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**Title:** Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth: The Significance of Mary for Fostering Harmony between Humanity and Earth

## **Abstract**

Theologians are reconfiguring some of the central theological aspects of Christianity to affirm the sacredness of the earth and to defend its intrinsic value. Drawing particularly on the Indian context and the significance of black Madonnas, this article argues that Marian devotion can be a powerful means to encourage devotees to avoid polluting the environment. Given that Catholic Christians and a remarkable percentage of non-Christians maintain a profound devotion to Mary, the Catholic Church can utilize this devotional relationship to raise awareness of the importance of the care of the earth.

### Introduction

Climate change or ecological crisis does not need any introduction. Its effects are felt in our environment. Of course, scientists and researchers around the world are busy proposing solutions, constructing discourses, and initiating measures to address this problem. This is an urgent threat which must be adequately dealt with now rather than later. Generations to come need a hopeful future. Although developed countries have a high profiled awareness of this crisis and have also engaged themselves in addressing it skillfully to the best of their abilities through various means and initiatives, what they miss is that the world is more than the West. The earth is perhaps the only planet which can sustain organisms of unimaginable diversity. It is a common home both for the developed countries, developing countries, and underdeveloped countries. What we do in the habitable areas has an impact on those places where human beings do not live. The sea level is rising because the solid ice (glacier) is melting. The developed countries must understand the urgency and turn their attentions to the developing countries which pollute the environment at an alarming rate and stop making them the dumping places for hazardous wastes. To a certain extent, every developed country does its best to keep its environment pollution-free and healthy. That must be appreciated; nonetheless, it is time that they assisted the developing countries to initiate similar actions. Here I point out the importance of raising awareness among the people of India about the paradoxical actions that underlie their daily life. The great majority of people in India adhere to religious traditions and largely depend on the cultivatable land for earning their livelihood. The majority's dependence on agriculture has a close association with the practice of religions and the celebration of religious festivals in India. It is surprising to learn that the expression of many religious beliefs in diverse ritual practices, to a large degree, causes pollution and further it is done ignorantly and unintentionally. Those involved perform contradictory actions at the same time: glorify their gods/goddess while polluting nature. On the one hand they venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary and Hindu gods/goddesses with a remarkable pomp and on the other hand they disfigure mother earth. They have hardly any awareness of these paradoxical practices. They do not intend to pollute the natural world although they do it unintentionally through their religious festivals. Following popular Hindu

festivals like Diwali, Ganesh or Vinayaka Chaturthi, and Maha Shivaratri, Christians celebrate the annual patrons' feast with grand decorations using flowers, coloured paper, and plastic materials. After the feast they burn them or throw them into the river or dump in public places. In addition, the use of crackers is integral to celebrating feasts/festivals in India.

In this article, I argue that Marian devotion can be a powerful means to bring awareness to devotees and thereby encourage them to avoid polluting the environment. Given that Catholic Christians and a remarkable percentage of non-Christians maintain a profound devotion to Mary, the Catholic Church can utilize this devotional relationship for raising awareness of the importance of the care of the earth. Since the apparition stories of Mary are popular in sermons and the clergy play a major role in organizing the annual feasts with grand processions to venerate, honour, and pray to Mary<sup>1</sup> and the patron saints,<sup>2</sup> the Catholic Church, by turning the focus of believers/devotees from the message of Mary, given during her apparitions, to the way she appeared, and the natural elements present during her apparitions, can persuade them to realize that the ecological celebration of feasts is integral to the veneration of Mary and essential to nurture a genuine devotion to her.

## Theology and Ecology

Of late, theologians have demonstrated how interpretations of Christian doctrine have contributed to devaluing/exploiting nature. For centuries Christian theology did not condemn acts of commodification and objectification, which were undertaken for the purpose of gratifying human beings' unbridled needs, as ecological sin. The structure of the biblical texts and the interpretations of bible passages have largely been guided by the spirit

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<sup>1</sup> I do not mean the liturgical Marian feasts like the Mother of God, the Annunciation, the Assumption, the Nativity of Mary, the feast of our Lady of Lourdes, the feast of our Lady of Guadalupe, and many other such feasts but the annual parish church feast (the parish which is named after a name of Mary) or village feast (those village churches/chapels which are dedicated to Mary; we may compare this with the annual feast of patron saints). However, one liturgical Marian feast, namely the Nativity of Mary, is celebrated with nine days of prayer and preparation in many Marian shrines, basilicas, and big parish churches.

<sup>2</sup> During the procession conducted in honour of a patron saint, besides the statue of the patron saint the statue of Mary is also carried in a decorated cart or chariot. This indicates how dispensable the place of Mary is in the life of Catholic Christians. They acknowledge her as queen of all saints.

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

of anthropocentrism. It was pointed out by Lynn White's remark that Christianity bears a 'huge burden of guilt' because of its support to the 'disenchantment of nature' and because of its doctrine of creation in which humankind is given dominion over nature; for nature is created for the benefit of human beings.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Elizabeth A. Johnson highlights those aspects of Christian theology that must be challenged in order to bring to the forefront those elements which lie underdeveloped. In her view hierarchical dualism, which the Christian world adopted from the Hellenistic world, values spirit over matter. Consequently, animals, plants, and the earth are categorized into the realm of matter: lesser value. The medieval distinction between the natural and the supernatural world encouraged people to flee the world in order to attain holiness and communion with God. At the time of the Reformation, the theology of the cross, which advocated salvation from sin, and in the time of exploration and colonization, the Genesis-mandate, which endorsed the idea of dominion over the creatures, have contributed to unbridled use of the natural world. In addition, a deficient pneumatology emptied nature of its sacredness and indwelling of the Spirit in it.<sup>4</sup>

It is time that Christians learned to place more emphasis on place in the here and now than to disregard it with an irrational belief that it will pass away.<sup>5</sup> To that end Craig G. Bartholomew takes a stand against the excessive spiritualization of Christianity which makes place 'negated and marginalized by the vision of a spiritual kingdom that transcends this creation'.<sup>6</sup> Sigurd Bergmann remarks that 'anthropogenic environmental problems cannot simply be "fixed" by technical and economical systemic solutions and environmental "management"' and that 'research results cannot easily be turned into so-called policies to

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155, 1967, 1203–1207, 1206 and Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning, 'An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis"', *Organization & Environment* 18.2, 2005: 163–176.

