottom-up' cross-cultural comparison of myths. According to Anna-Leena (2011) Siikala (2016), any mythological tradition should be examined as a dialectical process, in which the cultural change and new contacts bring about new concepts and images alongside and in place of old ones. At the same time, models of thought from the past offer cognitive frames for the new

elements. The new is thus adopted under the conditions of existing cultural consciousness. This is particularly true in the case of conceptions of higher deities and the dead.

One macromyth – to use Doniger's terms – is the story of a young woman or a virgin who becomes pregnant. The legend of a miraculous birth, including the virginity of the mother and some natural elements – such as light, wind, water, a fruit – can be found from many cultures and already from times before Christianity. For instance, the ancient goddesses Hera and Juno supposedly became pregnant by the influence of a plant or a flower. Of all the fruits causing such miracles, the apple is the most common (Mansikka 1910). In comparisons between Eve and Mary, it is typically Eve who eats the apple, but Mary as her counter-mirror is often portrayed in art with an apple in her hand.

Mary's impregnation by the lingonberry

As I said earlier in this chapter, the Song of Mary, published in 1831, comes from a collection of epic poems on Mary, interpreting Christ's birth and passion from the perspective of his mother. Each part of the song describes a turning point in Mary's life, a moment or a stage the singers considered important: becoming pregnant, losing or fearing the loss of a child, and exclusion from the community.

The Song of Mary later became known as The Creator's Song or The Messiah, because it was understood to address the life and passion of Christ. The recorders and early folklorists belittled as 'an Easter story from the time of papal teachings' (Zachris Topelius) or as 'empty gossip' by Elias Lönnrot, who put the *Kalevala* together. In the introduction to the Song of Mary in *Kanteletar* (originally 1840), another collection of poetry recorded by Lönnrot, which he did not include in the *Kalevala*, he even says annoyed: 'There is no Biblical basis for this song. The Virgin Mary was not impregnated by a lingonberry or some other berry but by the Holy Spirit' (*Kanteletar* 2000). The singers themselves, mostly women, called it the Song of Mary, which points to the importance of Christ's mother for them. There are over 300 variants of the epic, most of which were recorded from women.

The *Kalevala* was a conscious creation of a Finnish hero myth based on collected oral material. Much was also left out of the collection. This material is, however, still available in the archives and other published collections such as the *Kanteletar.* At some point, decisions were made on which material was to be included in or left out of the *Kalevala*, in the end a creation of Lönnrot himself. In this decision-making process, the Song of Mary was excluded, and the thread running through the entire *Kalevala* – even with its strong female personalities – is a traditional male hero myth.

In (principally) Orthodox Karelia, the story of how Mary was fertilized by a berry (*puolukka*, lingonberry) or an apple is one of the key themes in

the poems about the Virgin (Timonen 1994). Mary hears the berry calling, shouting, screaming to her from the forest: 'Come, maid, and pick me...!' Mary cannot resist the berry's temptation, and she must leave her home. Her departure is given extra significance by the accounts of how she dresses and prepares herself. The journey to the berry can be of immeasurable length, proceeding in giant steps, and dangerous.

When she finally reaches the berry, she sometimes simply 'takes the berry from the hill' and eats it, while other versions emphasize her ecstatic state. Her desire to obtain the berry is so great that she addresses it with lines from spells designed to rouse a man's sexual desire and potency: 'Rise, rise, my berry, onto my pretty hem! Rise, rise, my berry, onto my copper belt, onto my luscious breasts, into my silver lips, onto my golden tongue!'

The more southern, Ingrian version is usually of an apple or a nut or both: 'Took an apple from the bough, took the nut from off the tree, put the apple to her lips, from her lips on to her tongue, from her tongue into her throat' (Timonen 1994: pp. 307–309). This is how the Virgin Mary becomes miraculously pregnant in Ingria!

The following is an excerpt of one of the many variants of the impregnation story (recorded from a famous male singer Arhippa Perttunen, although most recordings are of women). The Finnish word *marja* means both berry and a 'Fennocized' Mary (in the poetry, all these names for Mary appear: Maria, Maaria, Marja, Marjatta).

Marjanen mäeltä huusi	A small berry called from the hill
punapuola kankahalta	A red lingonberry from the forest floor:
'Tule neiti poimomahan	'Come maiden and pick me
vyö vaski valitsemahan	copper-belt, choose me
ennen kun etona syöpi	before the snail consumes me
mato musta muikkoali!'	or the black worm destroys me!'
Neitsy Maaria emonen	Virgin Mary little mother
rakas äiti armollinen	dear mother full of grace
viitiseksen vaatiseksen	dresses, attires
pää somille suorieli	wraps her head in a headdress
vaatehilla valkehilla	in clothes of white
…	…
Läksi marjan poimentaan	She went to pick the berry
punapuolan katsontaan	to find the lingonberry
(niin meni mäille, sano	she went to the hills, they say
keksi marjasen meältä	she plucked the berry from the hill
punapuolan kankahalta	the red berry from the forest floor
On marja näkemiehen	It looked just like a berry
puola ilman luomeehen	a lingonberry without interest
alahahko ois maasta syöä	too low to eat from the ground
ylähähkö puuhun nosta.	too high from a tree.

