Re-baptizing Mary: Toward a Mennonite-Feminist Re(dis)covery of the Mother of Jesus

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"We hear a longing for Mary," said Mary Schertz, professor at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS). "We need to attend more carefully to this enigmatic woman."[1] She was speaking to the approximately one hundred pastors, artists, scholars, and others – including myself – who had gathered at AMBS in 2011, to encounter "Mary in Anabaptist Dress." Planners cited a neglect of the biblical Mary, the woman who "sings the most powerful, prophetic words in the New Testament," who provides "a female model of discipleship" and the "potential for a new way of looking at our own call to peacemaking," as motivation for the conference, which they hoped would "create an Anabaptist perspective on Mary."[2] During the conference, former Mennonite Church USA moderator Elizabeth Soto Albrecht lamented that Mennonites "'have kept Jesus,' but not the womb that bore him, the woman who created with God."[3]

As ironic as it may be for these spiritual (and some fleshly) descendants of the Radical Reformers to gather to voice their longing for the quintessentially Roman Catholic figure of Mary, it is not unthinkable. Consisting predominantly of Anabaptist-Mennonite women, these were members of a liminal tradition arguably poised between Catholicism and Protestantism in its emphasis on voluntary adult baptism into the church, communal discipleship, and an ethic of nonviolence or enemy-love.[4] But they were also, crucially, *women* and/or *mothers* seeking affirmation of their embodied particularity, of their experience integrating faith, parenting, and past and present women's work, within a tradition which has historically glossed over such longings with a 'universal' call to follow the (male) Jesus Christ.[5]

To place my discussion within the context of the AMBS conference on "Mary in Anabaptist Dress" suggests several things about my theological method and approach. First, it names and contributes to the emerging conversation between feminist and Mennonite theologies, two perspectives which are admittedly contested and difficult to define due to their shared anti-hierarchical character (i.e., their communal biblical hermeneutics).[6] Though feminist and Mennonite perspectives are not always easily reconciled, I follow Mennonite-feminist theologian Lydia Neufeld Harder in situating myself at the intersection of the two. This means that I hold to a feminist "hermeneutics of suspicion," a critique of Christian Scriptures and theology based on the norm of women's embodied experiences, which have not historically informed theology. But at the same time, I hold to what Harder terms a Mennonite "hermeneutics of obedience," although I prefer to call it a hermeneutics of discipleship, that is, a respect for the authority and liberative possibilities of the Bible for the church as an egalitarian discipleship community.[7] Within feminist theology, the term "liberative" points to biblical interpretation and theology which resists patriarchy (the "rule of the father") and affirms the full humanity of women and others who have historically been marginalized in the church and society. As such, it is liberative in the spirit of Jesus' declaration in Luke 4:18-21 and the Magnificat.

Secondly, while such a historical/critical yet confessional and ecclesial theological approach may seem self-contradictory, such hybridized perspectives predominate among "third-wave" Christian feminist theologians, according to Joy Ann McDougall. Moving beyond the simplistic "radical vs. reformist typology" of second-wave (1970s and 80s) feminist methodologies, McDougall speaks of "most" contemporary Christian feminist theologians viewing "feminist and ecclesial traditions as inseparable and mutually

informative dimensions of their theological identity. They move to and fro between these two received traditions giving neither absolute authority nor uncritical acceptance as norms for their theological construction" or reconstruction of central Christian doctrines.[8] As McDougall states elsewhere, "Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, many feminist theologians are 'taking back' their confessional traditions, refusing to let them go until they wrestle a feminist blessing from them," by which they, in turn, "revitalize the entire community of faith."[9] This confessional and ecclesial approach, further, connotes the requirement to both "deconstruct" and "reconstruct" the central Christian figure of Mary,[10] not simply as an intellectual or academic exercise, but as a response to the specific needs and "longings" of women for their particular experiences as women to be affirmed within a historically patriarchal tradition;[11] in other words, this is not an abstract manipulation of the tradition, but a pastoral-theological undertaking within the context of the – in this case, Mennonite – church, as it joins the wider, ecumenical feminist conversations concerning Mary of Nazareth.[12] As with all theological work offered to the church, its reception, of course, has no guarantees.

My Mennonite-feminist re(dis)covery of Mary will unfold in three sections: first, I will trace the presence of Mary within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition understood as both Catholic and Protestant, noting especially the centrality of the Bible as a historical and holy text, discipleship in connection with notions of mystical-ethical *Gelassenheit*, and a profound ethic of peacemaking or nonviolence, all of which potentially shape a portrait of Mary in "Anabaptist dress." Secondly, I will combine this Mennonite perspective with second- and third-wave feminist critiques of traditional Mariology, which both highlight the need to attend to women's neglected experiences as a source for theology and, relatedly, remind Mennonites of the burden traditional Mariology has placed on women and the significant risks associated with re(dis)covering Mary's female body. As Catholic feminists warn, Mary's virgin motherhood has often functioned precisely to denigrate ordinary women's experiences of sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering, and, moreover, to bar specifically *female* bodies from leadership in the church – something underemphasized in the midst of all that "longing." I will take the position that as long as the risks of Marian devotion are sufficiently recognized, a "re-baptized" Mary has the subversive potential to affirm the courageous discipleship, powerful mothering, and revolutionary nonviolence of women within and beyond the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, making her an exemplary figure for the whole

church as the egalitarian Body of Christ. I will close with a sketch of what such a "re-baptized," Mennonite-feminist Mary might look like.