<sup>4</sup> Indicating how pneumatology is marginalized in the history of Christian theology Sigurd Bergmann insists on an ecological pneumatology for emphasizing the indwelling of the Spirit in all creation. See Sigurd Bergmann, 'Life-Giving Breath Ecological Pneumatology in the Context of Fetishization', *The Ecumenical Review* 65.1, 2013, 114–128.

<sup>5</sup> See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, and her article 'Is God's Charity Broad Enough for Bears?', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 80.4, 2015, 283–293. Johnson outlines her ecotheology in detail in her book *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011, 92. As cited in Thomas P. Harmon, 'Review of Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today by Craig G. Bartholomew', *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 23.4, 2014, 478–482, 479.

be imposed on citizens'.<sup>7</sup> He also claims that: 'Religious processes and belief systems not only function as hindrances but also as constructive ecologic homeostates and crucial elements of sociocultural change in environments of dramatic and painful change.'<sup>8</sup> Concurrently Michael S. Northcott remarks that religion/Christianity can be 'a powerful source of redemption and repair to the pathologies of extreme mobility, placelessness, and ecological destruction that characterize contemporary life'<sup>9</sup> and that 'the Christian faith has much to offer to weary postmodern nomads longing for home'.<sup>10</sup> No doubt, in recent years, theologians have been seeking for ecological wisdom in their exegesis of Christian Scripture which promotes the intrinsic value of nature. In this regard, a good majority insists on the reformation and the reinterpretation of the Christian tradition and many of its essential theological notions. Ernst M, Conradie notes that many theologians emphasize the need 'to transform Christian theology into an ecological theology'.<sup>11</sup>

In this vein, theologians have stressed those aspects of Christian theology and belief systems which value nature and defend it against violation and exploitation. Some have highlighted the significance of the theology of the Trinity for empowering and contributing to the flourishing of the earth. Ivone Gebara claims that: 'The Trinity is an expression of our history, of human history, which is both tragic and challenging – but it is a unified Trinity, as if in that unity we were expressing our own desire for harmony and communion with all that exists.'<sup>12</sup> Trinity signifies unity in plurality. Plurality in the universe has a Trinitarian structure, hence: 'The Trinitarian earth is a movement of continuous creativity, unfolding process of creation and destruction, expressions of a single vital process.'<sup>13</sup> This single vital process is the result of a fact that everything in this universe is interrelated and interdependent. Hence,

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<sup>7</sup> Sigurd Bergmann, 'Climate Change Changes Religion: Space, Spirit, Ritual, Technology – through a Theological Lens', *Studia Theologica* 63.2, 2009, 98–118, 99.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>9</sup> Michael S. Northcott, *Place, Ecology, and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, 'Review of Place, Ecology, and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities by Michael S. Northcott', *Christian Scholars Review* 46.2, 2017, 206–207, 207.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst M. Conradie, 'Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project', *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 85, 2004, 123–135, 125.

<sup>12</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water Ecofeminism and Liberation*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999, 148. As cited in Jessica Fraser, 'Where the Divine Meets the Created: The Feminist and Ecofeminist Trinitarian Theologies of Elizabeth A. Johnson and Ivone Gebara', *Religious Studies and Theology* 23.2, 2004, 53–77, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 157. For an understanding of trinitarian cosmology see Sigurd Bergmann, 'The Legacy of Trinitarian Cosmology in the Anthropocene: Transcontextualising Late Antiquity Theology for Late Modernity', *Studia Theologica* 69.1, 2015, 32–44.

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

human beings are a part 'of the earth and of the cosmos' and are 'participants in the extraordinary process of life's evolution'.<sup>14</sup> 'God as communion' is the source of all that exists - everything that lives and moves has its origin in God; there is a divine spark in everything.<sup>15</sup> Mutuality and interdependence characterize the entire universe because mutuality, equality, and mutual-indwelling are the source of the Trinitarian mystery.

Some theologians have Christified the universe<sup>16</sup> to defend the intrinsic value of the cosmos. Johnson adopts the idea of 'deep incarnation' to insist on God's 'sharing in the conditions of the flesh in order to accomplish a new level of union between Creator and creature'.<sup>17</sup> God becoming the earth material shares in the growth and the decay of all creatures.<sup>18</sup> Mathew Fox distinguishes between Christ and Jesus of Nazareth in order to claim that, while Jesus is a particular reality, Christ is cosmic: Christ as light is present in everything and the cause of their existence.<sup>19</sup>

Theologians have also emphasized a pervasive presence of the Spirit in everything. Johnson asserts that: 'The Spirit of God indwells the world and is present in all things as the ineffable, energizing power of life.'<sup>20</sup> Criticizing the modern tendency of fetishizing nature,<sup>21</sup> Bergman insists on the sacredness of the earth by stressing the inhabitation of the Spirit in the places/earth. He opposes the tendency to reduce the other as commodity. He argues that

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<sup>14</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> See Rabbi David Seidenberg's book, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Sasongko has disclosed essential elements in the theology of Delio and Johnson to highlight how the universe is christified for defending it against devaluation and degradation. See Nindyo Sasongko, 'The Christified Universe and the Vanquished Creatures: The Perspectives of Ilia Delio and Elizabeth A. Johnson', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56.1, 2017, 61–72.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 196. See also Johnson, 'Is God's Charity Broad Enough for Bears?', 289–290. Deep or radical incarnation is a phrase from Niels Gregersen who uses it to unfold the ecological significance of God becoming flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. It means 'an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature. Understood this way, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God's redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as with the victims of social competition. God bears the cost of evolution, the price involved in the hardship of natural selection', 205. See Niels Henrik Gregersen, 'The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40.3, 2001, 192–207. See also Denis Edwards, 'Every Sparrow That Falls to the Ground: The Cost of Evolution and the Christ-Event', *Ecotheology* 11.1, 2006, 103–123.