Tempoi kartun kankahalta	She dragged a pole from the forest floor
senni päällä seisataksen	and, standing on that
heitti marjan helmohinsa	she threw the berry into her lap
helmoiltansa vyönsä päälle	from her lap onto her belt
vyönsä päältä rinnoillensa	from her belt onto her breasts
rinnoiltansa huulellensa	from her breasts onto her lip
huuleltansa kielellensä	from her lips onto her tongue
siitä vatsahan valahti.	from there it slid to her stomach.
Siitä tyytyi, siitä täyttyi.	From that she became content From that she became filled.

(From Viena region, quoted in Haavio 1946.)

Another variant of the same story of Mary's miraculous impregnation by the berry follows. *Tinarinta*, tin chest, refers to a metal-colored brooch worn on her chest (Stark, personal communication, January 26th, 2018).

Tuli Maaria poimimahan	Mary came to pick
Tinarinta riipomahan.	Tin chest to tear
Otti marjan suuhusehen	Took the berry to her mouth
Tuosta paksuksi panihen	From it became pregnant
Lihavaksi liittelihen.	From it became fat
Kanto kohtua kovoa,	Carried a heavy womb
vatsan täyttä vaikiata.	Belly full of hard.

(*Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot*.)

The berry (or apple or nut) slipping into Mary's stomach ends the dramatic climax in the poem about the miraculous fruit. Sometimes Mary goes on to describe the goodness of the berry: 'Many have I picked, many plucked, many fingered, but never one so good!' The epilogue is always calm, and Mary 'fulfilled' (Timonen 1994).

It is easy to think here of the imagery of Eve and the apple tree, which for the Karelian singers would amount to an active, significant reinterpretation.[11] The poem seems to turn upside down the Christian story of the Fall. The Eve imagery is even stronger in another version of the story where Mary is accused (even by her own mother) of being a whore after she eats the berry: 'You were not, you whore, picking berries; you were looking for a husband!' Mary, the young woman, defends herself and the purity of her sexuality: 'This womb is the Creator's work, begotten by holy God!' (Timonen 1994: p. 310.) There are several versions of the same theme, in which Mary is left alone, excluded from the community, lamenting her life even to the point of wanting death. 'The holy Mary cannot proceed through life in perfection and humility, carrying out her purpose, for she also experiences moments of great weakness and needs help from outside in order to overcome them' (Timonen 1994: p. 311).

Here is one variant of Mary's accusation by others:

Emo saattavi sanoa,	Mother dares to say
oma vanhin vastaella:	Own parent to respond
'Voi sinua, hiien huora!	'Oh you whore of the Evil Creature!
Kenen oot makaelema?	Whom have you slept with?
Ootko miehen naimattoman	With a single man
eli nainehen urohon?'	Or with a married man?'
Marjatta. korea kuopus,	Mary, pretty child
tuop' on tuohon vastoavi:	Responds to this:
'En ole miehen naimattoman	'Not with a single man,
enkä nainehen urohon.	not with a married man.
Menin marjahan mäelle	I went to pick berries in the hill
punapuolan poimentahan,	To pick red lingonberries
otin marjan mielelläni,	I took the berry gladly
toisen kerran kielelläni.	Took a second time with my tongue.
Se kävi kerustimille,	The berry went to my throat
siitä vatsahan valahti:	From there to my belly
Tuosta tyy'yin, tuosta täy'yin,	From that did I become satisfied,
	From that did I become full
tuosta sain kohulliseksi.'	From that did I become pregnant
	[literally, 'with womb'].'

(*Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot*.)

The 'evil creature' in this poem is *hiisi* in Finnish. It was originally a forest (or nature) spirit, but in Christianity it was demonized and slowly became a synonym for the devil. It is not always certain how it was intended, but in this context the translation into some kind of evil creature is close to the meaning in the poem (Stark, personal communication, January 26th, 2018). The even older meaning of the *hiisi* referred to a sacred place, primarily a sacred grove used as a cult and offering site. There are still several Finnish place names that have the word *hiisi* in them.

According to Timonen (1994), Mary's assurances of her virginity and purity are profoundly symbolic here. They reflect a woman's interpretation of sexuality as something pure as opposed to the traditional Christian view. At the same time, it reflects the common everyday experiences of children born outside marriage and of the treatment of unwed mothers.

The poem also refutes the dichotomy between Eve and Mary: the virginal pregnancy is caused by a fruit and not the Holy Spirit. Mary – and not Eve – eats the fruit or picks the berry. To desire to pick and eat the fruit does not, in Mary's case, lead to the fall (of humankind) but to the incarnation, her miraculous pregnancy. Eve and Mary form a continuum, as the church teaches, but with an opposite logic: it builds on the goodness of sexuality and fertility,

rather than on their dirty or evil nature. Eve and Mary are not opposite to one another, but they assume each other's characteristics. Mary's holiness and exceptional nature remain, while Eve is not associated only with sin and evil.

According to Timonen (1994), the epic elevates women's sexual experiences to the mythical, sacred sphere, in total opposition to the official Christian tradition. Sexuality and sexual intercourse are seen from the point of view of the woman, and sexual encounter is interpreted as a manifestation of the divine in the everyday world.