"She retained their affection": Anabaptist Fragments of Mary

Kathryn Tanner has advocated that feminists question the prevailing accounts of a given tradition's past in order to reclaim a more gender-egalitarian strand of the tradition.[13] Within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, such a tactic involves a look its origins in the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century, which still hold significant authority to legitimize biblical-theological and ethical claims in the Mennonite church.[14] A Mennonite-feminist rereading of Anabaptist history questions the still prevalent assumption that Anabaptism was and is a radical form of Protestantism with few, if any, ties to Catholic theology and practice. This assumption renders the re(dis)covery of Mary an artificial project: an effort to graft a predominantly Catholic figure onto a Protestant root. Granted, Anabaptist-Mennonites share central Reformation principles (priesthood of all believers, a primarily memorial understanding of the elements of Communion, *sola scriptura*), but remain distinctive in their practices of voluntary, adult baptism and a "visible church" ecclesiology based on communal discipleship or imitation of Jesus, which includes pacifism/nonviolence. According to several prominent historians, however, it is precisely these distinctives which tied early Anabaptism to late-medieval lay monasticism. Adult baptism clearly echoes the practice of monastic vows, and therefore reflects "an anthropology based on free will, yieldedness (*Gelassenheit*), and grace" and a view of salvation not based on "faith *alone*, but…a faith that obeys," such that the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit "must be visible in works" or a "visibly holy life" – i.e., discipleship in the (nonviolent) way of Jesus, made possible by human cooperation with God's grace. This notion of *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness, surrender, or union with God; "accepting God's will") thus takes on a sacramental-mystical significance, marking discipleship as incarnational, as bringing about Christ's very presence in the work of the faithful: "Christ must be born in us."[15] Anabaptists thus understood the voluntary church as "the sacramental community, transformed into the body of Christ, and capacitated for peacemaking."[16] Centered on the idea of a "visible church," this understanding of discipleship clearly paralleled the discipline, simplicity, and communal expression of faith which lay monastic

life entailed, as seen, for instance, in the Brethren of the Common Life. It is on this basis that Mennonites today variously self-identify as Catholic, Protestant, both, or neither.[17]

Further evidence for the ties which remained between early Anabaptism and Catholicism can be found in John Rempel's claim that Mary of Nazareth "retained the affection of many reformed [i.e. Anabaptist] believers," despite their rejection of her "mediating role" in redemption. According to Rempel, several well-known early Anabaptists held to a "christocentric view of Mary." These included former priest and doctor of theology Balthasar Hubmaier, who did not condemn Anabaptist "reverence for Mary," but asserted her perpetual virginity ("before, during, and after the birth" of Jesus), affirmed her faith, and granted her the title of *Theotokos* or "God-bearer."[18] Pilgram Marpeck also regarded Mary highly, as she confirmed the true humanity of the incarnate, enfleshed Christ.[19] Andrew P. Klager argues that "Marpeckite" view of the sacrements even credits Mary's "pure flesh and blood" with the elements of Communion, since "the humanity that Christ received from Mary is ... the same 'flesh and blood of Christ, which ... is the right food in the Lord's Supper.'" Marpeck's view contrasts with the "celestial-flesh Christology" of, among others, former priest Menno Simons,[20] for whom the utterly sinless "Jesus was born *in* but not *of* Mary,"[21] such that "Christ in the Incarnation passed through Mary's womb like a ray of sunshine through a glass of water without taking on any of her 'sinful flesh,'" which nevertheless remained "holy," "pure," and "blessed," for Menno.[22] But Rempel observes that these examples of early Anabaptist "affection" for Mary are incomplete: though some sixteenth-century Anabaptists mention the Annunciation, none refer to the Magnificat or to Mary's presence at the cross.[23] Beyond Rempel, I contend that Mary's distance from her biblical-historical depiction points to a larger problem within official Catholic Mariology which early Anabaptists echo rather than subvert: the reduction of Mary to a surreal symbol, the disembodied, archetypal feminine that corresponds to the Divine imaged as masculine, indeed as male. In short, she is not seen as a flesh-and-blood woman, despite confirming the (ontological) humanity of Jesus Christ, and hence cannot speak to the experiences of women.[24] Significantly, Rempel does not mention Hans Hut (died 1527),[25] who arguably breaks this pattern, writing,

> The Word must be conceived in a pure heart through the Holy Spirit and become flesh in us. This happens with great consternation and trembling as happened to Mary when she heard the will of God from

> the angel….When the Word is born and has become flesh in us, and we are able to praise God for this great favour, our hearts rest in peace, and we become Christ's mother, brother and sister.[26]

Hut's unvarnished description of Mary as afraid yet faithful begins to acknowledge a decidedly *human* Mary, and thus provides a welcome precedence from within early Anabaptism for contemporary feminist views on Mary, especially insofar as he references Mary's exemplary, incarnational faith, which is bound up with her mothering, her Magnificat, and peace.

