

The Mary Myth. Andrew M. Greeley. New York: Seabury Press, 1977.

Chapter ONE: A Return to Mary?

"I write about the God revealed in Mary and the human nature revealed by woman, a God of hope and a people of hopefulness despite themselves."

Contemporary intellectuals have lost hope in Enlightenment rationalism:

- ◆ Heilbroner's pessimism: we must look to Atlas as our model, struggling bravely in the face of doom.
- ◆ Reich's optimism: we must look joyfully to the 'younger generation' as they usher in 'Consciousness III'.

The Marian symbol is surely one of the most powerful symbols in the Western tradition.

Paintings, cathedrals, poetry.

With the death of Enlightenment rationalism, we have entered into an era of the open marketplace for religious symbols: "Under such circumstances, the Mary symbol ought at least to be reconsidered on the possibility that a symbol which has had as much power for most of the history of the Western world as it did may still have some power of illumination in our time."

"I am recommending a reevaluation of what the Mary symbolism really stands for on the grounds that Mary might be extremely relevant for the problems of our time."

"I will contend that Mary is a symbol of the feminine component of the deity. She represents the human insight that the Ultimate is passionately tender, seductively attractive, irresistibly inspiring, and graciously healing."

"In excluding the feminine component of the deity, the reformers missed a very important and indeed a well-nigh universal component of human religious experience."

MYTHS offer ways of ordering experience, inform man about himself, express a saving power in human life, provide patterns for human actions, and are enacted in rituals (I. Barbour).

Doctrines are theologically directed attempts to explicate symbols.

There are four primary Scriptural images of Mary: the New Eve, the Church, the daughter of Zion, and the Virgin.

"I have leaned much more heavily on poetry and art than has traditional theology."

"(Present popular Mariology) is creepy, and does a great disservice to Our Lady, who has been a prisoner of creeps for too long."

"I would rather be judged on whether my approach is useful or not."

"This book is not about Mary. It is about God revealed to us through Mary."

Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST II-II*, 1, 1.

The core of the approach is a four-celled MODEL that represents four aspects of the Mary myth – Madonna, Sponsa, Virgo, and Pieta – which correspond to four elements of the human limit-experience of sexual differentiation.

Model = a tool for examining reality, not a description of what reality is.

“... an abstraction, a schematization, a simplification of a reality that is in every instance far more complex, elaborate, subtle, and indeterminate than my model.”

“Reality, even religious reality, is far too tangled and fluid to be captured by apodictic certainties.”

“The purpose of this book. . . is merely to offer new perceptions, new insights, a new structuring of experience.”

It is an exercise in the margins between theology and sociology.

Chapter TWO: Religion, Experience, Symbols, Language

“Religion is humankind’s way of wrestling with the ultimate; it is the set of answers, usually in nonpropositional form, to the most fundamental and basic questions a human has about the purpose of life and of the world in which he finds himself.”

“Religion is a symbolic interpretation of ultimate reality that provides templates, guideposts, road maps according to which people can chart their way through the obscurities of life.”

“Religion appears first of all in symbols, in dense, complex, multilayered, polyvalent pictures, stories, rituals, because religion takes its origin from experience, and religious communication is primarily designed to lead to the replication of experience.”

Religion takes its origin in experience, and humankind shapes its life in the context of the view of ultimate reality it derives from its experience.

In limit-experience we encounter the wall that imposes a boundary on our finite existence; and we question the why, the what, and the how of that wall; and, occasionally, we have the impression that ‘there is someone on the other side of it.’

By stirring up *wonder*, such limit-experiences can disclose reality to us as a hint, sometimes subtle, almost imperceptible, and at other times powerful, that there is ‘something else’ going on in our lives, and if there is, there may also be ‘something else’ beyond the horizon.

Certain human experiences have a special capacity for revelation, but they have this capacity because everything has potential for revelation.

“Everything is grace!” (Karl Rahner)

“Sexual differentiation is sacramental in the sense that it has an extraordinarily powerful potentiality for creating in us a limit-experience, an experience in which the harsh wall of

our finitude is almost brutally encountered but which is also an experience of the revelation of the possibility of graciousness beyond the wall."

Sexual differentiation need not be sacramental.

Sexual differentiation is sacramental because the whole material world is sacramental.