The miraculous pregnancy of the maiden Xkik'

As a supracultural myth we can also find the story of the impregnation of the maiden in the other cultural context of my book, Latin America. The *Popol Vuh,* the pre-Columbian book of the Quiché Maya Indians (with some Christian influence), contains the story of the virgin Xkik' or Lady Blood (daughter of Cuchumakik, the lord of the underworld), who ate from a tree and became miraculously pregnant.

Like the *Kalevala*, the *Popol Vuh* is a national epic. It narrates the birth of the earth, the sun, and the moon as well as the creation of human beings from corn.[12]

The lords of Xibalba, the Place of Fear, the underworld or the land of the dead, had ordered that no one should eat the fruit of the calabash tree, considered miraculous.

> The head of One Hunahpu was cut off, while the rest of his body was buried with his younger brother. "Place his head in the midst of the tree that is planted by the road," said One Death and Seven Death. Now when they went to place his head in the midst of the tree, the tree bore fruit. The tree had never borne fruit until the head of One Hunahpu was placed in it. This was the tree that we now call the calabash. It is said to be the head of One Hunahpu. …Thus the Xibalbans spoke one to another, "Let no one cut the fruit, nor enter beneath the tree," they said. … Now a Maiden heard of it. Thus we shall now tell her story.
>
> (*Popol Vuh* 2003: pp. 125–127)

Xkik' could not believe that the fruit of the tree was truly sweet so she went to find out for herself: 'Ah! What is the fruit of the tree? Is not the fruit borne by this tree delicious? I would not die. I would not be lost. Would it be heard if I were to pick one?' (*Popol Vuh* 2003: p. 128). The skull of One Hunahpu from the tree spoke to the maiden, asking why she wanted a mere skull. She stretched out her right hand in front of the skull.

> Then the skull squeezed out some of its saliva, directed toward the hand of the maiden. When she saw this, she immediately examined her hand. But the saliva from the skull was not in her hand … Thus the

> maiden returned again to her home, having been given many instructions. Straightaway her children were created in her womb by the mere saliva. Thus the creation of Hunahpu and Xbalanque.
>
> (*Popol Vuh* 2003: pp. 129–130)

Thus, by spitting in her hand, the skull of One Hunahpu – an epithet for the calabash – makes her pregnant by the second generation of heroic twin deities, whose triumphs make the sky-earth (world) a safer place for human habitation.

After this, the father of Xkik' intends to sacrifice her because she had been dishonored: 'This my daughter is with child, O lords. It is merely the result of her fornication.' She replies: 'I have no child, my father. … I have not known the face of any man.' (*Popol Vuh* 2003: p. 131.) Her father orders her to be taken away for sacrifice, but she defends herself and her purity: 'You will not succeed in killing me, you messengers, for this that is in my womb was merely created and is not the result of fornication. Rather it is the result of my admiration for the head of One Hunahpu …' (*Popol Vuh* 2003: p. 132). With the help of a dragon tree (it gives red secretion to substitute for her blood) and two servants, Xkik' is able to defeat an oppressive social order, represented by her father: 'Thus the lords of Xibalba were defeated, for the maiden had tricked them all' (*Popol Vuh* 2003: p. 134).

Allen J. Christenson, who has translated the version I am using from the original Maya text, explains the blood-related names as follows:

> In Maya society, blood is the most precious substance because it bears within itself the spirit or essence of the ancestors and thus, by extension, of the founding deities from whom they descended. It is therefore the repository of life, which transcends individuals to include the ancestral dead. It is consistent with this view that "Lady Blood", daughter of an underworld lord, is the means by which the skull of One Hunahpu is able to produce new life out of death.
>
> (*Popol Vuh* 2003: p. 128)

In the person of Xkik', the images of Eve and Mary are mixed, as are Christian and pre-Christian elements, just as in the Karelian myths. In both, myths much older than Christianity are present, especially the one that equates women's ability to give birth with the creation of the world and humanity. Xkik', Eve and Mary all represent this female progenitor, whose activity, curiosity and fertility gives birth to all life. Life and death overlap in both stories, but in *Popol Vuh* they are not separated and thus, neither is the separation symbolized by two women as in Christianity.

The Christian way of locating evil in Eve and good in Mary creates two opposite progenitors for humanity – one carries death, the other carries life. In pre-Christian myths in the Mediterranean region, Mesoamerica, and Northern Europe, the sexual and fertile power of a woman contains both: the power to protect and to destroy, to create life, or to bring about death.

The power of the *Magna Mater*, the archetypal Great Mother, à la Jung, is based on this duality. The Xkik' of *Popol Vuh* is both the active, wise, and rebellious Eve and the Mary who overcomes evil.

Thus, the myth is basically about how good defeats evil with the help of the woman, the tree and the miraculous pregnancy of the virgin/maiden. How much Christian influence can be seen exactly in this part of the vast story told in the *Popol Vuh* is hard to say. What we know is that the myths and stories it tells are much older than the then couple of decades of Christianity in the Quiché lands, but that the authors were also familiar with Christian mythology.