<sup>18</sup> See Gregersen, 'The Cross of Christ', 192–207.

<sup>19</sup> Mathew Fox, 'Love Is Stronger than Stewardship: A Cosmic Christ Path to Planetary Survival', *Tikkun* 30.2, 2015, 40–42, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, 'Is God's Charity Broad Enough for Bears?', 286.

<sup>21</sup> According to Bergmann, 'Fetishization is a human process that transforms an unanimated being into an animated one that is attributed with power over others in a larger cultural system of perceptions, beliefs, and practices; on the other hand, classical faith in the Holy Spirit is not situated in a *man*-made environment but in a world characterized by divine gifts and Godgivenness', 126. See Bergmann, 'Life-Giving Breath'.

when the other is made a commodity, the life-giving presence of the Spirit in the other is violated. He sees the modern fetishizing as sin. He is also happy to condemn the humiliation of the Spirit as heresy.<sup>22</sup>

The kinship between the created world and human beings is highlighted by theologians to indicate human responsibility to care for the earth. An 'earth consciousness'<sup>23</sup> is necessary to emphasize that human beings are not the masters of the earth but members of the earth. Interdependence/interconnectedness and mutuality are the principles which guide the relationship between human beings and non-human beings. In this context, it is also argued that the term earth refers to the 'living system *within* which we humans live in a relationship of interdependence with other members of the Earth community'.<sup>24</sup> In this regard Norman C. Habel states how one has to read the texts of the Bible with an ecological lens; he stresses that:

We no longer consider ourselves readers within the hierarchy of creation, but fellow members within the community of earth. We are no longer reading as stewards over creation, but as kin, relatives within the Earth community. We no longer see ourselves as pilgrims *on* Earth, but as species *in* Earth, beneath a common protective skin called the atmosphere.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, Sarah Jane Boss claims that: 'We are ourselves natural beings, composed of the same elements as the world we inhabit, and able to recognize a kinship with animal,

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<sup>22</sup> See Bergmann's works, 'Life-Giving Breath', 114–128; 'Atmospheres of Synergy: Towards an Eco-Theological Aesth/Ethics of Space', *Ecotheology* 11.3, 2006, 326–356; 'Theology in Its Spatial Turn: Space, Place and Built Environments Challenging and Changing the Images of God', *Religion Compass* 1.3, 2007, 353–379; 'Climate Change Changes Religion', 98–118 and *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Norman C. Habel, 'Introducing the Earth Bible', in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel, vol. 1, The Earth Bible, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000, 25–37, 26. See also the five volumes published in *The Earth Bible* series: Norman C. Habel, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, vol. 1, The Earth Bible, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000; Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, eds., *The Earth Story in Genesis*, vol. 2, The Earth Bible, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000; Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, eds., *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, vol. 3, The Earth Bible, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001; Norman C. Habel, ed., *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, vol. 4, The Earth Bible, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001, and Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski, eds., *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, vol. 5 The Earth Bible, London: Sheffield Academic Press/Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002. Vicky Balabanski, *Colossians: An Eco-Stoic Reading*, London: T & T Clark, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Habel, 'Introducing the Earth Bible', 27. Italics original.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. Italics original.

vegetable, mineral and other creatures.’<sup>26</sup> Joining Teilhard de Chardin, Johnson expounds the interrelatedness between human beings and the universe by citing him in regard to the fact that human beings are a product of evolution and ‘the human person is the sum total of fifteen billion years of unbroken evolution now thinking about itself’.<sup>27</sup> She asserts that: ‘This person, Jesus of Nazareth, was composed of star stuff and earth stuff; his life formed a genuine part of the historical and biological community of Earth; his body existed in a network of relationships drawing from and extending to the whole physical universe.’<sup>28</sup>

Thus, theologians are reconfiguring some of the central theological aspects of Christianity to affirm the sacredness of the earth and to defend its intrinsic value. When the created world is degraded, it is God who is humiliated. Commodification of nature is a sin because it violates the life-giving presence of God in the created world. Although such reflections are inevitable to address the ecological crisis which threatens a healthy future for the coming generations, I draw the attention of theologians to the significance of popular devotion for its potential to protect the universe and nature from degradation. Theological reflections at the academic level are essential but they become truly effective only when they reach the theologically non-trained people who constitute a vast majority of the world’s population. Religious communities are to be brought to an awareness of this ecological crisis. While the awareness of ecological degradation spreads rapidly in developed countries, such awareness does not adequately reach the people in developing countries and underdeveloped countries. I maintain that in those countries the practice of popular devotion is a powerful means to bring this awareness to them and to help them recognize how profoundly humankind is a dependent member of the created world. I choose the Indian context to demonstrate how the paradoxical actions of believers/devotees in India have a double effect: veneration of Mary at the same time as the degradation of the earth.

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<sup>26</sup> Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary*, London: Continuum, 2004, 131.

<sup>27</sup> As cited in Michael Dowd, *Earthspirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity*, Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991, 17. See also Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 209.



## India – the Environment<sup>29</sup> and Popular Devotion

To venerate Mary and to ensure the granting of their prayer requests through her intercession villages, parish-churches, basilicas, and shrines, which are entrusted into her patronage or named or dedicated to her maternal care, organize under the guidance of the clergy an annual feast and a procession mostly in May and June. Although the celebration is intended to honour her, the way it is conducted can degrade the earth in India. One of the primary reasons for the preservation of such paradoxical action is because Indian theologians have not yet taken ecological crisis seriously. An urgent theological response from them is much needed to initiate ecological actions at pastoral level. I do not think that even theologically trained priests and religious are aware that there is an environmental problem in India. Because they make up a good majority of theologians, to form an ecological awareness among Christians they must first be conscientized. Unless they acknowledge that India too causes ecological degradation and that pollution takes place at an alarming level in the country, they will not be able to see how even religious rituals and celebrations of the feast of patron saints and Mary disfigure mother earth. Since most people do not have an awareness of how the celebration of different feasts/festivals can pollute the environment, I examine here the use of firecrackers in the annual feasts and processions conducted in honour of patron saints and Mary to show how it can degrade the surrounding, and hope thereby to evoke an ecological response from Indian theologians.