There are two phases in the process of a thing becoming a sacrament (cf. Thomas Fawcett):

- I. The Descent
 - i. The presence of an existential need;
 - ii. The moment of disclosure or perception of need;
 - iii. The symbolization of ontological anxiety.
- II. The Ascent
 - i. The descent becomes the basis for further disclosure;
 - ii. Creative disclosure or perception;
 - iii. Symbolizations of integration and wholeness.

The presence of 'existential need' means that when the predisposition to wonder is there, then everything is potentially sacramental, and some things are overwhelmingly so.

I.e., "between my yearnings for self-transcendence and the thing's unique and special capacity to reveal Being, the dialectic is established that reveals the pain of the limit-experience, consciously and explicitly hints that something beyond the experience may be perceived, and transforms the thing itself into symbol which embodies both my perception of the problem and my grasp of the hint of an answer."

In such experiences, the ordinary structures of perception are shattered.

The thing-become-symbol serves three roles:

- 1. It shatters my old perceptions.
- 2. It reorganizes my perceptions into a new configuration.
- 3. It accompanies me as a symbol which will recall for me the original experience and enable me to share that experience with others.

Symbolization is action producing: restructured perception leads to restructured living.

"One reflects on the symbol and its meaning only after one has lived – perhaps passionately – the renewed life the symbols have made possible."

Eliade suggests that a universality of sacraments is the result of general structures of human existence.

"There are primal symbols in the sense that certain things in the world have almost universally overwhelming sacramental power, but these primal symbols can take very different forms as they become the carriers of different specific religious limit-experiences, and as specific religious insights have grown out of these experiences."

"Mary is part of the universal human experience of sexual differentiation as a sacrament of alienation and dealienation, of diversity and unity, of the combination of opposites in the one."

Of its nature, limit-language involves tension which produces the startling and perception-shattering experience in the listener which religious language is designed to produce.

It is language designed to make the symbol “explode with a linguistic power that discloses possibilities for human existence which seem and are beyond the limit of what our ordinary language and experience might imagine” (David Tracy).

“When a thing becomes a symbol, it speaks to us all at once, and much of what it has to say we hear dimly indeed.”

E.g., a reader can perceive dimensions of the experience which gave rise to a poem which the author was not explicitly conscious of.

“‘Prospective’ meaning of a symbol” (paul Ricoeur).

Metaphors, symbols, myths are open-ended, and can thus be extended to new situations.

“... a suggestive invitation to the discovery of further similarities” (Barbour).

“The symbol presents a comparison to be explored, insights to be discovered, a many-faceted flow of images to be enjoyed. It illumines one’s situation so that one sees aspects of reality which one might otherwise have missed; and at the same time the contact with a newly illumined reality can reflect back on the symbol itself and enable one to discover a potential extension of the basic comparison that was hitherto unperceived.”

Symbols describe different aspects of the same primal Great Experience; thus the ‘priveleged center’ of a symbol system is not diminished by the existence of other symbols organized around it.

“What one does with a thing-becoming-symbol is shaped to a considerable extent by one’s culture, one’s personality, one’s biography. I would maintain that there is a strain toward graciousness in a limit-experience, but it is one that can be resisted.”

“In this book I intend to ask what illumination we can receive for the problems of our time by permitting ourselves the limit-experience of the thing-called-sexual-differentiation becoming the revelatory symbol that is incarnated in the Mary tradition.”

Continuity of experience within a given symbol over time is determined by continuity of response, i.e., between reordered structures of perception.

The thing becomes a symbol precisely insofar as it manages to embody itself in story, an image rooted in our perception of our reality.

At the heart of the limit-experience is a sensation of ‘givenness,’ ‘gifted-ness,’ ‘grace.’

It is when a thing is perceived as a gift, as a grace, that it can shatter our perceptual structures and begin to build new ones.

“Grace” = “the capacity of a reality to possess our perception with the utter gratuity, the

sheer given-ness of its existence'.

"Sacrament" = 'a thing-becoming-symbol which reveals to us its graciousness and the Graciousness of Being in which it is rooted and from which it has been thrust into a being of its own.'

Chapter THREE: The Androgyny of God

Primitive humans were convinced that all attributes existed as one in the divinity, and that therefore there was every reason to think that both sexes should be more or less clearly expressed together – as ultimate reality and absolute power, God simply cannot be limited by any attribute whatsoever.