While I cannot make a sustained argument about the similarities between the different myths in this chapter, my aim is to present surviving glimpses of stories and myths which stem from the encounter of Christianity with pre-Christian religions and belief systems. How much the Christian Eve and Mary influence Xkik' is difficult to say. According to Maya specialist Harri Kettunen, the visual theme of the tree and the head of Hunahpu is at least 1,500 years old and can be seen in ancient Mayan art (Kettunen, personal communication, September 2010). (See Figure 5.1)

Figure 5.1 Mayan ceramic dish done a thousand years before the compilation of *Popol Vuh*. The character in the tree is most probably linked to the story of Xkik'. *Museo Popol Vuh*, Guatemala, 2010. Photo: Harri Kettunen.

Interestingly, there is a much later visual theme in the region of presenting the Virgin Mary with her twin children, not just with Jesus. If there is a relation to the story of Xkik' of the *Popol Vuh*, it is impossible to say without further research. (See Figures 5.2, 5.3).

Figure 5.2 Statue of Mary with two children at the church of the indigenous village of Santiago de Atitlán, Guatemala, 2009. Photo: Harri Kettunen.

Figure 5.3 Zapotec women in the procession of Epiphany (*Día de los Tres Reyes Magos*), Ocotlán de Morelos, Oaxaca, Mexico, January 2010. Photo: Meri Mononen.

The world tree or tree of life is a common transcultural myth, including in Uralic and Baltic-Finnic cultures. In its own way, the tree of Eden in the Bible represents one variant of this myth. Besides the world tree, a significant feature in the mythologies of the Uralic peoples, according to Siikala, has been the role of the female as ruler over life, death, and the directions which symbolize the south and north. The ancient Finnish female sun-deity *Päivätär* ('Lady Day') has been replaced by the Virgin Mary, who represented life force (Siikala 2002, 2016).

Cross-cultural Mary?

Finnish-Karelian women interpreted Mary's story and life in the light of their own experiences, as many Costa Rican and Finnish women do today, not by reflecting on official doctrines and Mariology, but the other way around: by placing their own life experiences in the Mary story, as it had come to them, through various levels of enculturation and syncretization. In Orthodox Karelia, women connected Mary's (heroic) story with the cultural connotations given to the female body. If my interpretation of the work of Finnish folklorists is correct, those connotations would include the *väki*. As we saw, the *väki* is not only about fertility but about the woman's power to protect and do harm, to bring life through her body, interpreted as a cosmic movement between transcendence and immanence, this world and the other world, including death. Thus, by combining the Marian interpretations of folk piety with the *väki* beliefs of the shamanistic world-view, as I am doing, we could see Mary's body, just like any woman's body, as a passageway between worlds.

In Finnish-Karelian magic incantation poetry, even the (male) shaman, or *tietäjä*, is described as descending through the vagina, the passageway to the lower world. In traditional Finnish-Karelian folk thought, a woman's body was situated within the same paradigm of vertical passages between the upper, middle, and lower worlds as sacred trees; steep cliffs; caves; and smoke-holes in cottages and saunas, through which the smoke rose to the sky (Apo 1998; Stark-Arola 2001).

To take my interpretation even further, could we understand the female *väki* as the immanent divine in women's experience, which again makes a projection of the divine-human Mary possible? Women seem to interpret their own embodiment and its cultural connotations as being about the deification or sacralization of the human female and her experiences. Mary is the divine mirror for all other women, because she is both like them and different from them. This view of Mary between the human and the divine would then reflect the (self-?)understanding of women as passageways, transgressors, and intercessors.

Women's identification with Mary in her role as intercessor may thus be related to their roles as guardians of various boundaries and liminal spaces in different cultures. A woman's body as the bridge connecting immanence (this world) and transcendence (the other world) from which all life is born

is thus understood and interpreted as the site of the holy. The Virgin Mary, as a cultural symbol, would then represent one way of sacralizing female embodiment and the female body. It is impossible to say whether women did or do this themselves. According to folklorists, the Song of Mary was recorded primarily from female singers. Incantations used in childbirth were most probably used primarily by women as midwives. However, even if we consider women's stories as 'alternative ways of looking at things' and see genders as genres (Doniger 2011), there is no guarantee that women's perspectives are always women-friendly or even less feminist.

There is no direct or one-way link between myths and social reality. If the too easily assumed link between a female divinity and women's position held true, the centrality of the Virgin Mary in Christianity would mean that women's position in those churches where she has a central role would be high. As we know, to argue to the contrary is more plausible – the common feminist argument for why the Virgin Mary is 'harmful.'

I am fully aware that seeing structural parallels between all these stories, from different times and cultures, some recorded or written tradition, some information gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, is not without difficulties. We might not be able to interpret the different cultural variations of a myth as a vindication or reinterpretation of Eve; the Fall; and the concomitant symbolism of the woman, the tree and the fruit. However, boldly thought, they might reflect women's cultural resistance to the demonization of their sexuality and – theologically speaking – the possibility of a life-affirming, embodied image of the Virgin Mary based on women's concrete experiences.

The combination woman – tree – sexuality (together with the serpent) is a powerful symbol of sin in Western culture. However, as in the aforementioned stories, the combination could be interpreted as harmony and cooperation with nature, something sacred and good. Fertility can be seen as an essential part of the cycles of nature, as a woman's active cooperation in the creation of the world, and as sacralization of human corporality. This creates a possibility for human divinization, overcoming oppositions and dualisms[13] with the help of the divine-human Mary. Finally, the stories offer us a variety of possible interpretations of both traditional Mariology and folk or popular religion from different cultures.