Of course, the potentially liberative interpretation of Mary by one early Anabaptist is hardly enough from which to begin a re(dis)covery of the mother of Jesus. Mennonite-feminist/womanist theologian Malinda Berry has rightly encouraged contemporary Mennonites to ask, "Exactly whose experience has significantly informed our theology?" If we remain beholden to "our favorite sixteenth-century Anabaptist(s)," she concludes, then we are problematically out of touch with our present-day context, including feminist and womanist insights regarding gendered experience and power.[27] As Harder argues, Anabaptists today are linked "not primarily by institutional structures but rather connected historically by the recognition of common faith origins and ... a common conversation about themes important to the Anabaptist movement, such as discipleship, adult baptism, the separation of church and state and peace-making." The church is also viewed as a "hermeneutic community," empowered by the Spirit for biblical-ethical discernment, thus approaching the Bible with what I have termed a hermeneutics of discipleship.[28] While this hermeneutics is arguably "suspicious" in its own way, by virtue of arising from a minority, peace-oriented perspective, a number of Mennonite theologians who are women have pointed out the neglect of women's embodied experiences *qua* women – and by extension, a specifically *feminist* hermeneutics of suspicion – within contemporary Mennonite theology.[29] This hermeneutics provides crucial reminders of the significant risks involved in re(dis)covering the female body of Mary.

Virgin-Mother, Queen of Heaven: Feminist Critiques of High Mariology

Since Mennonite conversations on Mary and the experience of women are just beginning, I turn to the pioneering, second-wave feminist conversations on her (predominantly Rosemary Radford

Ruether, Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, and the more recent contribution of Elizabeth A. Johnson). This is in part because they are influential *Catholic* feminists grappling with two millennia of official Catholic doctrines concerning Mary, but also because of their more radical approach to demythologizing Mary, largely rejecting Marian doctrines and turning instead to a historical-critical biblical portrait of her as an ordinary, Jewish woman. This both reminds Mennonites of just how fraught Mary's recovery or rediscovery is and resonates with their biblically grounded theologizing, which likewise has no need to retain traditional Marian doctrines.

Admitting with Paul Tillich that Protestantism lacks and needs "the feminine element provided through Mary," Ruether observes that, "churches with a high Mariology ... are most negative to women. It is the Protestant churches without Mariology which ordain women."[30] Calling Catholic Mariology "nothing if not ambiguous," Johnson protests the dominant, malestream interpretations of Mary as "an idealized woman, created as an act of men's definition of women, whose voices were officially silenced. Strong emphasis on Mary's obedience, virginity, and primary importance as a mother shaped a religious symbol that satisfied the needs of a monastic or ecclesiastical male psyche more adequately than it served women's spiritual search or social capabilities."[31]

Perhaps most obviously, the emphasis on Mary's virgin motherhood, intensified into the doctrine of Mary's Perpetual Virginity, distances her from women's experience. According to the extra-biblical *Protoevangelium of James* and *Pseudo-Matthew*, Mary is said to have virginally conceived Jesus and given birth without pain and without the loss of her virginity (her midwives reportedly confirmed that "a virgin has conceived, a virgin has brought forth, and a virgin she remains").[32] Along with the later doctrine of Mary's own Immaculate Conception (i.e., a sexual but graced conception without original sin), Mary is hereby dramatically distanced from the ordinarily "messy" processes of human reproduction and mothering, thought to be tainted with sin and mortality because of Eve's curse of pain in childbirth (Gen. 3:16). It is only through miraculous divine intervention that a woman's body is rendered "pure" enough (i.e., sufficiently divorced from female sexuality and embodiment) to mother the Son of God.[33] Instead of being representative of women, Mary thus becomes the great *exception* among women:[34] "'[a]lone of all her sex' she stands pure and blessed by God." The Mary-Eve, spirit-flesh, "madonna-whore" dichotomies relegate most women to the latter categories, Johnson asserts. It revealis a pattern "which exalts the symbol of the spiritual feminine but denigrates the sexual, maternal, carnal

reality of actual women in the concrete,"[35] something exacerbated, for instance, in the "lack of reproductive choices" among women living in poverty.[36] The doctrine of Mary's Assumption into heaven and her coronation as Queen of Heaven distanced Mary further from ordinary women and co-opted her into the racist, classist, violent ideologies of Christian colonialism.[37] Mary's representation as a Caucasian, European woman of privilege unmoors her once and for all from her Jewish, biblical-historical roots (feeding Christian notions of supersessionism over Judaism). Moreover it uses her to uphold the brutally violent status quo of colonialism, as in the disturbing example of Mary depicted as "*La Conquistadora*" (the female conqueror) in Santa Fe, New Mexico.[38] This, certainly, is not the Mary of the Magnificat, which "tellingly has found no place in traditional marian theology."[39]