This androgyny continued to be present in Midrashic writings, in classical mythology, in Christian Gnosticism, and may well have influenced the Pauline affirmation of Galatians 3.28, and continues to be present dimly in Catholic theology (e.g., John Scotus Eriugina and Nicholas of Cusa).

"The ultimate reality, then, is primal unity. Creation represents a fragmentation of unity; reintegration involves putting the fragments back together again. The Pauline notion of 'restoring all things in Christ' surely shows the influence of this primal religious theme."

In God that which is most attractive in maleness and that which is most attractive in femaleness are combined in a higher unity.

The feminine goddesses of antiquity represent the fact that the 'feminine principle' is present in the deity; they are developments from more primitive androgynous deities, and reflect the human experience of sexuality as sacred.

Though the data available to us about ancient religion is very complex and obscure, it does seem clear that in the Paleolithic Age there was an intense devotion to the Great Mother goddess (cf. Erich Neumann).

From this period, there have been found about 60 sculptures of a female deity, a Great Mother, the pregnant goddess of fertility, a symbol of the reproducing, protecting, and nourishing dimensions of reality.

"Fertility was the great mystery, and no sophisticated modern looking at a newborn child in his mother's arms can escape completely a sense of fascination and mystery at the awesome phenomenon of reproduction and continuation."

A woman, as the locus of fertility, was an especially sacred thing; as such, she was the object of both reverence and fear.

In the pastoral and agricultural societies at the dawn of history, fertility had become the central theme of religious activity.

As time passed, goddesses became more human in appearance and more attractive.

There is also some ambivalence about the death dimension of the female deity.

Female power = life-giving and life-taking-away.

“The various woman goddesses reflected the implicit conviction that life, pleasure, excitement, and death themselves reflected components of the perfect unity of the ultimate and the absolute.”

“... the feminine spiritual power is part of the human condition and exists in both men and women. It is called ‘feminine’ because of the obvious analogy between this psychological power and the biological functions of the woman.”

Hindu ‘shakti’ = female spiritual power.

By the time of classical antiquity, there was a rough differentiation of function established among the goddesses: i.e., there are many components to the single experience of sexual differentiation obtained in the encounter with the feminine:

- The giver of life;The sexual lover;
- The source of inspiration;
- The receiver in death.

“The goddess acted as intermediaries between the experience of the feminine in ordinary life and the assumed existence of the feminine as a component of the ultimate.”

“The distinction between the religious and the secular was not nearly as sharp for them as it is for us.”

Erich Neumann’s paradigm portrays the experience of the feminine as being two-fold: “Woman as *earth* gives life and then takes it back; woman as *moon*, as transformer, gives renewal, rebirth.” [cf. figure one] – elementary and transformative dimensions.

Four different aspects of woman:

1. As source of life (+ elementary);
2. As inspiration (+ transformative);
3. As source or sexual satisfaction (- transformative);
4. As absorbing in ego-destroying death (- elementary).

Sexual gods and goddesses tell us about certain fundamental parameters of human existence and certain fundamental dimensions and structures of the human personality.

“One turns to the history of religions for symbolic themes. . . to strive to learn what one can about the propensities of humankind to interpret the varieties of their experience so that, having ordered that experience, they can respond to it.”

“In the experience of the opposite sex (and the traits fo the opposite sex one perceives in one’s own sexuality) the Other is perceived as linked to the rediscovery of self, the loss of self, pleasure, and inspiration.”

There are two aspects of sexual differentiation as limit-experience (David Tracy):

1. One experiences the gifted-ness, the wonder of sexual differentiation.

2. I discover simultaneously the androgyny of the other and the androgyny of myself.

There is a rhythm in intimacy, a rhythm of alternating 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

"As the various components of our personality blend together in an ever more rapid alternation of the masculine and the feminine, of the pursuer and the pursued, we get a hint of what it must be like to be God – the One in whom the pursuer and the pursued (the first and final cause) are perfectly blended."

"The symbol has its own morphology which cannot be violated by the interpreted precisely because there is built into the thing-which-becomes-symbol a structure and being of its own."

Yet that morphology does not predetermine the nature of the experience, the substance of that which is revealed in that experience, or the content of the limit-language which is later used to describe the experience.

"They are not formless inkblots, but neither are they propositions which admit only of very narrow and restricted interpretation."