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<sup>29</sup> Although some theologians cry out that the ecological crisis needs immediate attention (see Selva Rathinam, 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation', *VJTR* 77.2, February 2013: 56–74, 153, a cursory look into the contents of Christian theological academic journals will reveal that Indian theologians have not paid adequate attention to the problem of pollution and environmental crisis in India; not to say, whether they are aware that there is such a problem in India. I have examined two theological journals, namely, *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* and *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* and I was surprised to note that Indian theologians have not yet acknowledged the climate change as a problem. From 2000 onwards, they are much concerned about inter-religious dialogue, subaltern issues, moral theology, marriage, family, liturgy, priestly formation, and Vatican II documents and very little is written about the ecological crisis. Even after the promulgation of *Laudato si* a substantial and critical eco-theological evaluation of concrete environmental issues is not undertaken by them. Since I cite many articles from *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* when I discuss Mary, hereafter I use *VJTR* as an abbreviation for this journal.

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

In India 50-60% of the people still depend on agriculture.<sup>30</sup> It means that, if there is no rain, the livelihood of more than a half of the population is at stake. This would explain why India is filled with temples and why festivals are plenty in India. The conducting of annual festivals with a grand procession to appease gods and goddesses in India is linked to their dependence on rain for livelihood. This is much noticeable in Tamil Nadu, South India. Kristin C. Bloomer expresses her surprise on finding a temple or a church/chapel in every village in Tamil Nadu, a state in South India.<sup>31</sup> Francis X. Clooney is indeed fascinated to find a small temple at every street in Chennai where he lived for a longer time in India; temples are dedicated to independent gods/goddesses everywhere.<sup>32</sup> Since agriculture is a predominant source of income and occupation for a great majority in India, popular devotion and belief in god/goddesses is also high. Indians worship innumerable gods and goddesses, although Indian theologians speak of an unnameable, infinite, and incomprehensible God.<sup>33</sup> I wonder how many farmers are aware of such a theology of an incomprehensible God, but it is beyond doubt that the vast majority is convinced of the power of the gods and goddess to cause either a good or a bad harvest and ensure timely rains. Many of the village festivals, especially in South India, are conducted to appease gods and goddess so that the rains fall at the appropriate times and the land produces a rich harvest.<sup>34</sup> Bloomer notes that Hindus believe

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<sup>30</sup> See Annual Report 2020-2021 published by the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare, [https://agricoopnic.in/sites/default/files/Web%20copy%20of%20AR%20%28Eng%29\\_7.pdf](https://agricoopnic.in/sites/default/files/Web%20copy%20of%20AR%20%28Eng%29_7.pdf). Accessed on 27 July 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Kristin C. Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin: Hinduism, Roman Catholicism, and Marian Possession in South India*, Oxford: Oxford University, 2018, 1–4.

<sup>32</sup> Francis Xavier Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*, Oxford, NY: Oxford University, 2005, vii–viii.

<sup>33</sup> Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, 15–16 and 100–111.

<sup>34</sup> More than gods, goddesses are much associated with ensuring timely rainfall in India. Although god Indra is known as god of rain, among goddesses Mariyamman in South India is believed to have control over fertility, rain sicknesses, death, and evil. See K. R. Hanumanthan 'The Mariamman Cult of Tamil Nadu – A Case Study in Cultural Synthesis', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 41, 1980, 97–103, 98–100; Yuko Nishimura, *A Study on Mariyamman Worship in South India*, Tokyo: IICAA, 1987, 3–11; Patrizia Granziera, 'The Indo-Mediterranean Caduceus and the Worship of the Tree, the Serpent, and the Mother Goddess in the South of India', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, 2010, 610–620, 613, 619; C. Jeya Veera Devan and Anju M, 'The Village Deity of Tamil Nadu: A Case Study of Mariyamman's Myth,' *International Journal of Research Culture Society* 2.6, June 2018, 79–81 and Perundevi Srinivasan, 'Sprouts of the Body, Sprouts of the Field: Identification of the Goddess with Poxes in South India', *Religions* 10, 2019, 1–15. See also Henry Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India*, revised ed. 2, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1921; Alleyn Diesel, 'The Worship and Iconography of the Hindu Folk Goddesses in Natal', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 5.2, September 1992, 3–30, 13, 28; David Kinsley, *The Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, University of California Press, 1986, and Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin*, 1–31. In the Tamil film *Sandakozhi 2*, released in 2018, the failure of rainfall is argued as an effect of not having organized the annual festival to the village guardian god for seven years. In most of Amman films one can notice the link made between the goddess and her control over rainfall.



not only in gods and goddesses but also in small evil gods, demons, and the spirits of the ancestors.<sup>35</sup> All of them seem to play a role in the good and bad happenings in village life. She also describes how people live as one with nature; they believe that trees and ponds house spirits.<sup>36</sup> In the families of the farmers, domestic animals such as goats and cows are part of their household.

In South India people conduct an annual festival and take the statue of goddess Amman in procession because of their belief in her power to ensure good rainfall and bountiful harvest.<sup>37</sup> And this is in line with Rosemary Radford Ruether's claim of pre-history images of goddesses' connection with fecundity, fertility, and nurture.<sup>38</sup> Though the poor people and farmers of India glorify mother goddesses, they are not aware as to how much they disfigure the mother earth, first of all by their ignorance and second by becoming victims of the consumerist society and corporate culture.