Myths survive and stay alive because they tell us something essential about human life. In myths, humans conceptualize life and death, origin and end – basic questions that haunt human beings in different times and cultures. Birth and death are similar human experiences regardless of these differences.

Anna-Leena Siikala addressed these questions in her departure lecture at the University of Helsinki titled 'The Mind of the Myths' in May 2008. She argued that all mythology essentially addresses the question of how the world and world order came to be. A myth speaks many languages simultaneously and on several levels. The meanings of myths change and live on,

even if their foundational symbols may remain the same. Myths are also constantly subjected to interpretation. They are cultural practices, even if they in essence echo times and cultures past. According to Siikala, as cultures renew themselves, old themes become reinterpreted.

In an earlier text, she states how world mythologies revolve around the same key questions, even though the solutions may vary from culture to culture. Mythic traditions are slow to change: they carry voices from the ancient past to the present day. Comparative studies have shown that the mythical motifs found in the Kalevalaic epics are part of a widespread international tradition. Studying these parallels is difficult, but Siikala – like Doniger – encourages comparative research into mythical traditions (Siikala 2002).

Women's identification with Mary in her role as *Mediatrix* may relate to their cultural experiences as the guardians of boundaries or liminal spaces. A woman's body as a bridge between this world and the other world could then be interpreted as something sacred. The Virgin Mary symbol represents one way in which women have sought a divine and holy meaning for their embodied existence. Good and evil, life and death, body and spirit, nature and culture are not strictly separated from one another. A woman's active collaboration with nature's fruits yields fertility. Both the Karelian Mary and the Mesoamerican Xkik' defend their purity before others who accuse them of being whores. The myth and its interpretation may convey how cultural and religious images of women can be read and interpreted against the grain. Fertility and women's bodies can then appear as sites for the holy.

Notes

1 In English, see, for example, the edited collections Apo, Nenola and Stark-Arola, eds. (1998); Siikala & Vakimo, eds. (1994).
2 See, for example, Honko et al. (1993); Siikala (1994).
3 In Finland, the study of folklore was part of the nationalistic agenda from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the Second World War. The vast collection of folklore material was part of nation building for a small linguistic group seeking to discover Finnish ethno-cultural identity, origins, and relationships to other traditions. Only recently have researchers influenced by feminist theories started to interpret this material. Given that Finns still have common knowledge of this heritage, interpreting it from a gender perspective is not without importance. See the Introduction in Apo, Nenola and Stark-Arola, eds. (1998).
4 The sauna was the primary place to give birth until the first half of the twentieth century. Besides that, not only healing but many other rites were regularly performed there. The sauna was a marginal world or place of initiation used in connection with birth, wedding, and death (Honko et al. 1993).
5 Raising a close relative from the dead is a natural and recurring motif in women's lyric songs. Ingrian women, in particular, have developed an image of opening the grave with their own hands and lifting out the dead. These attempts to raise relatives from the dead in narrative songs are features of lament tradition in epic and thus link Mary with the women lamenters (Timonen 1994,

quoting Tarkka 1990). See also Timonen (2002) on Lemminkäinen's mother and Mary as aspects of the same supracultural theme. The lament has survived in the Baltic-Finnish area almost exclusively among members of the Orthodox Church (Honko et al. 1993).

6 *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* (Ancient Poems of the Finnish People) is a large collection of oral tradition, including prayers, incantations and narrative poems. Today they are available in a digital database, only in Finnish. See https://skvr.fi.

7 Folklorists have compared or equated *väki* with the Melanesian concept of *mana* and the Iroquois concept of *orenda*. There are different kinds of *väki* or dynamistic force: *kalma väki* (the dynamistic force of death), *metsän väki* (located in the forest), *veden väki* (located in waters), *löylyn väki* (located in the sauna steam), and so on (Stark-Arola 1998b). All beings and categories carry within themselves power charges, which can be dealt with and which require special treatment, including power transferral (Apo 1998).

8 As far back as classical Greece, women warded off evil forces by exposing their genitalia. The tradition was known in Christianized Europe, too. However, in comparison with, for example, the folk belief system of the Mediterranean, Finnish-Karelian mythical and magical models of thought appear to lay heavy emphasis on the female genitalia; the presence of the phallus is noticeably weak (Apo 1998; see also Stark-Arola 2001).

9 In fact, to translate *vittu* as vagina is far too medical and scientific. *Vittu* is today one of the most common curses in Finnish. The English equivalent would be cunt. However, this is not how *vittu* was seen in the traditional Finnish folk culture, in which *vittu* was rich in diverse cultural meanings, many of them positive for women. Sometimes *vittu* marked the generational difference between mother and daughter, 'having *vittu*' implicating attained social status and sexual experience rather than just fertility. The *väki* did not necessarily lessen in menopause (Stark-Arola 2001).

10 See Giovannini (1981) for a partly similar, partly very different construction. Interestingly, in the Southern European context, the legacy of Catholicism is different from that of the Orthodox tradition in how the Virgin Mary is tied into the culturally coded and (differently) syncretized understandings of women and female sexuality. In both Catholicism, especially in Latin America, and the Orthodox tradition, pre-Christian elements merge into the image of Mary, even if differently.