"I will be content to assert here that Christian religious experience and Christian religious faith, which is both revealed and re-presented in such experience, is not totally unrelated to humankind's other religious experience, but it is categorically different from them."

"Mary is the only feminine religious symbol who reveals a God passionately in love with his people."

Chapter FOUR: The Emergence of Mary

Subsequent to the Sinai experience, the Hebrews sought to guarantee fertility not longer by worshipping the fertility forces of the universe or by engaging in ritualized sex, but by worshipping Yahweh.

But the struggle between Yahwism and the more ancient pagan fertility rituals was long and fierce – the goddesses may have retreated and gone underground, but they were not completely destroyed.

Sexual differentiation was not eliminated from Yahwistic religion, but appeared in a new and extremely important manifestation: Yahweh was the spouse, Israel was the people, his bride.

"Yahweh's intervention on Sinai was the beginning of a divine love affair with a fickle, unreliable but still very attractive spouse."

In the rhetorical technique of corporate personality, the people of Israel are spoken of as the Daughter of Zion caught up in a romance with Yahweh (Is 62.11; Zp 3.14-18; Zc 2.10; Lm 1.15; c.13; Jr 18.13; 4.31; Mi 4.10).

'Wisdom' is feminine, and may have in her background the presence of a female deity in Judaism.

“Yahwism was a multifaceted and polyvalent religion with room for many different components, including many survivals from paganism which it had absorbed. The female deity was still around, now either absorbed in the tenderness of Yahweh or continuing as the Daughter of Zion or the Wisdom of Zion or as the shadowy patron of human love and marriage.”

Sexuality is Yahweh's gift to humankind, a gift that reflects and symbolizes his love for his people.

“By the early second century, Christian writers were speaking of Mary as the New Eve; by the late second or early third century, drawings of her appeared in the catacombs, and by the middle third or early fourth century, direct and explicit devotion to her was well under way.”

Two factors were at work in the emergence of Mary as an object of devotion:

1. The fantastically liberating exuberance of the early Christians freed them from old laws, old fears, old constraints, old customs.

“... whatever was good... true... beautiful.. admirable in the human condition was... already Christian.”

“The feminine goddesses were integrated, rehabilitated, and transformed into Mary.”

2. Typology was a common theological method of early Christian writers, in which figures and events in one section of Scripture are seen as anticipations (though not as literal predictors) of figures and events in another section of Scripture.

The early Christians vigorously used the typological argument that Jesus was ‘the new Adam’, the father of us all.

Mary came to be seen as ‘the new Eve’, the mother of us all – “With that jump, Mary emerged as the Christian symbol of the feminine aspect of the deity.”

Exegetes contend that the New Testament conveys virtually no historical information about the mother of Jesus, but that there are explicitly Marian doctrinal themes in the Gospels.

“(But) if the Mary symbol becomes detached completely from the actual Mary, then however admirable the symbol may be, it cannot really claim to be Christian.”

In knowing Jesus, we surely know much about his mother: “The mother of Jesus had to be an extraordinarily intelligent, courageous, devout, and charming woman. She could hardly have been anything else.”

“When we know Mary through Jesus we are able to translate the qualities of Jesus into ‘feminine’ form; and by seeing the feminine sources of the personality of Jesus, we are able to return to that personality and see more easily and more readily the feminine aspects of the personality itself.”

Through the two of them there is revealed to us the fullness of the unity of opposites in God.

“Could it be that the ease with which the church began to theologize about Mary so early could be explained by the contact that some of the early Christians had with the person herself?”

The typological theme of Mary as Daughter of Zion, the New Eve, the Church, and the Virgin were already strongly at work in the church by the year A.D. 70.

Mary becomes a corporate personality in the infancy stories (especially Luke): “She is the spouse of Yahweh representing the whole people to whom Yahweh is committed in passionate love. Jesus is born of the love between Israel, as represented by Mary, and Yahweh.”

In John’s Gospel, Mary is seen simultaneously as the New Eve and as the Church, the mother of the new creation, the loving mother of us all.

The Johannine stress is on Mary as symbol of the Church.

“It is the limit-experience of maternity that produces the thing-turned-symbol that Mary the mother of Jesus has become in these two Gospels” (Lk and Jn).