High Mariology also bolsters a polarized gender dualism/segregation, with Mary symbolizing feminine/human submissiveness, which complements *masculine*/*Divine* activity and initiative. This dynamic is exemplified in Mary's supposedly passive response in the Annunciation; calling herself God's "handmaiden" or "slave," she essentially replies, "I'll do whatever you say."[40] The symbolism of Mary as Mother-Church, the submissive Bride to Christ's Bridegroom, further exacerbates this idea, according to Schuessler Fiorenza, dividing the church along hierarchical and gendered lines: "Whereas the hierarchy is said to represent Christ's masculinity and God's father power, all so-called lay Christians, men and women, are exhorted to imitate Mary, who perfectly represents the feminine qualities of receptivity, subordination, humility, malleability, obedience, and passivity."[41] Mary thus exhorts women in particular to "servanthood instead of discipleship" and "self-abnegating motherhood" as women's "primary vocation."[42] It also denies them ordained leadership because they lack a "physical resemblance" to Christ (i.e., a male body). Furthermore, Christ becomes distanced from his own and our humanity, which is increasingly associated with the feminine Mary, aided by the gendered trope of soft-hearted, feminine "mercy and forgiveness."[43]

Given "the torrent of misogyny that has flowed from traditional mariology," as Johnson puts it,[44] is it even possible to re(dis)cover a liberative Mary who does not curse but blesses female bodies? Feminist re-readings of Mary as an embodied, biblical-historical Jewish woman of exemplary courage and faith suggest that it is. "[L]et us not be too hasty to abandon Mary to our patriarchal opponents," writes Johnson.[45] Of course, the landscape of official Catholic Mariology has changed significantly since the Second Vat-

ican council in the 1960s, when Mary's role was somewhat tempered and reframed primarily in terms of her discipleship, which subsumes a higher, "christotypical" Mariology under an "ecclesiotypical" framework (i.e., Mary as a representative of the church rather than a co-Redemptrix alongside Christ).[46] This change is in one sense positive, in that Mary regains closer ties with her biblical portrayal and exceeds the stereotyped parameters of motherhood alone, but it is not without its pitfalls. As Elina Vuola argues, it also represents a turn away from Mary's embodiedness as a woman, a certain "embarrassment in the face of descriptions of pregnancy and parturition (Mary as a mother)." This is a stark contrast to, for instance, medieval devotion to and iconography of Mary breastfeeding Jesus, which connoted the sacredness of the maternal body in that Mary was "breastfeeding God" even as she participated in the life-giving power of God.[47] However, more recent feminist perspectives on Mary, including Johnson's, recognize and trace subversive, 'folk' readings – including women's readings – of a more human and embodied Mary which have existed throughout Christian history alongside (and sometimes even influencing) those given official sanction. It is primarily the "subjugated" and embodied knowledges of women which I bring into conversation with my own Mennonite tradition in order to "re-baptize" Mary, thereby privileging alternative visions of Mary, including her repressed and fragmented biblical portrait(s).[48] Since it is beyond the scope of this discussion to flesh out all of these details, I will limit my sketch of the liberative Mary to her discipleship, her embodied mothering, and her Magnificat, her revolutionary hymn of social justice and peace.

Mary/Miriam, Re-baptized: Glimpses of a Mennonite-Feminist Mary

Taking the position that the Mennonite longing for Mary is not misplaced, provided we remain attentive to the Marian pitfalls and distortions I have just elucidated, I draw on the commonalities between Mennonite and feminist theologies (as egalitarian "protest movements" which democratize biblical hermeneutics, emphasize faith as praxis/communal discipleship, and strive toward justice and/or peace – or "peace with justice"),[49] to re(dis)cover Mary in a way which takes both theological traditions seriously. From a Mennonite standpoint, she can be read as a disciple who, in a kind of adult baptism, mystically surrenders to the love of God (*Gelassenheit*) and, as part of the biblical "cloud of witnesses" (Heb.