Disfiguring the mother earth occurs through various causes, among which the festivals of glorifying the gods and goddess play a major role. In India, the use of firecrackers is indispensable to celebrating the festival and to conducting the procession. Hence, though India is the second largest manufacturer of firecrackers, sadly it exports no firecrackers.<sup>39</sup> It uses all its manufactured goods for its own use. Every village and every street venerate a god or goddess who serves as guardian of the boundaries. In order to please them, villages and streets dedicate a day to honour them with a pompous celebration in which the burning of the firecrackers is integral. Every village feels compelled to appease its deity because of the belief that such appeasement would ensure good rain. However, people are not aware that the nitrogen oxide which is generated by it causes different sorts of health issues related to heart, breathing, and eyes. It also pollutes the air and the surroundings. One may also add to it factors such as uncontrolled population explosion, low-level of literacy, corruption,

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<sup>35</sup> Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin*, 7–9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–4.

<sup>37</sup> See the chapter on Durga in Kinsley, *The Hindu Goddesses*, 95–115. Although Amman is the most worshiped village/folk goddess in South India this is not the case in North India. Goddess Durga (some maintain that Amman is her incarnation) is believed to have control over the growth of grains.

<sup>38</sup> See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston, MA: Beacon, 1983; and *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> [www.indiatoday.in](https://www.indiatoday.in), 'Shocking Facts about the Indian Firecracker Industry', <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-and-current-affairs/current-affairs>. Accessed on 27 November 2019.

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

excessive use of motorbikes, and irresponsible disposal and the burning of hazardous materials.

Since most of the Christians in India are Christians in faith and Indians in culture, the celebration of the village festival, which is organized to honour Mary and the saints to whom the village is dedicated, also involves the use of firecrackers in large amounts. I suggest that, because popular devotion is active and common in India, Marian devotion can be a reliable means to bring people, at least the Catholics, to an awareness of the paradoxical actions in which they too are involved.

Though devotion to Mary has declined in the West, theologians acknowledge that popular Marian devotion is flourishing in other parts of the world.<sup>40</sup> Two important practices of popular devotion are: going on pilgrimages to well-known Marian shrines<sup>41</sup> and organizing grand feasts. Chris Maunder observes that the most popular Marian pilgrimage places in the world are Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima.<sup>42</sup> These places are officially recognized and approved by the Roman Catholic Church as originating in authentic apparitions. In India, Marian feasts are celebrated with remarkable preparation.<sup>43</sup> Our Lady of Valankanni, or our Lady of Good Health, which is regarded by Indians as the Lourdes of the East, is a very popular Marian pilgrimage site in India. Millions of people visit this shrine every year and among them more than half belong to other religions. Bloomer notes that many Hindus come to the Marian shrines and participate in the festivals.<sup>44</sup> Church officials state that during the festival season (29 August to 8 September), millions of people visit this shrine.<sup>45</sup> This is the case with many

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<sup>40</sup> Agenzia Fides, 'Asia/India – Marian Devotion Flourishes in India and Pakistan; Thousands Flock to Take Part in Novenas and Pilgrimages, Attended with Respect and Devotion by Hindus and Muslims', [http://www.fides.org/en/news/3047ASIA\\_INDIA\\_Marian\\_devotion\\_flourishes\\_in\\_India\\_and\\_Pakistan\\_thousands\\_flock\\_to\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_novenas\\_and\\_pilgrimages\\_attended\\_with\\_respect\\_and\\_devotion\\_by\\_Hindus\\_and\\_Muslims](http://www.fides.org/en/news/3047ASIA_INDIA_Marian_devotion_flourishes_in_India_and_Pakistan_thousands_flock_to_take_part_in_novenas_and_pilgrimages_attended_with_respect_and_devotion_by_Hindus_and_Muslims). Accessed on 10 May 2022.

<sup>41</sup> See Lawrence Fernandes, 'Encountering the Sacred at Shrines: With Special Reference to a Marian Shrine', *VJTR* 74.5, May 2010, 30–40 and A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Pilgrimages to Shrines: Subaltern Perspectives', *VJTR* 75.1, January 2011: 29–44.

<sup>42</sup> Chris Maunder, 'Apparitions of Mary', in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss, London and New York: Continuum, 2007, 424–457, 424.

<sup>43</sup> Eugene Lobo, 'Celebrating the Feast of Nativity of Mother Mary', <https://www.indiancatholicmatters.org/celebrating-feast-nativity-mother-mary/>. Accessed on 22 May 2022. Thomas M. Landy, 'Shrine and Feast Honoring Mary Attract Indian Catholics and Hindus', <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/india/shrines-pilgrimage/our-lady-good-health>. Accessed on 22 May 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Vailankanni.info, 'When to Visit at Velankanni?', <http://vailankanni.info/best-time-to-visit-velankanni/>. Accessed on 29 November 2019. Mary is believed to have appeared here.

other Marian shrines, to name a few: Poondi Madha, Elakurichi Adaikalamadha, Our Lady of Good Health in Bangalore, and Gunadala Matha.<sup>46</sup> In many places in India, nine days of preparation are conducted before celebrating the birthday of Mary.<sup>47</sup>

Clooney and Bloomer observe similarities between the celebration of the annual feast in honour of Mary in India and Mexico and between Christians and Hindus.<sup>48</sup> They make a big procession. This mirrors the procession taken to celebrate the festivals of goddess Amman, who is largely worshiped in South India. She is dark in colour and deeply associated with the earth and the protection of the village and the harvest.<sup>49</sup> In the academic world, of course, Kali, a dark-skinned goddess is well known. She also has a deep connection to the earth.

As aforementioned, because farmers in India largely depend on rain for their survival and cultivating their lands, they worship those deities who are dark-skinned. And most popular among them are Amman and Kali.<sup>50</sup> Owing to their unavoidable dependence on rain, they believe in all sorts of superstitious practices<sup>51</sup> besides faithfully celebrating festivals in

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<sup>46</sup> It is claimed that Mary appeared on this hill on 11 February 1858. See <http://www.gunadalashrine.org/>. Accessed on 1 June 2022.