Whether the virgin symbolism is reflection on historical fact is a matter of current exegetical debate. But on this point, Raymond Brown’s comment is significant: “... it should be clarified for Catholics that the doctrines of the sanctity of Mary and of the incarnation of God’s Son are not logically dependent on the virginal conception.”

The purpose of the limit-language of virginal conception is to reveal to us that with the coming of Jesus a new creation began: “Just as Adam had no father but God, so Jesus had no father but God.”

It seems probable (cf. G. Ashe) that a popular Mariology preceded the official cult; the Council of Ephesus was the turning point of the triumph of popular devotion over official hesitation.

Ashe thinks that the emergence of Mary as Mother in the fifth century (in the fourth century she was predominantly Virgo) was a response of Christianity to the horror of pagan invasion by seeking protection and security in the arms of a mother.

“There seems to be a thrust in human religions to search out symbols that reflect the femininity of God. Such symbols were available – though perhaps vaguely – in the official Yahwism of the Second Temple era and in the surrounding matrix of Graeco-Roman culture. They found their way into the New Testament. After some hesitation, Christians decided that it was safe for them to let these symbols develop into a Christianized cult of the Queen of Heaven. Such a process was practically inevitable once Christianity decided to take the risk of absorbing all that was good and beautiful in paganism.”

Chapter FIVE: MADONNA / *Dei Mater Alma*

There is a dialectic between the overarching symbol and our own symbolic experience: “The overarching symbol has the power to intervene in a particular limit-experience of ours to bestow sacramental power on the thing we have experienced.”

The most elemental dimension of the experience of sexual differentiation is maternity.

We can experience maternity in three different ways, each of which has a powerful potentiality for inducing a limit-experience:

1. Each of us had a mother, whose image is permanently implanted in our personality.
2. Many of us have been and are mothers or are married to women who are mothers.
3. We have the experience of encountering maternity as a part of everyday life.

There are almost overwhelming emotional currents released by such encounters with maternity.

“Mothering is part of any intimate human relationship in the sense that we expect those who love us to be at least on occasion passionately tender toward us, to assume the responsibility of ‘taking care’ of us.”

“... the biological-psychological thrust toward pride, tenderness, admiration, protection, reverence, and delight between a mother and a child is one of the most fundamental powers in the universe.”

“The primary element of sexual differentiation, then, is that women bear children and men do not.”

“That childbirth is an experience intimately related to religion is testified to by almost all the cultures humankind has ever known.”

“The feminine aspect of the ultimate is the life-bestowing dimension of God as opposed to the life-ordering or masculine.”

Yahwism involves a considerable transformation of pagan ideas: “Eve may represent the origin of human life; she may be the mother of us all; but she is not a goddess of a life force with specific power unto herself.”

“Mary represents the rich, abundant, variegated creativity with which Yahweh has blessed the earth. Therefore, she reveals to us the life-giving, the feminine dimension of Yahweh.”

In some of the greatest poetry of the Western world, Mary the Mother is called upon to help and protect us, to care for us as she cared for her son.

“I would submit that the images of Hopkins, Byron, Chaucer, Erasmus, the nameless medieval bards, and the elegant Prudentius tell us far more about the power and meaning of the Madonna than theology books could possibly portray. Poetry is much better at conveying limit-experience than scholarly theology.”

Marian paintings reflect the mystery of birth and of the passionate protective tenderness, the fierce dedication and devotion of a mother toward her child.

Maternity as illumined by Mary responds to the human experience of despair.

We know the child will die, and we ask if the life-producing forces are to be routed ultimately by the life-destroying forces. But in the encounter with woman as mother, we may become aware of the overwhelming power of life – and we perceive life as a gift, a given, as something wildly, madly, exuberantly gratuitous. Thus we have experienced grace, and we ask: ‘Might there possibly be a Giver, of whom fertility, maternity, and even the lovely-eyed Madonna are but a

pale reflection?' And we can begin to hope once again, committing ourselves to bringing joy and happiness and peace and love to the earth.

The faith of the followers of Mary is not rooted in social science or social ideology but in a vision of a world animated by the passionate, life-giving tenderness of which the Madonna is a sacrament.

"If God is androgynous, then it is all right for humankind to be androgynous."

If Mary reflects an androgynous God – women need not fear being strong, and men need not fear being tender.