12:1), practices her faith through nonviolent hospitality toward her son (i.e., *giving* life rather than taking it) and the revolutionary, prophetic words of the Magnificat. At the same time, Mary can affirm the feminist values of women's consent/choice, faith understood as egalitarian mutuality with God and each other, and women's embodied experiences of pregnancy, birth, mothering, and survival of sexual violence, as "subjugated knowledges" or "dangerous memories" which point to women's full humanity in God's image, full discipleship, and ultimate liberation.[50] Combining these two perspectives, Mary becomes 'enfleshed' as a historical figure yet also witnesses to the God of Life; without idealizing her or reducing her to a symbol, we can affirm her as an *ethical example*, even as she affirms us as women and men of faith. On these grounds, I provide the following three overlapping glimpses of the subversive, liberative potential of Mary or (in Hebrew) Miriam of Nazareth, critically and constructively 're-baptized' with Mennonite-feminist waters:

Courageous Jewish Disciple

Combining a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion with a phenomenological-mystical "hermeneutics of restoration," theologian Rose Ellen Dunn depicts the Annunciation (Luke 1) using medieval mystic Meister Eckhart's terminology of *Gelassenheit* interpreted as *mutuality* with God. As she describes it, "Mary ... is beckoned by the divine into possibility; responding in grace, she in turn beckons the divine into possibility. Transgressing the limits of language, this possibility slips into apophasis – into a moment of *Gelassenheit*: a mutual 'letting-be' or releasement of Mary and the divine into a mystical union of love."[51] Dunn stipulates that Luke's narrative does not reduce *Gelassenheit* to "piety" alone, but elaborates it into "the *kardia* of ethico-religious concern that follows in the words of the Magnificat." Rather than epitomizing submissiveness or self-denial in the face of God's demand, the Annunciation can be re-read as God's invitation[52] and commissioning of Miriam to be the mother of the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, particularly since, as late Catholic feminist Jane Schaberg has noted, this is the only biblical instance in which the person being commissioned gives "verbal consent." This assertion emphasizes Miriam's courageous, voluntary decision to "say yes," despite all of the uncertainties which faced her as a young, Jewish, peasant woman in an occupied land.[53] To my Mennonite ears, Miriam's chosen commitment (that she "hears the word of God and keeps it" – cf. Mark 3:31-35) foreshadows her son's adult baptism and commissioning, and recovers

Anabaptist notions of *Gelassenheit* as empowering, resonating particularly with the vulnerability and risk involved in an ethic of peace. Feminist-liberationist Dorothee Soelle has similarly appropriated Eckhart's mystical-ethical language of living and acting "without a why" (*sunder warumbe*), writing, "[b]ut the rose has no why, and one has to do some things *sunder warumbe*, even when they meet with no success now. There is an inner strength of being-at-peace which cannot make the goal orientation of action the measure of all things. All nonviolent action in a violent world participates, in this sense, in the 'without a why' of the rose."[54] This imagery bears rich possibilities for a voluntary, embodied, and empowering mystical-ethical reading of nonviolent discipleship.

Powerful Mother of the Messiah

Taking seriously Vuola's concern not to lose sight of Mary's maternal body and its affirmation of the sacredness of mothering, I turn to Berry's Mennonite-feminist/womanist emphasis on Mary's embodied participation in the incarnation. For Berry, Mary is "the original embodiment of the *in utero* incarnate God"; her female body makes possible the embodiment of God in history, such that Incarnate "embodiment has taken place in a woman's body as well as a man's." Berry clarifies, "I am not romanticizing pregnancy, nor am I saying being pregnant is the only way women have participated in God's self-disclosure!" Rather, Mary's pregnancy and participation in "the struggle of God's self-disclosure being birthed in this world – new life and new meaning when so much militates against it," represent "that God's revelation is inclusive of, and relies on, women."[55] Beyond Berry, I contend that God relies here on a *marginalized* woman pregnant somehow outside of patriarchal wedlock – perhaps, as ancient texts suggest, as a result of rape by a Roman soldier, as hinted by the other women listed in Matthew's genealogy. Rather than facing divorce, poverty, or death by stoning, Mary finds an ally in Joseph, meaning that here God "sides with the outcast, endangered woman and child"; God "exalts the violated and makes the fruit of illegitimacy holy."[56] Despite the tragedy and hostility of her circumstances – as homeless in Bethlehem, a refugee in Egypt, and mother of a political martyr tortured to death by Roman occupiers – Mary offered her child the hospitality that they were continually denied, thereby revealing mothering as a way of creative survival and embodied faith. Though women should not be limited to mothering roles, Mary's choices exemplify that pregnancy, birth, and mothering can be deliberate, powerful, profoundly embodied acts of women giving life

as co-creators with the God of Life. Along these lines, Catholic feminist Tina Beattie speaks of Jesus' birth as Mary's "own physical passion" which parallels the cross, stating, "Rejected by society and lying in a barn among animals, she suffered for the salvation of the world."[57]

Prophet of Nonviolent Justice

In Beattie's more recent elaboration of a "gynocentric" Mariology within the official Catholic doctrines, she argues that Mary's perpetual virginity represents "the essentially peaceful nature of the incarnation."[58] For Beattie, it is peaceful since God sought Mary's consent for the virgin conception and she gave birth "without violence and bloodshed, without sweat and labour, without the tearing apart of the mother's flesh and the limp exhaustion that comes afterwards."[59] Beattie thus concludes, "Mary's unviolated body becomes God's protest against women's suffering .... Never, from the moment of Christ's conception, does he do violence to the body of a woman."[60] While I agree with Beattie's characterization of the "peaceful" character of the incarnation, her understanding of peace is exclusive, problematically reinscribing Mary's distance from ordinary women's experiences of labour and childbirth and effectively rendering her, once again, a silent theological symbol.[61] But if we listen for Mary's voice, we arguably find a much more radical, prophetic, and ethical vision of justice and peace.