11 'Is the poem dominated by Christian (Eve and the apple tree, Mary and Gabriel) or pre-Christian (the archetype theme of the immaculate conception) beliefs, a hero myth (journey descriptions), women's daily work (cleaning, berry-picking) or erotic and sexual fantasies? Or does it incorporate elements of all of these?' (Timonen 1994: p. 309.) I would say that modern feminist theological reinterpretations and similar stories from other cultures and times point towards a cautious yes to the latter question.

12 The *Popol Vuh* comes from the Quiché people of Guatemala. It was written with Latin alphabet in the mid-sixteenth century, not long after the European invasion, to preserve the ancient knowledge and story of the beginning of life. Soon after the Spanish conquest, literate members of the highland Maya nobility made a number of transcriptions of their pre-Columbian books in order to preserve what they could of their recorded history and culture. A Spanish priest named Francisco Ximénez made the only surviving copy of the Quiché text of the *Popol Vuh*. See the translator's preface in *Popol Vuh* (2003). I have used Allen J. Christenson's English translation of the original Maya text.

13 Another translator of *Popol Vuh* into English, Dennis Tedlock, says in his introduction that for the Quiché Maya thinking dualities are 'complementary rather than opposed, interpenetrating rather than mutually exclusive. Instead

> of being in logical opposition to one another, the realms of divine and human actions are joined by a mutual attraction. If we had an English word that fully expressed the Mayan sense of narrative time, it would have to embrace the duality of the divine and the human in the same way the Quiché term *kajulew* or 'sky-earth' preserves the duality of what we call the 'world' (*Popol Vuh*, Introduction, 1996: p. 59).

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Epilogue
Our Lady of the Bridges?

The symbol of the Virgin Mary should not be interpreted as exclusively good or bad, either empowering or harmful for women. All interpretations of Mary today need to consider the rich cultural and theological heritage which crystallizes in her figure. Different notions and beliefs about Mary, official or on the margins of Christianity, are related to the most central questions and issues about human life, which religions attempt to answer. The myths and beliefs of grassroots religiosity, including elements of so-called folk religions, have always been fused with institutional religion. Religions have had an ongoing impact on their surrounding cultures and ideologies. This is true regarding the Virgin Mary and any interpretations of her.

The cult of Mary and the many beliefs about her have deep roots, originating even before Christianity. Thus, Mary is not purely an invention of early Christianity. Historically, the religions of the Near East and Europe form a continuum, with origins in Egypt and Mesopotamia. One great strand leads from the religion of Mesopotamia to Judaism and from there to Christianity and Islam. Many ideas and beliefs can be followed along this line. No scholar of the history of religions would deny this connection of Judaism and Christianity with Mesopotamia.

In the Virgin Mary, these influences manifest in many ways visually, symbolically, and doctrinally. The most important of them are the ideas about Mary as the Mother of God, her miraculous virgin birth, and her mediating role between humankind and the (male) divinity. All these conceptions have very old roots. Through the ages, Christian Mariology has venerated Mary as the ideal and exemplary human being, with different emphases in the East than in the West. It seems that in folk and popular religiosity from different regions and eras, interpretations of Mary exist that are in many ways more female- and body-friendly than the official teachings of the Christian churches. More importantly, lived piety – to be found in legends and practices but also through listening to them – is more reflective of the experiences of women.

Based on my work, I argue that in women's cross-cultural popular Marian piety, Mary is not only a maternal figure, sister, or friend – someone

ordinary women can identify with as another woman – but also a powerful, holy, and divine woman to whom other women can turn, especially in situations and issues that have more urgency for them as women. She is experienced as an empowering, not alienating, resource in different cultural and religious contexts. My data confirms – or at least offers glimpses indicating – that through her and with her, it is possible to experience womanhood as something divine and, conversely, the divine as female. This appears to be at the heart of women's popular piety on Mary.

According to Christian teaching, both men and women are created in God's image. However, associating divinity primarily with masculinity and defining women as inferior to men have in practice obscured this basic Christian understanding about humanity. What does it mean that women are also created in the image of God? Narrow notions of God have had a harmful impact on the understanding of humanity, with negative effect on both men and women, but particularly on the latter. In those religious traditions where Mary is present in one way or the other, women have been able to compensate for this distortion through her. This does not imply considering Mary a goddess, as a female counterpart of a 'male' God. Rather, her both-and character includes both her (female) humanity and her divinity, however that is understood in different Christian traditions. Especially in lived piety and folk traditions, there is no doubt that Mary is not merely a human woman and mother but also someone with special power and willingness to intervene and help.

My interviews with Catholic and Orthodox women point to a piety that also could be called imitation of Mary, *imitatio Mariae*. It is an old form of Marian piety, but in the ways my interviewees spoke of her, she appears to be an ethical ideal for them even today. I argue that this exemplarity has aspects which counter feminist claims of her being primarily an alienating and oppressive symbol. By this, I am not saying that the long history of misogynist and anti-body Christian theology does not have any influence. It has. What I do claim is that it is important to look at other sources and to ask women themselves – in whatever church or country – how they interpret Mary and their religious tradition.