<sup>47</sup> The following links can give a picture of how novenas are organized in different places. Indrani Basu, 'Catholics Start Observing 9-day Novena', <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/navi-mumbai/catholics-start-observing-9-day-novena/articleshow/53950925.cms>. Accessed on 23 May 2022. Alfie Dsouza, 'Nine Days Novena Prior to the "Monthi Fest"- the "Feast of the Nativity of Blessed Virgin Mary"' Begins', <https://www.mangalorean.com/nine-days-novena-prior-to-the-monthi-fest-the-feast-of-the-nativity-of-blessed-virgin-mary-begins/>. Accessed on 23 May 2022. The Times of India, 'Novena Ends Today with Feast of Mother Mary', <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/indore/novena-ends-today-with-feast-of-mother-mary/articleshow/54162990.cms>. Accessed on 28 May 2022. UCAnews, 'Devotees "Saffronize" Marian Novena in Southern India', [https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post\\_name=/2002/09/17/devotees-saffronize-marian-novena-in-southern-india&post\\_id=21344](https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2002/09/17/devotees-saffronize-marian-novena-in-southern-india&post_id=21344). Accessed on 29 May 2022.

<sup>48</sup> See Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* and Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin*.

<sup>49</sup> See Burton Stein, 'Temples in Tamil Country, 1300-1750 A.D', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 14, 1977, 11–45; Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, 40, and Patrizia Granziera, 'The Indo-Mediterranean Caduceus and the Worship of the Tree, the Serpent, and the Mother Goddess in the South of India', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, 2010, 610–620.

<sup>50</sup> Though Amman is interpreted as the incarnation of either Kali or Durga, she is foremost a village goddess who is believed to be the guardian, *grama devata* of the village. See Granziera, 'The Indo-Mediterranean Caduceus', 613, and Padmaja Kamat, 'Representations of the Hindu Divine Feminine: Implications for Female Empowerment in India', *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 10, 2017, 535–542, 535. For an understanding of these two goddesses see Lynn Foulston and Stuart Abbott, *Hindu Goddesses: Beliefs and Practices*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009, 31–39. For an analysis of various Hindu goddesses see Alleyn Diesel, 'Felines and Female Divinities: The Association of Cats with Goddesses, Ancient and Contemporary', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 21, December 2008, 71–94.

<sup>51</sup> Some groups of people in India believe that if donkeys or frogs are married it will appease rain gods and bring rainfall. It happens now and then in some parts of India. This I call superstitious practices. See Sanya Jain, 'Weeks After Marriage to Please Rain God, Frogs Divorced to End Downpour', <https://www.ndtv.com/offbeat/weeks-after-marriage-to-please-rain-god-frogs-divorced-to-end-downpour-2100236> and Shalini Lobo, 'Braying for Rain: Tamil Villagers Beg for Rain, Marry off Donkey',

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

honour of their village deities. Since Marian devotion is increasing in India and the visits of the adherents of other religions to Marian shrines are on the rise, a reflection on the way Mother Mary appeared to her visionaries can demonstrate how important nature's elements are for the experience of transcendence through them. Though many saints are venerated in India,<sup>52</sup> Mary is a household name in most of the Catholic Christian families. She is considered a member of Catholic families and Catholics never ever want to disrespect her; believers of other religions also do the same. Hence sermons on Mary on the days of Marian feasts are popular and devotees enthusiastically listen to them because of their unwavering confidence in her motherly care. However, in sermons and also in theological articulations more emphasis is given to the place of Mary in the Salvation history, to her divine motherhood, to the healings/miracles<sup>53</sup> brought about through her maternal intercession, and to her relation to the church.<sup>54</sup> In addition, both preachers and theologians focus more often on the message of Mary, given during her apparitions in Lourdes and Fatima, to stress the importance of prayer, conversion, and penance in today's Christian life.<sup>55</sup> A moral invitation to do good and to live a righteous and God-fearing life is exhorted using the message of Mary. Although such a presentation of the significance of Mary is necessary, it may not bring listeners to an ecological conscience. Hence, I suggest that adequate importance is to be given to *how* Mary appeared to highlight the way in which Mary appears to use the elements of nature to reveal God's message and to bestow God's blessings.

For instance, Indians cherish the devotional practice of carrying the holy water to their homes. They not only sprinkle the water in and around the house, but when they suffer from some physical ailments, they drink it with faith that it will relieve and heal them from pain and illness. A sermon that stresses the necessity of the protection of water as integral to venerating Mary and respecting her message in apparitions can both alert them to recognize

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<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/tamil-nadu-monsoon-rain-donkey-marriage-wedding-1577581-2019-08-05>. Accessed on 26 July 2022.

<sup>52</sup> See Thomans M. Landy, 'Indian Parishes Pour Sources into Nine-Days Feast', <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/india-parishes-pour-resources-nine-day-feasts>. Accessed on 22 May 2022.

<sup>53</sup> In many Marian pilgrimage places in India one cannot avoid to notice the testimonies of healings (mementos as proofs of the grace obtained through Mary) preserved in museums.

<sup>54</sup> Paulose Mangai, 'Editorial: A New Liturgical Memorial of Mary as Mother of the Church', *VJTR* 82.5, May 2018, 3–6 and John M. Samaha, 'Mary as Model and Type of the Church in the Liturgical Year', *VJTR* 82.5, May 2018, 31–43.

<sup>55</sup> See Paulose Mangai, 'Editorial', *VJTR* 81.5, May 2017, 3–6; George Nedungatt, 'Fatima 1917–2017', *VJTR* 82.3, March 2018, 76–80 and 'Lourdes: "I am the Immaculate Conception"' *VJTR* 82.12, December 2018, 15–26.

the degradation and disfiguration that happens in their surroundings, and form an ecological conscience to understand their ecological duty to protect the earth.