Late Mennonite theologian A. James Reimer once asserted that "Marian devotion, like most forms of spirituality, can become a powerful force for progressive social reform ... . in [which] the mighty are put down from their thrones and those of low degree are exalted. It is in this spirit that we too can exclaim with Elizabeth: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'"[62] Reimer is referring here above all to the Miriam of the Magnificat, that revolutionary hymn of justice which is "the longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the New Testament" (Luke 1:46-55). Here, writes Johnson, we see Mary as a preacher of the Good News, and her "no to oppression completes her earlier yes to solidarity with the project of the reign of God," resulting in "a rare glimpse of female reproductive power as both physically nurturing and politically revolutionary."[63] As a prayer of resistance against the violence and death which will pervade her and her son's lives,[64] Miriam addresses a God who instead gives life, justice, and peace.[65] Her own actions, too, respond to the taking of life with its inverse: the giving of life. Even in standing at the foot of the cross, her actions prefigure the protests of mothers in

Argentina's Plaza de Mayo, for instance, who practice nonviolent resistance to dictatorial regimes of torture and murder, 'armed' only with their life-giving power as mothers.[66] Mary most likely raised her son in this subversive faith, prompting him, for example, to make wine for the thirsty at the modest, peasant wedding at Cana (John 2).[67] Along with Elizabeth (Luke 1), and later, as a possible leader among those who receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1-2), Mary thus takes her place in the Jewish prophetic tradition. She becomes a member of the "communion of saints" or "cloud of witnesses" who have gone before and whose faith and praxis remain an example to all people who today seek to embody God's justice and peace in the world.[68]

This re-humanized Mary – her historical body recovered, her biblical story rediscovered – this Mary/Miriam embodies the depth of liberative potential within the Christian tradition and is truly worthy of our longing. She is a courageous Jewish disciple choosing to participate in the mutual love of God. She is a possible survivor of sexual violence, who responds by welcoming the Messiah with life-giving, mothering power, declaring, "This is my body, this is my blood."[69] And she is a prophet of nonviolent justice declaring the end of oppression and God's coming reign of peace. Surely such a woman can exemplify for all Christians the deeply embodied nature of faith in the One who became flesh in her, and who, in some way, continues to be born in us.

Notes

1 The conference was entitled, "'My Spirit Rejoices in God, My Savior': Mary in Anabaptist Dress." See Mary E. Klassen, "Rediscovering Mary," *Canadian Mennonite*, April 18, 2011, accessed October 3, 2015, http://www.canadianmennonite.org/articles/rediscovering-mary.

2 Mary E. Klassen, "Mary to Be in the Spotlight at AMBS," *Mennonite World Review*, January 17, 2011, accessed October 3, 2015, http://www.mennoworld.org/archived/2011/1/17/mary-be-spotlight-ambs/.

3 Klassen, "Rediscovering Mary." My own denomination is Mennonite Church Canada, the counterpart of Mennonite Church USA, a largely acculturated and increasingly multi-cultural branch of the Mennonite church.

4 Historian C. Arnold Snyder speaks about some Mennonites self-identifying as Catholic, some as Protestant, and some as both or neither. See Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 27. This cursory definition of the Mennonite tradition builds on the classic definition from Harold S. Bender's "The Anabaptist Vision," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1957), 42, 47, 51.

[5] Here I must mention feminist recoveries of Christian mystical traditions of viewing Jesus Christ as female, such as biblical Wisdom Christology, Julian of Norwich's "mother Jesus," and the image of the crucified Jesus giving birth to the church from his wounded side. Contemporary sculptures "Christa" and "Crucified Woman" depict the crucified Christ as female and therefore God's solidarity with the suffering particular to women. The re(dis)covery of Mary does not replace but resonates with these likewise laudable efforts to affirm women's embodiment within Christianity. The difference is that Mary is a historical figure who was undeniably female. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 34, 94-100, Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Gynocentric Reconfiguration of Marian Symbolism in Engagement with Luce Irigaray* (Bristol, U.K.: Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender, 1999), 108, and Julie Clague, "Symbolism and the Power of Art: Female Representations of Christ Crucified," in *Bodies in Question: Gender, Religion, Text*, ed. Darlene Bird and Yvonne Sherwood (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 32, 34.

[6] Key examples of Mennonite theologians engaging feminist and womanist theologies include Malinda E. Berry, Gayle Gerber Koontz, Lydia Neufeld Harder, Mary E. Schertz, Carol J. Penner, and J. Denny Weaver.