"The high tradition of Mariology is compatible with a theory of the role of women which emphasizes the freedom, independence, strength, passion, and responsibility of maternity. It is less compatible with one that emphasizes the quiet, docile, retiring, passive, fragile role of women."

Chapter SIX: VIRGO / *Atque Semper Virgo*

The Virgin symbol is a limit-language paradox, representing renewal, transformation, the beginning of a new creation.

"The symbol of woman as positive transforming force. . . is not easily understood in a world which worships orgasm as the only meaningful sexual interchange."

This current fixation on orgasmic satisfaction seems to make it impossible for many people to consider any other dimensions of human sexuality.

The transforming influence of the opposite sex is an obvious datum of ordinary life.

E.g., there is a perennially human propensity for the members of one sex to try to impress members of the other (and this desire to impress a member of the opposite sex is quite unrelated to whether one is sleeping with him/her or not).

The presence of a member of the opposite sex heightens our consciousness and transforms our behavior.

In a happy marriage, the wife plays numerous roles: nurse, organizer, mother, mistress, daughter, provider of comic relief.

"Lovemaking between husband and wife integrates all these other and transforming dimensions of their relationship. Yet, over the long haul, it is precisely their ability to use sexual differentiation as an occasion for a mutual transforming and renewing experience that will condition the payoff each receives from genital sexuality."

This transforming power of the opposite sex is universal, because it is biologically rooted.

To our archaic ancestors, the woman is primordially the natural, nourishing principle, the mistress of all that implies nourishment – house, table, hearth, and bed.

Female goddesses: of the crops, herds, or curative and intoxicant fruits, the nymphs, the wood spirits, the graces and the muses.

The mother goddess reaches her height of development in the figure of Sophia (Wisdom) in late antiquity.

“She is not abstract, disinterested knowledge but rather the wisdom that comes from loving participation.”

The goddess has now become interested not only in reproduction and physical fertility, but also in the whole man through the process of his spiritual development.

“... a spiritual force, calling forth the highest and the most noble in the creative powers of human beings.”

The moon became the natural symbol of the transforming goddess.

Mary, the Virgin ‘full of grace’, is the spiritual mother who watches over the course of her children’s spiritual development.

“For her to be full of grace. . . means that she is full of graciousness *for us*.”

The limit-experience of weariness is the human existential need which opens us up to the limit-experience of woman as inspiration, transformation, and renewal.

“Mary, the virgin mother, is the Christian symbol that illuminates our weariness, our discouragement, our frustration, and draws us in tenderly and compassionately to an experience which inspires and transforms us, gives us new life. She is the virgin mother presiding over our rebirth, just as in the birth of Jesus she presided over the rebirth of humanity.”

This renewal experience is essentially an experience of fidelity.

“... brief numinous instants in which we see the whole purpose of the universe converging, and we see our place in it.”

“... faithful love, love with plan and purpose, love which does not repent of the promises it has made, love which draws us up out of ourselves and integrates us into its dazzling unity, love which bathes us with joy, serenity, peace, confidence, and sometimes even literally heat and light.”

Our perception is reintegrated into a new structure of confidence.

“To love life is not purposeless, aimless, useless, not unintelligent, not blind; it is rather directed, purposeful, concerned, involved with us.”

There are episodes of transformation and rebirth available to us in our everyday life, if we are willing to pause to consider them:

- A gentle breeze at the end of a hot day;
- A rain shower at the end of a dry summer;
- The first warm breath of spring after months of cold;
- A kind word from someone we have helped.

These are all revelatory of the existence of a reality that is 'full of grace'.

The illumination given is that of trust.

"You can risk yourself in relationships with others because even if you get hurt, the tender virgin mother, reflecting the tender renewing God, will drape her great blue mantle around you in protection."

And if it is possible to trust, then it is possible to make commitments which are permanent and which will not be withdrawn when one grows weary, frustrated, and discouraged.

"When the cause for which one stands receives frustration, setback, failure – as do all causes – then one has the resourcefulness, the resilience, the strength to bounce back and start over."

Mary incarnates and symbolizes the human capacity to be transformed and renewed and the divine love at work in the world striving to transform and renew our troubled, battered, weary souls when we are caught in the frustrations and discouragements of 'the middle course of life.'

"Under normal circumstances, a renewal experience of sufficient power to shatter our weariness and restore our confidence in the fidelity of Being will come out of the marriage relationship."