Hence, if the pollution of the environment, which happens through ignorance, were to be explained as an act against the veneration of Mary, it would generate remarkable awareness as to how nature/the earth is disfigured through paradoxical actions during the celebrating festivals for the purpose of venerating the Virgin Mother and the saints, in the ways mentioned above. The theology of Mary does not occupy a significant place in academia in India. Most Indian theologians tend to see Mary-talk as a subject matter for popular piety and devotional practices. As a result, Mariology is not considered as a key subject in theology nor do theologians show interest in theologizing lived-Catholicism in terms of Maria-experience.<sup>56</sup> In this article, I attempt to explore the meaning, implications, and the significance of black Madonnas to indicate how they can be of remarkable importance for raising ecological awareness among Indian Catholics. I maintain that, since the worship of Amman is popular in India, black Madonnas can easily be brought to the forefront to promote the care of the earth not only among Catholics but among other faiths as well. Hence, I contend that contemporary theological explorations must stress the importance of the physical manner in which Mary appeared to the visionaries rather than to the messages that are common in preaching and facilitate the phenomenon of pilgrimages and the celebration of Marian feasts. This theological proposal can hopefully be considered a pioneering attempt to bring to the awareness of theologically trained priests and religious and theologically non-trained believers/devotees the ecological significance of Mary which can be extracted through an eco-theological articulation of her apparition stories. It is essential for informing and conscientizing the clergy who play a predominant role in organising annual feasts and processions, including the preaching of Marian sermons to believers residing in cities and villages.<sup>57</sup> Hence, utilizing the available theologies of Our Lady of Guadalupe, specifically that

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<sup>56</sup> See the two internationally known academic journals: *Asian Horizons* and *VJTR*. Very few articles are written on Mary and Marian devotion.

<sup>57</sup> I must acknowledge that many well-educated Catholic Christians living in cities have become aware of the ecological crisis. They oppose the state whenever it fails to be ecological. See Mumbai Mirror, 'Mumbai's Christians Oppose Supreme Court's Decision to Allow Firecrackers to Be Burst During Christmas Eve, Say "Protecting the environment is the need of the hour"'.  
<https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/mumbais-christians-oppose-supreme-courts-decision-to-allow-firecrackers-to-be-burst-during-christmas-eve-say-protecting-the-environment-is-the-need-of-the-hour/articleshow/66402613.cms>. Accessed on 1 May 2022.

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

of Virgilio Elizondo, whose theological views correspond well with the theology of black Madonnas, I highlight how the theology of Guadalupe, a black Madonna, can initiate ecological actions for protecting the environment and nature. This will disclose why a change of focus from the message of the apparitions to the physical appearance of the apparitions is highly recommended in an Indian context where Marian apparitions stories are highly admired and where Catholic Christians, both theologically trained and non-trained, cherish a special bond with Mary.

It is true that devotion to our Lady of Guadalupe or black Madonnas is not prevalent in India. The stories of Guadalupe are known and popular, but we hardly find a chapel or church dedicated to this title in India. People are interested in the story but do not practice devotion. But there are many similarities between the way villages/parishes/basilicas/shrines celebrate annual feasts in honour of Mary and the way Hindus celebrate the village feast to appease their patron goddess, Amman, who is black. This can explain why Hindus also come to Marian pilgrimage sites or shrines. I argue that if the eco-theological significance of black Madonnas can be introduced in the Indian context through apparition stories, this can also be addressed to the devotees of Amman who come to pray to Mary and participate in the annual feast and procession conducted to venerate her. And, in this regard, we already have the eco-theological reflections of the apparition stories of Guadalupe at our service.

### **Black Madonnas, Nature, and Our Lady of Guadalupe**

Penny Barham suggests that ‘the Lady of Guadalupe and others like her should be moved back from the margins and into centre stage’, because of the colour black’s symbolic connection to the environment and earth.<sup>58</sup> Jeanette Favrot Peterson has demonstrated this ongoing attempt by religious scholars to ‘rediscover the original (read “indigenous”) meaning of Guadalupe’ by unravelling the characteristic features which she has absorbed from Tonantzin-Coalticue, the pre-Columbian goddess of the cosmos.<sup>59</sup> Such theological attempts

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<sup>58</sup> Penny Barham, 'Black Madonnas', *Feminist Theology* 11.3, 2003, 325–332, 326.

<sup>59</sup> Jeanette Favrot Peterson, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?', *Art Journal* 51. 4, 1992, 39–47, 46.



recommend a study of black Madonnas in order to discover the ecological implications of Guadalupe who belongs to this group of black Madonnas.<sup>60</sup> Peterson explicates her popularity as a result of the plurality of meanings to which she has been attributed and, recently, of her connection with the sacred and the earth.<sup>61</sup> Boss is of the opinion that besides many implications and interpretations associated with the black Madonnas, her connection with the earth is of particular importance.<sup>62</sup>

Barham notes that black Madonnas were an alternative means to continue the preservation of the tradition of their goddesses by African people who were carried to other countries as slaves. Interestingly, black Virgins have occupied the sites where pagan goddesses were previously revered. Hence, it is a continuity of the goddess tradition in the image of Mary. Barham is convinced that black Madonnas 'have a unique quality which goes further than the issue of ethnicity, and a power and presence outside the confines of Christianity'.<sup>63</sup> They continue, in a way, the tradition of the ancient Earth Goddess: 'The blackness of a figurine reflects the physical features of the population and is also a representation of an earlier Earth Goddess.'<sup>64</sup> She is of the opinion that this is true of Guadalupe. Hence, she argues that the Guadalupe Madonna absorbed the features of the Great Corn Mother of the Aztec period and is identifiable with the physical features of the indigenous people.<sup>65</sup> The similarities found between Demeter, Isis (the corn goddesses), and Mary with her child indicate how these images were Christianized and taken over by Christianity through the image of Mary. Black is a metaphor which is used to signify the darkness of the earth because, in the darkness of the earth, seeds germinate and to this darkness of the earth they return.

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<sup>60</sup> For a remarkable study on black Madonnas see Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, Arkana: Penguin Books, 1996.

<sup>61</sup> Guadalupe is unique because of her flexibility to be associated with diverse theological significances. Peterson maintains that the Virgin's image's 'constancy and flexibility to meet the shifting social, religious, and political needs of a heterodox society', x-xi, broadens her spiritual economy to be worthy of 'translocation from Old World to the New World and back again', 6. See Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe: From Black Madonna to Queen of the Americas*, Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Series in Latin American and Latino Art and Culture, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Boss, *Mary*, 74–100.

