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Essay 1, Track 2: The Identity of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

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Autonomy and freedom are often considered prerequisites to shaping one's personal and collective identities. To many, it seems that only when one is autonomous and free, one can cultivate herself and thus become her own *self*. However, can these two conditions also play a deeper role in identity formation? Perhaps rather than only serving as catalysts, they can be some of the substrates of one's identity. The question, therefore, becomes whether the *way* an individual uses her autonomy and freedom can become the key component of this person's identity.

An example of a figure for whom the answer is positive could be Mary of Nazareth. This religious figure is venerated in multiple traditions, but it seems that the doctrine of the Catholic Church particularly clearly links her identity to her use of autonomy and free will, a manifestation of which is the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. This essay is a short attempt to uncover this relationship while exploring the identity of the mother of Jesus in some aspects of the tradition of the Catholic Church. What follows is a discussion of what the tradition can tell about Mary's identity, the role of autonomy and free will in her identity, and whether Saint Mary can be considered a "Moral Saint" as defined by Susan Wolf.¹

The Catholic tradition not preserved many details about Mary other than the ones of a theological (or, more precisely, Mariological) significance. This fact, *per se*, influences her identity in the minds of Catholics. When thinking about Mary, they can have a clear notion of her

¹ Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," in *The Journal of Philosophy* 79:8 (August 1982)

role in history (of humanity and of the Church), her virtues to follow, or the relationships they can form with her (e.g. they may treat her as their spiritual mother). However, they cannot have a precise understanding of her character or preferences; they do not know what jokes made her laugh, what food she liked, or what party she would vote for today. Culture- or context-specific identities of Mary, either the ones she had in ancient Palestine or the ones she would assume if she miraculously appeared in any other place and time, are not salient in the Catholic tradition.

However, basic biblical references and various forms of traditional devotions allow many Catholic to associate Mary with a range of different descriptors (whether she would use each of them to describe herself is, of course, subject to probability rather than certainty). In the Bible, Mary is a woman, a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a virgin, a Galilean, and a Jew. In Catholic Mariology, Mary is the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin, the Queen of Heaven and Earth, the Seat of Wisdom, and entire litanies (literally) of other titles.

Moreover, Catholics infer Mary's personality from her words and behavior described in a few short biblical passages. The most common interpretations of the personality of Mary point to her readiness to follow God's will, her full obedience to personal vows (virginity) and religious precepts (during the presentation in the temple; Luke 2:22. 34f), her concern for others (at the wedding of Cana; John 2:3-5), or her perseverance and trust toward Jesus (despite misunderstandings and bewilderments, such as Luke 2:19; Luke 2:48; John 2:3-5). The Canticle of Mary, her longest speech in the Bible, reveals some additional aspects of her personality, such as her confidence in God as well as in herself, or her appreciation of God's trustworthiness and justice (including its socioeconomic aspect; Luke 1:46-55). In the absence of a coherent

biography, these short passages and their interpretation constitute Mary's identity in the tradition.²

The aspect of the identity of Mary that is probably the most interesting for those concerned with autonomy, is her title "Immaculate Conception," which contains the notion that she has always been free from sin.³ This singular identity—which, along with her dignity as the Mother of God places her above all other creatures—begs the question of Mary's autonomy and free will.⁴

On the one hand, Mary was predestined to this identity, as she did not have agency before her conception. One way the Catholic theology justifies the immaculate conception is by asserting that the Jesus could not have had a sinful biological mother.⁵ From this perspective, it was the future becoming the mother of Jesus that determined Mary's sinlessness. This suggests that Mary's will perfectly conformed to her mission. Moreover, Mary was not strictly autonomous (following Appiah's term for the Kantian concept of autonomy).⁶ In her response to God's angel she called herself a handmaid of the Lord, which suggests a complete submission to God's will. In addition, Mary's command "do whatever [Jesus] tells you" to the servers at the wedding in Cana seems to flow from her own submissive approach to the son of God (Luke 2:5).

On the other hand, the Catholic Church emphasizes that Mary has remained sinless out of her free choice. As such, Mary fully possesses a free will; she chooses to be *free from* sin while

² "Even if one takes these scenes as literal historical accounts, they do not add up to an integrated portrait of Mary."—"Mary, mother of Jesus." Britannica.

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Immaculate-Conception-Roman-Catholicism>

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html

⁵ <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/apologetics/why-catholics-believe-in-the-immaculate-conception.html>

⁶ Appiah, Ethics, Chapter 2 (pp. 36-61)

remaining *free to sin*.⁷ Mary is also granted a degree of autonomy, as she realizes her life story as the Mother of God only upon her full consent to God's request (Luke 1:38). She seems to voluntarily and independently continue to participate in this new life path when she goes to Jerusalem to witness the death of Jesus, despite the absence of the apostles, and remains there to await the Pentecost, together with the apostles (John 19: 25--27; Acts 1:14). Moreover, Mary's intervention at the wedding of Cana, when she surprises Jesus with a request to perform a miracle, suggests that her agency in God's plan extends beyond personal autonomy.