One can trust, one can take risks, one can begin to explore the mysterious, the numinous which lurks just beneath the surface of the most ordinary and the most everyday, the most routine and the most matter of fact, the most commonplace."

The virgin mother is a symbol of possibility; she stands for a second chance.

Chapter SEVEN: SPONSA / Ave Maris Stella

A 'death' image : the Sponsa, the seductress, deprives us of the individuality and the rationality of life in the frenzy of orgasmic release.

"Mary as a symbol of the limit-experience of sexual differentiation as manifested in sexual passion."

The overwhelming power and pleasure of physical union between the sexes was sacred to early human kind.

The passionate desire for union with the body of a member of the opposite sex ('lust') is more than biological and psychological: because of its intense power and force, it is interpreted and given meaning within a context of sacredness.

The rituals of the fertility goddess cults often came to be identified with the breaking down of sexual restraints that were necessary to keep a community together.

"... to provide socially legitimate escape from sexual tensions."

From the very dawn of human religion as we know it, it was thought that something as strong as sexual desire must give us some hints about whatever is ultimate, absolute, and final..

"If God craved unity the way we crave the body of another, then who was the object of his craving for unity? The answer was a startling, and it must have seemed blasphemous to many, insight: God craved union with us."

Yahweh wanted the whole personality, body and soul, of his people: "So the people became personified as the Daughter of Zion for whom Yahweh felt a passionate lust, a lust which would produce eventually a messiah, who in his turn would preside over Yahweh's Messianic age."

In God's relationship to us, there is something like the passionate longing that we feel at the height of our lust for the body of one who is sexually different from us.

Whether God is the passionate aggressor or the passionate temptress, the message is clear: God wants us and he is leading us on or pursuing us toward eventual union.

The sexually attacking male, if he has any skills at all, is teasing, arousing, enticing; and the sexually tempting female, if she has any wiles at all, knows when to stop being passive and take the offensive.

This is what Mary, the Daughter of Zion, with whom Yahweh has fallen in love, represents.

Mary reveals God to us as alluring, tempting, charming, arousing, attracting.

The existential need as a prelude to the limit-experience of an encounter with a passionately aroused Being is a combination of alienation, constriction, restraint, loneliness.

I am alienated; I encounter something which arouses my wonder and which becomes a revelation of giftedness; the thing-become-symbol possesses me by its attractiveness; in the act of abandoning myself through the gift of the thing-turned-symbol, I abandon my old structures of perception; the new structures of perception which emerge from the limit-experience are looser, more open, more flexible, more sensitive, more in communion with other things; I now approach the world not with fear, suspicion or inhibition, with joy, liberation, abandonment.

"When human abandonment of any sort becomes a limit-experience, a sacrament of grace, a revelation, through the impact on us of the being of the thing to which we have given ourselves, then there is revealed to us the glorious gift and liberating seductiveness and passion of the ultimate."

Freedom is the illumination offered to us: "If our life is dominated and guided by one who is calling us to ever greater love, then there is nothing to be afraid of."

"... we are free to live and love and laugh and rejoice."

Mary, as the beloved Sponsa of God, stands as a symbol for us that the freedom of abandonment to the passionate goodness of the universe is a possibility for our lives.

If you are liberated by a love that captivates your heart, you simply must celebrate.

We rejoice in having abandoned ourselves in passionate love of an aggressive and seductive deity regardless of the political and economic outlook. We can chant the Magnificat to the Daughter of Zion, even with the Black Death moving through the streets of our city.

The Mary myth incarnates the worldview which advocates joyous abandonment of restraint in the relationship between a man and woman who are committed to one another.

“Experimentation, playfulness, joyous abandonment ought to be characteristic of the sexual relationship of those who believe that God is a passionate lover, a ravisher, a seducer, a temptress all combined.”

“Consecrated virginity is one way of responding to Yahweh’s love. It is a way of reacting to the grace that is revealed to us in limit-experiences. It is a way of serving and loving other human beings.”

There are many ways one can abandon oneself; there are many ways to celebrate; there are many forms of service in which you can rejoice.

“The symbol of Mary, the virgin Daughter of Zion, is sufficiently broad to reinforce all deep, passionate, powerful commitments that we humans can make, as well as every joyous, celebratory abandonment in which we give ourselves over to the goodness of being.”