[7] Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority*, Studies in Women and Religion Series (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1998), 8, ix. Cf. 10-11. Cf. Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Redemptive Resistance to Violation of Women: Christian Power, Justice, and Self-Giving Love," in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder, Occasional Papers No. 16 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 30. Harder argues that feminist theology at times does not recognize the liberative possibilities offered by the Bible, and Koontz cautions that peace is viewed as disempowering or self-abnegating by some feminists.

[8] Joy Ann McDougall, "Keeping Feminist Faith with Christian Traditions: A Look at Christian Feminist Theology Today," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 1 (January 2008): 103-104. Following Rebecca S. Chopp, she speaks of feminist theologians moving beyond a focus on method alone to reworking central Christian doctrines, thereby overcoming "the atheological limits of secular feminist theory."

[9] Joy Ann McDougall, "Women's Work: Feminist Theology for a New Generation," *The Christian Century* (July 26, 2005): 20.

[10] Kilian McDonnell, "Feminist Mariologies: Heteronomy/Subordination and the Scandal of Christology," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 528.

[11] Cf. Elina Vuola, "(The) Breastfeeding God," *The Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (March, 2013): 99-102, and Sally Cunneen, "Breaking Mary's Silence: A Feminist Reflection on Marian Piety," *Theology Today* 56, no. 3 (October, 1999): 322-323, 333.

[12] A number of theologians discuss Mary's ability to evoke ecumenical dialogue. Cf. Vuola, "(The) Breastfeeding God," 99, Cuneen, 319, 333, Elina Vuola, "The Ecumenical Mother Mary and Her Significance for Lutheran Tradition," *Seminary Ridge Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 1-21, Melissa C. Stewart, "Mary, the Mother of God: Ecumenical Bridge or Barrier?" *Theology Today* 67 (2011): 430-440, and William McLoughlin and Jill Pinnock,

eds., *Mary is for Everyone: Essays on Mary and Ecumenism* (Herefordshire, U.K.: Gracewing, 1997).

[13] McDougall, "Keeping Feminist Faith," 105, and Kathryn Tanner, "Social Theory Concerning the New Social Movements and the Practice of Feminist Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 179-197.

[14] Cf. Malinda E. Berry, "Needles Not Nails: Marginal Methodologies and Mennonite Theology," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia/Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2008), 272-273.

[15] Malinda E. Berry, "A Theology of Wonder," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 12-13, and Snyder, 26, 82-83, 65. Cf., 78. Berry goes so far as to assert that the early Anabaptists were in fact "theologically orthodox" (i.e., "they accepted Christendom's creeds and symbols" even while straining and subverting "orthodox" understandings of church and the life/practice of faith).

[16] Andrew P. Klager, "Ingestion and Gestation: Peacemaking, the Lord's Supper, and the Theotokos in the Mennonite-Anabaptist and Eastern Orthodox Traditions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 455.

[17] Snyder, 65, 27, and J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium*, C. Henry Smith Series (Telford, PA: Pandora U.S., 2000), 150-151, 62-65. Weaver refers to Mennonite historian Walter Klaassen's assertion that Anabaptism is neither Catholic nor Protestant, but instead "represents some of the best of both traditions." The Mennonite recovery of its more Catholic aspects is not limited to academic history or theology (especially Snyder, A. James Reimer, and Thomas Finger), but evident in Mennonite attraction to "high church" or liturgical worship/ecclesiology and ongoing Catholic-Mennonite dialogues. Cf. Susie Fisher, "The Beckoning: Shifting Affinities and Manitoba Mennonites at an Anglican Church," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 33 (2015): 35-53, and Gerald W. Schlabach, "The Bridgefolk Movement in Ecumenical Context," *Bridgefolk.net*, accessed Feb. 29, 2016, http://www.bridgefolk.net/misc/the-bridgefolk-movement-in-ecumenical-context/

[18] John D. Rempel, "Mary in Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism" (paper presented at "'My Spirit Rejoices in God, My Savior': Mary in Anabaptist Dress," Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN, March 24-26, 2011, revised December, 2011), 1, 3, and Klager, 452. Rempel notes that Hubmaier's Anabaptist ministry took place along the Swiss-German border and in Moravia, and warns that his anti-Semitic Marian "affection" inspired "the destruction of the city's only synagogue and ... the building of a Marian shrine in its place."

[19] Rempel, 4. Marpeck's ministry covered an area from Strasbourg to Moravia.

[20] Klager, 451-452. Stated differently, the "pure flesh and blood of the virgin Mary prepared this flesh and blood for us." Klager is quoting from Marpeck's *Verantwortung*. Cf. 437.

[21] Rempel, 4. According to Rempel, Menno hereby rejected Mary's immaculate conception, which was not yet an official Catholic doctrine at the time. Menno ministered in the Netherlands and North Germany.

[22] Ibid., and Cornelius Krahn and Cornelius J. Dyck, "Menno Simons (1496-1561)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1990, accessed

October 10, 2015, http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M4636ME.html.

[23] Rempel, 5.