This complex relationship between Mary's predestination and submission versus freedom and autonomy reveals itself in the way Mary participates in the design of her life. Although she does not sketch a figure to paint with her actions, she finds an alternative way to realize a plan of life that makes her happy and fulfilled. While its details are not clear, Mary certainly had some particular life plan before the angel's annunciation. She planned to remain a virgin for the rest of her life, possibly in relation to a sort of religious vocation (considering common motives for virginity in her culture).⁸ This made her ask the angel how she could reconcile the plan with bearing the son of God, a new religious duty which she apparently deemed in conflict with the previous religious commitment.

The moment Mary accepts God's mission, regardless of how different or more difficult than her original plan of life it was, symbolizes the way Mary eventually fulfills her life, pursues her identity, and uses her freedom. Her entire agency over these issues relies on continuously listening to God. Like in Cavareo's interpretation of Blixen's narrative, Mary does not try nor is able to draw a stork by herself.⁹ However, unlike in Cavarero's conclusion that living a life like a

⁷ <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/was-marys-immaculate-conception-absolutely-necessary>

⁸ <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/555/article/historical-mary>

⁹ Cavarero, p. 9

novel would be an error, Mary in a sense lives such a life —she lives the divine novel.¹⁰ She does not indifferently submit to fate; rather, by actively, trustfully, and carefully listening to God, she finds her way to craft a life story and an identity. As she expresses it in her Cantic, her “handmaid’s lowliness” eventually led her to a position in the history of Israel (as well as the Church and the entire world) that makes her “blessed,” or joyful (Luke 1:46-55).

In the light of this interpretation, being the handmaid of the Lord is probably the only identity Mary really cares about in her temporal life. Although the biblical narrative does not leave us with a complete psychological portrait of Mary, she seems to be constantly willing to accept whatever identities (or perhaps just roles) God assigns to her at a given moment. When God proposes that she becomes the mother of God, she accepts it; when the son of God addresses her “woman,” which (in the Catholic theology) identifies the woman who cooperates in the salvation of humanity, she does not protest; when Jesus names her the mother of John, she carries over her maternal care to the apostles. Thus, her identity as a servant makes it plausible that she treats all other identities as secondary or even contingent. In other words, Mary focuses on realizing particular tasks—as a woman, a mother, a Jew— rather than on understanding or expressing herself.

Yet the key to understand the identity of Mary in Catholic theology is that for Mary, the choice of a lowest identity in this life astonishingly leads her to acquiring the highest identity in eternal life. Her limited pursuit of an identity in general and the specific choice of arguably one of the most constraining identities available seems puzzling. The trust in the graciousness and justice of God—who disperses the arrogant, throws down the rules, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry, and sweeps away the rich, as per Mary’s Cantic—provides some explanation (Luke

¹⁰ Cavarero, p. 9

1:46-55). Based on such a belief in God, Mary sings that He “has looked upon” her humility and submission and thus “has done great things” for her. The great things, according to the Catholic Mariology, mean the new identity of Mary in relation to God (the beloved daughter of God the Father, the Mother of the son of God, and the Spouse of the Holy Spirit) and the rest of creation (the Queen of Heaven and Earth).¹¹

Does this discussion suggests that Mary’s identity choice is a kind of investment that maximizes her eternal rewards? Or that Mary realizes one of the two Wolf’s *moral saints* models, which would imply that calculated all her actions while striving for moral perfectionism and leading a boring lifestyle?¹² Although Mary has been rewarded by God and declared saint by the Church, the answers to both questions seem negative. The Catholic tradition portrays her as a person solely focused on pursuing the will of God, not even on being more rational, ethical, moral, or polite.

The narrative does not give a solid basis to infer either that Mary bargained with God or that she restlessly avoided misconduct. Her behavior seems pure and simple: once she knows the will of God, she pursues it without regards to the consequences. And while Mary achieved a moral perfection, the Catholic tradition is far from portraying her as perfectionist. In fact, Mary was not too shy to offend anyone once prompted by her conscience toward a higher good. Although she asked the angel what would happen to her virginity, she did not express a similar concern about the reactions of her husband or relatives to her unexpected pregnancy. Her request to Jesus in Cana was short, brave, and astonishing—the simple words “they have no wine” that achieved her goal—rather than elaborate, apologetic, or gentle (John 2:3-5). Behind the tone of

¹¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html

¹² Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 79:8 (August 1982)

Mary's Canticle one cannot find a shy and reserved person, but rather one whose confidence in God and empowerment by His grace exalts her to the highest dignity (Luke 1:46-55). Finally, although the tradition does not leave any clue as to whether Mary enjoyed entertainment or not, her persistence in service to God made her life, full of both joyful and sorrowful events, interesting enough to be frequently and extensively meditated upon in a prayer called the rosary.

In conclusion, although the Catholic tradition has passed down too little information to extensively discuss Mary of Nazareth's historical identities in relation to other humans, Catholic Mariology does contain enough information for an attempt to describe Mary's identity. It seems that this identity is built upon the perfect alignment of her free will and autonomy with the will of God, and this legitimizes her other salient identities, such as the Mother of God or the Queen of Heaven and Earth. Although, under the guidance of God, Mary seems to have agency in shaping her life story, inasmuch as she freely chooses to follow the path of a prophecy that she is confident will be fulfilled by her consent and with her cooperation. Thus, the reason she follows a path of self-denial, humility, and the lowest socioeconomic status is to fully rely on God, and this eventually leads to the highest joy, freedom, and glory in eternity.

The Canticle of Mary

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.

The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him.

He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.

He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly.

The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy,

according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Luke 1:46-55

References

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