I am not assuming that all women would desire to perceive or embrace Mary in the ways I have described. My purpose has been to demonstrate the richness and many dimensions of the Mary symbol, even in its paradoxes and contradictions. I want to argue that a closer study of popular and/or folk piety and lived religiosity opens a more multidimensional vista of religion(s) than merely analyzing doctrines and texts alone. This applies to the feminist study and reconstruction of religions. Listening to women's own religious experiences is essential in this endeavor.

Women have all the reasons to consider Christianity patriarchal – the evidence is too strong to claim the contrary. However, it is important to draw an analytical distinction between different dimensions and levels of religion: often, religious traditions carry contradictory messages, even

within their foundational texts. Gender equality is a prime example of such a tension: one can argue, on basis of the tradition, both for women's subordination and for radical equality of all human beings.

Greater and deeper multidisciplinarity in the study of religion, especially in the case of gender and religion, is important. Anthropologists, historians, and sociologists of religion could dialogue more with theologians, and vice versa. Gender theorists, especially from the social sciences, should know at least the basics of the feminist study of religion when making any claims about the relationship between women and religion. A broader approach simultaneously pays serious attention to the patriarchal structures of different religions and their impact on women and listens to other actors than the religious elites, comprised mostly of men. The study of the Virgin Mary is one such area where simultaneous critique and reinterpretation is taking place.

For many, the Virgin Mary constitutes a barrier and an obstacle in ecumenical and interreligious relations. However, as I hope I have been able to show, seen, and interpreted especially from women's perspectives, Mary appears as 'Our Lady of the Bridges,' a privileged symbol of connection rather than separation. Teachings concerning both Mary and women are more similar than different across Christian denominations. The intention to understand Mary from a feminist perspective, both in critical and more constructive interpretation, is shared by feminist theologians from different Christian backgrounds. That ecumenical, and even interreligious, endeavor is as important as formal negotiations between traditions, in which women often cannot participate as authoritative representatives of their respective religions.

If the Virgin Mary could be seen as a bridge rather than barrier, what is she connecting? As we have seen, Mary, whether in academic theology or lived piety, looks quite different from women's perspectives than in most of traditional teaching about her. The women I interviewed and most feminist theologians share the intention not to see her as the great exception to all other women. For women, what is being said about them as women, and of Mary as part of that, is a greater problem than her status in the theologies and practices of different churches.

Theoretically, interpreting Mary both theologically and ethnographically bridges some gulfs between feminist theology and religious studies or anthropology of religion, and especially between secular gender studies and feminist study of religion. My interdisciplinary approach, which includes theology, ethnography, gender and folklore studies, may not be without problems. I am well aware that it is not possible to draw too sweeping conclusions from such a multiplicity of methods and source materials. Nevertheless, this very multidisciplinarity allows parallels to emerge. This is clearest in my two ethnographic studies. When women and their thinking and practices are the focus, the similarities are sometimes striking.

My ethnographic material from two different contemporary Christian contexts reveals that women actively reflect on their lives *as women* with the Mary symbol. The least I can thus say is that the feminist rejection of Mary as a harmful symbol for women is far too simplistic. At best, different layers and aspects of Mary should be analyzed – not merely the doctrinal and theological, but also the lived. Like any symbol, the Mary symbol is contradictory and open to interpretation. My material points to the possibility of women in different cultures and times interpreting Mary as the human-divine mirror of their most intimate experiences. By and large, the Mary in the narratives of my informants is powerful and protective; she understands women and mothers because she is both herself. In both contexts, my interviewees tended to focus on Mary in those roles, not as a virgin or a submissive model.

My intention to bridge different traditions, cultural contexts, and academic disciplines through and with the Virgin Mary symbol may appear to some as too broad – an argument I am more than willing to accept. I propose that this broad scope can be a strength, given my critique of lack of dialogue between disciplines, methods, sources, and religious traditions. Too often, even in the study of lived religion, only some traditions are studied and oppositions between the lived and the institutional are created – even when this never was the intention. Focusing only on the 'institutional' or on the 'lived' obscures the reality that they influence and intersect with each other in multiple ways.

There are of course real differences between Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches in their views of the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, they also share a lot. Interpretations such as those born in the context of liberation theology, which emphasize the ordinary, even poor, Mary of Nazareth as the model for a church of the poor and marginalized, come surprisingly close to Martin Luther's own Mariology. Mary's powerful presence in the liturgy and spirituality in the Catholic and Orthodox churches begs the question why contemporary Lutheran churches are so void of anything feminine, although they ordain women.

Again, from women's perspective, it is the very experience of Mary as 'like myself,' also in bodily ways, which creates another possible bridge between Christian churches. The both-and character of Mary in women's devotion includes this likeness but also the vision of her as more than an ordinary woman. These aspects are not set in opposition to each other: rather, their combination seems to be at the heart of women's cross-cultural Marian devotion and piety.

The figure of the Virgin Mary and much of Mariology have been used against different groups of people in Christian anti-Semitism, in Protestant anti-Catholicism and, to a lesser degree, anti-Orthodoxy, and against women. Images of femininity and motherhood are central to all of these, but do not necessarily stem from real-life experiences of women and mothers.