[24] Here I differentiate between physical/biological sexes (generally categorized as male or female) and socio-cultural gender roles/norms (masculinity/femininity/other), which do not always coincide. Arguments (below) against women's ordination reveal a literalizing of Christ's maleness such that males resemble God more closely.

[25] Johann Loserth, Robert Friedmann and Werner O. Packull, "Hans Hut (d. 1527)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1987, accessed October 18, 2015, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Hut,_Hans_(d._1527)&oldid=128414.

[26] Hans Hut, "Comparing and Interpreting Divine Scripture: A Christian Instruction given in the power of the Holy Spirit with the three parts of the Christian Faith and how they are to be understood (1527)," in *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism*, trans. Walter Klaassen, et al., ed. C. Arnold Snyder (Waterloo: Herald, 2001), 32-33. This is a reference to Matt. 12:46-8 and parallels.

[27] Berry, "Needles not Nails," 272-273, 278. Womanist theology is African-American or black, woman-centred theology.

[28] Harder, 2-3, 9. As seen above, Harder terms it a "hermeneutics of obedience."

[29] Cf. Berry, "Needles not Nails," 272-273, Harder, 10-11, and Carol J. Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1999), 14, 180, 3.

[30] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 37, and Ruether, *Mary – The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 11.

[31] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 6-7. Cf. Cunneen, 320.

[32] Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 123-25. Cf. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 28. Biblical references to Jesus' siblings (i.e., Mary's other children) are explained away as Jesus' cousins or children from Joseph's first marriage. Mary's painless labour has been interpreted as her experience of redemption from Eve's curse. The latter has historically been used to prevent women from accessing pain relief during labour and childbirth. See Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 78-79, 83, and Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 10th Anniversary Ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 168-171.

[33] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 28, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 143-144, 150, 152, and Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 53-54. In *Sexism and God-Talk*, Ruether speaks of "antisexual asceticism" within which the "escape from sex and birth is ultimately to escape from death for which women as Eve and mother are made responsible."

[34] Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 173-174.

[35] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 23-25.

[36] Elina Vuola, "Radical Eurocentrism: The Crisis and Death of Latin American Liberation Theology and Recipes for Its Improvement," in *Interpreting the Postmodern: Responses to "Radical Orthodoxy,"* ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marion Grau (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 59.

[37] Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 144.

[38] Georges Casalis, "Jesus – Neither Abject Lord nor Heavenly Monarch," in *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, ed. Jose Miguez Bonino, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 74. Cf. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 5, 204-206, and Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

[39] Johnson, 14.

[40] Ibid., 26.

[41] Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 171.

[42] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 26-27, 33. Cf. Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in *A Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Orbis, 1993), 213.

[43] Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 126, *Mary*, 62, and *New Woman/New Earth*, 52. In 1976, the Vatican denounced women's ordination because "there must be a physical resemblance between the priest and Christ."

[44] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 314.

[45] Ibid., 15.

[46] Ibid., 129-131, 133 and Cunneen, 319-320.

[47] Vuola, "(The) Breastfeeding God," 100-101. Cf. Cunneen, 333.

[48] Vuola, "(The) Breastfeeding God," 98-100, and Cunneen, 319-322.

[49] Harder, 8, 10-11, Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63, no. 2 (April 1, 1989): 173, 176, and Koontz, "Redemptive Resistance to Violation of Women," 30.

[50] See Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 186, and Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 43, 209ff.

[51] Rose Ellen Dunn, *Finding Grace with God: A Phenomenological Reading of the Annunciation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), x, 2.

[52] Ibid., 75-77.

[53] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 254.

[54] Dorothee Soelle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 39-40.

[55] Berry, "Theology of Wonder," 20-21. Womanist theology combines Black liberation and feminist theologies into woman-centred theology from the perspective of African American women, who are triply oppressed on the basis of race, class, and gender. Cf. Mary Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1990), 175, 186, 191.

[56] Schaberg quoted in Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 225, 230, and Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 186. Cf. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

[57] Tina Beattie, *Rediscovering Mary: Insights from the Gospels* (Liguori, MO: Triumph, 1995), 57. Cf. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 277.

[58] Tina Beattie, "Queen of Heaven," in *Queering Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 296-7.

[59] Tina Beattie, *Eve's Pilgrimage: A Woman's Quest for the City of God* (New York: Burns & Oates, 2002), 97.
[60] Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 83.
[61] Cf. Cunneen, 320, 323.
[62] A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora/Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2001), 441-442.
[63] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 262-263, 258, 260, 273. Cf. 270.
[64] Ibid., 296-297, and Dorothee Soelle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 45.
[65] Cf. Berry, "Theology of Wonder," 20. She speaks of the Magnificat as "imagin[ing] a world of peace, freedom, and justice."
[66] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 296-297.
[67] Ibid., 289-291.
[68] Ibid., 263-264, 305-306, 312. Cf. Rempel, 5-7.
[69] Several poignant poems have been written about Mary with this Communion-evoking refrain: one by Irene Zimmerman and one by Frances Croake Frank. See, respectively, Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 69-70, and Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 148.