Chapter EIGHT: PIETA / *Felix Coeli Porta*

“It is from the earth that life comes; it is the earth to which life returns. The earth is the great womb; it produces us in life, it devours us in death. It is the place from whence we come, the place to which we go to rot. If woman is like the womb and like the earth, then she is both the giver and the destroyer of life.”

Reality, whatever it is, brings us into being only to take that being away.

Small wonder, then, that the woman, the bearer of life, is also seen as the bearer of death.

We are ambivalent about the source of life and the end of life: both may look terrible on occasion, and both may also on occasion look attractive.

“Death may be a hideous fate, but it may be also a gentle and peaceful sleep.”

And may not the raw, primal creativity, which produces us and destroys us, bring us new life once again?

“The church reintegrates humankind by first requiring that individual humans must die in order that they might live again not in suspicion and mistrust, which separates us from our fellows, but in generous love, which unites us to one another. Mary the Pieta becomes a ‘goddess’ of death insofar as she and her type, the church, presides over the death and rebirth experience of baptism.”

In popular piety, Mary the Mother can also be a fierce and destructive protector of those who assault her children.

So various cults of Mary became identifies with persecuted and oppressed peoples who sought religious and political freedom.

“Mary, the warlike mother, reflects the deity who for all his love and tenderness can legitimately be thought of as fiercely angry at oppression and injustice, at persecution and suffering and misery.”

Ambivalence about life is the existential need which precedes dialogue with the Pieta symbol.

There is a deep weariness of life conveyed in the notion that we are pilgrims wandering through a veil of tears.

“Our ambivalence about life is essentially the result of our dissatisfaction with the individuation that means separation. We wish that we could be lost again in the great cosmic processes from which we emerged.”

The limit-experience which can follow such an existential need is that of dying to the individual self and being absorbed in the cosmic collectivity which can give us a new, more serene and peaceful life.

“One takes up life for a brief period and then returns it. It was a loving and benign power which gave us life, it will be a loving and benign power that receives it back.”

“Having ‘lost’ ourselves temporarily to the thing that has invaded us and become a symbol, we emerge with our perceptions restructured, viewing the world and its problems, worries and troubles, with a greater sense of the transiency and contingency of all things. From this improved perspective we are able to give ourselves more effectively to the world, since now we work from peace, not from terror.”

“We have learned to care and not to care.”

There is a rebirth experienced in the acceptance of death.

“Jesus’ dead body, which was taken gently and lovingly into the arms of his mother, has risen; and in our experience of the dead and risen Jesus, we encounter the best symbol available to re-present our unshakable conviction that human life does make sense, as well as our paradoxical intuition that death is birth and dying is a prelude to rising again.”

The grace revealed in this limit-experience is the perception that the love which gives life and which absorbs us back into primal unity will not destroy whatever is most truly us, but will

liberate and enrich it. The self will not be annihilated but will be transformed. He who loses his life shall find it.

The illumination given is that of resignation and peace: "We accept death, and in the peace which comes from that acceptance we are able to live."

"One does what one can while one has time; but one has not failed because the messianic age had not appeared before one's 25th birthday."

"The service of other human beings is far more effective when it is done in a spirit of peace and serenity, when it is done to reflect the graciousness of the universe rather than to do penance for one's own guilt."

"To be effective in one's social commitment one must first of all die to the old self that seeks self-validation through the commitment and rise to the new self which is capable of giving generously to others without any fixation on the self-as-given."

Such generous, resigned, peaceful giving of oneself is absolutely essential in the intimate relationship between man and woman: "In the limit-experience of resignation and acceptance, one lays down gladly and generously. In human intimacy one not only dies to the old, selfish, separated self, one dies for the other person, the other who has lured one into the snare of intimacy and promises a rebirth, a new life, if only one will give oneself to the total vulnerability of death."

"The woman depicted at the foot of the cross in most Christian art are deep, deep in sorrow, yet able to cope. They have suffered a terrible loss, but they have not lost their faith. They have plunged into the depth, but they are strong enough to rise up. They are resigned; they have accepted. Despite their sorrow, they are in the process of being born again, anticipating, as it were, the resurrection of their son. This is what the limit-experience of acceptance is all about, and what Mary as Pieta – the church, our loving mother – is supposed to represent to all her followers."

Chapter NINE: Our Light, Our Sweetness, and Our Hope?