A genuinely ecumenical Mariology – in which Mary forms a bridge rather than an obstacle – requires serious attention to the following issues. First, Mary's exemplary humanity is a central Marian theme in all Christian churches, including the Lutheran tradition. Second, Mary seems to hold specific significance for women in all Christian churches: her exemplary humanity is female humanity and thus bears connotations which may be gender-specific. Third, especially in the context of the *Magnificat*, Mary is important for the poor and marginalized. A spirituality of Mary as an exemplary human and paragon of faith points to social change and critiques structures of power. Mary is both like her people (deeply human) and something more (a prophet and powerful actor). This is related to the fourth point: Mary's both-and role is expressed in lived religion and popular piety, and is central for ordinary Christians, including its gender-specific forms. In Latin America, since the very beginning of the conquest, Mary formed the cultural bridge between the European and the American, white and indigenous, shaping a unique Marian piety within the Catholic Church.

Fifth, a close reading of Luther, especially his commentary on the *Magnificat*, can make Marian spirituality more ecumenical. Mary's importance in the Catholic and Orthodox churches is best understood from the perspective of spirituality. The Lutheran churches share the two ecumenical dogmas with the other Christian churches, but instead of the deep Marian spirituality, liturgy, and devotion of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, there is an emptiness and a vacuum in the Lutheran tradition. Understanding Mary's mediating and intercession as a bridge – to God and Christ, to fellow human beings, between women and men, between cultures – opens up space to include Lutherans in ecumenical Marian spirituality. Last, Mary as a bridge and example to follow (*imitatio*) can be relevant not only in ecumenical but also in interfaith contexts. Mary is important in Islam, as we have seen, and we need to remember that Miriam of Nazareth was a Jewish woman.

The feminist theological critique of Mary, as presented in Chapter 2, tends – understandably – to focus on certain Mariological themes, most importantly her impossible combination of motherhood and virginity, her exaltation beyond ordinary women and her concomitant exceptionality, and her placement at the other end of the binary with Eve. Interestingly, while academic theologians see these themes as the crucial issues to be deconstructed in the Mary symbol, most did not even surface in my interviews. As my material makes clear, Mary's virginity was either ignored as not very relevant or, when dealt with, it was rejected on the basis of women's bodily experiences or interpreted in more symbolical terms. Eve was not even mentioned in my interviews, either in Finland or Costa Rica, implying that the Eve-Mary juxtaposition, as central as it is in both Catholic and Orthodox Mariology, does not resonate in any way in the lived devotion of my informants. And finally, as already mentioned several times, the core of my

informants' Marian devotion is at the experience of Mary being simultaneously like themselves and very different, a female (reflection of the) divine. This – and not her supposed alienating exceptionality among women – is the basis of the experience of Mary. For my informants, Mary's exceptionality is what makes her powerful, while her likeness to other women makes her identifiable and ordinary. The Mother of God is experienced as especially women's ally, accomplice, and shield – all expressions by my interviewees. It is a powerful protest of (feminist) interpretations of her as the primary symbol of women's subordination, whether in the church or in society.

To conclude, my interviews with Catholic and Orthodox women in two different cultural contexts illustrate gender-specific aspects of women's devotion to Mary. Even when women are excluded from religious leadership and authority in both churches, there are aspects of their relationship to the Virgin Mary that can be considered empowering. These aspects may be – and in fact, often are – in tension with the formal teaching of their church. This was clearest, in both contexts, in how women questioned and rejected Mary's virginity as a physiological fact. Mary's human motherhood combined with her powerful potential for intercession is important for my informants in two very different contexts. Women identify with Mary as another woman and mother, not as a virgin.

The interviews call into question feminist views that see religion – and especially the figure of Mary – only as oppressive for women. This feminist critique is usually directed at the Mariological teachings of Christian churches. It is not informed by women's own Marian interpretations and practices. I am not claiming that a feminist critique of Mariology is unnecessary, but this more theoretical and theological work should not be equated with an overarching critique of Mary as an oppressive cultural symbol.

My data highlights the importance of intersectional analysis: despite what a given religious tradition teaches about gender and women, factors such as levels of secularization, economic circumstances, history, and culture-specific forms of gender are all crucial. For example, in Costa Rica, it was mostly women from low-income spheres who held onto an image of a miraculous Virgin Mary who may be able to help when all safety nets are gone. In Finland, where gender equality is widely recognized, women from non-liberal religious communities, such as the Orthodox Church, do not necessarily tie their identity as Orthodox women to formal equality issues such as women's ordination. Instead, they tend to see their church as 'more feminine' than the majority Lutheran Church, because of the central place the Virgin Mary and other female saints have in Orthodox theology, liturgy, and iconography. For my informants in both Costa Rica and Finland, Mary was experienced as women's ally and shield.

To return to the question posed at the beginning of the book: is the Virgin Mary a harmful or a positive model for women? I answer in the spirit of

Mary: yes and no, both and. Both sides become evident when analyzing the Mary symbol. The answer depends on which questions are asked, of whom, and from which perspectives. The evidence presented in this book suggests that women have by and large found Mary a more positive than negative presence in their lives. Women experience and express aspects of Marian devotion that are not necessarily tied to official church teaching. In a world where women have not been fully accepted as images of God, Mary remains an important mirror and ally, supporting women to accept their humanity as reflected in the divine.

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