<sup>63</sup> Barham, 'Black Madonnas', 325.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>65</sup> D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix. Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 43; Otto F. A. Meinardus, 'The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East', *Marian Studies* 47, 1996, 88–101, 90; and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 129–130.

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

Boss states that blackness refers to the primal matter or 'elemental matrix' of which the universe is made. She associates this elemental matrix with Mary. Following Ramón Llull who pointed out that Chaos was created first out of nothing, she makes the link between Mary and Chaos. For Llull, Chaos is 'the foundation of all corporeal beings and all that constitutes corporal beings is initially present *potentially* in Chaos'.<sup>66</sup> Boss amplifies it, saying, '*Chaos is that in virtue of which bodily things as such participate in one another by identity.*'<sup>67</sup> On this basis, she argues that: 'If Christ's conception in his mother's womb is truly a new creation – or rather, the recreation of the world – from the foundations of the cosmos, then there must be some sense in which there is a true identity between Mary and Chaos.'<sup>68</sup> The Word's incarnation signifies his participation and union with the entire material world. If Christ through his incarnation has united himself with the whole cosmos and redeemed it, then it is plausible to identify Mary with Chaos.

Although Barham interprets the black Madonnas as the 'continuing aspects of ancient Earth Goddesses', Boss argues that they are more than the pagan earth goddesses of fecundity.<sup>69</sup> Earth not only gives life but it also is to the earth that the dead return.<sup>70</sup> According to Robert Pogue Harrison, the forest is a place of life and death, darkness, and confusion. Although forest dwellers are the fore-parents of modern apparently 'civilized' people, for the sake of civilization trees are cut and distance is created from the woods. Because some did not want to move away from the woods and soil, the womb of the goddess, there emerged the cult of Mary to let them justify their life in the woods.<sup>71</sup> No doubt, many of the Marian shrines are located on remote places, mountains, caves, and forests. While civilization and urbanization denote separation and distance from the woods from nature, Marian shrines in the remote areas call people to return to nature in order to 'cross over that boundary that divides culture from nature'.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> As cited in Boss, *Mary*, 88. See also Ramón Llull, 'Libre de Contemplació', in *Obres Essencials*, vol. 1, Barcelona: Edicions Ariel, 1957, and Ramón Lullius, 'Liber Chaos', in *Operum*, vol. 3, Mainz: Haffner, 1723. Italics original.

<sup>67</sup> Boss, *Mary*, 89. Italics original.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> See Barham, 'Black Madonnas', 326 and Boss, *Mary*, 91–92.

<sup>70</sup> See Thomas Manickam, 'Earth the Motherly Gaia: The Womb and Tomb of All Creatures', *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 3.1, June 2009, 56–72.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1992, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Boss, *Mary*, 94.

Based on this intrinsic link between Mary and the earth I highlight in the following section the importance of the created world for understanding the message of Mary in apparitions. For this purpose, I utilize Elizondo's Marian theology of Guadalupe.

Elizondo, who is known as the father of Hispanic theology,<sup>73</sup> has developed the theology of Guadalupe<sup>74</sup> to defend and affirm the value of mestizo identity. Naming her as the mother of the new creation, he defends the method of inculturation as an apt method in those countries which are already blessed with rich cultural heritage and religious traditions. Guadalupe is a momentous event which endorses the idea that 'evangelization is inculturation'. In this sense, through Guadalupe, Mexican Americans were sacramentalized rather than evangelized. What the colonizers regarded as pagan and evil was reinstated through the event of Guadalupe as of value and of importance. The indigenous people had a holistic view of nature. Their oneness with nature allowed them to give enormous importance to songs and flowers. They did not use determinative language in their description of God. Since for the indigenous peoples, the cosmos is saturated with divine power and everything was religious, the singing of the birds and flowers was seen as a medium of God's revelation and communication.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> See Timothy Matovina, 'Introduction' in *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends*, ed. Timothy Matovina, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000, 1–9, 6–7. In the introduction to this edited work Matovina explains why Elizondo is worthy of this title. See also Arturo J. Bañuelas, 'U.S. Hispanic Theology: An Initial Assessment', in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Bañuelas, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995, 55–82, 56 and Jorge A. Aquino, 'Mestizaje: The Latina/o Religious Imaginary in the North American Racial Crucible', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, 283–311, 286.

<sup>74</sup> For an introduction and genealogy of theologies of Guadalupe see Timothy Matovina, *Theologies of Guadalupe: From the Era of Conquest to Pope Francis*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019; and Virgilio Elizondo and Timothy Matovina, eds., *New Frontiers in Guadalupean Studies*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014. See also Clodomiro L. Siller-Acuña, *Para comprender el mensaje de María de Guadalupe*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1989; Miguel León-Portilla, *Tonantzin Guadalupe: Pensamiento náhuatl y mensaje cristiano en el 'Nican mopohua'*, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000; William B. Taylor, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion', *American Ethnologies* 14, February 1987, 9–33 and *Theater of a Thousand Wonders: A History of Miraculous Images and Shrines in New Spain*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016; Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, *A Handbook on Guadalupe*, Waite Park, MN: Park Press, 1997; David A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix. Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001; Jose Luis Guerrero, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: A New Interpretation of the Story, Apparitions and Image*, Liguori: Liguori, 2008; and Carl Anderson and Eduardo Chávez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of the Civilization of Love*, New York: Doubleday, 2009.

<sup>75</sup> See Virgilio Elizondo's book and articles, *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997; 'Our Lady of Guadalupe: A New World Image of the Trinity', *Marian Studies* 51, 2000, 40–51; 'Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of a New Creation', in *Joseph and Edith Habiger Endowment for Catholic Studies Spring 2002 Habiger Lecture*, ed. Center for Catholic Studies, Minnesota: University of St. Thomas – St. Paul, 2002, 1–21; 'María de Guadalupe: Star of the First and New Evangelization', *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 56, 2006, 353–360; 'Evangelization Is Inculturation: A Case Study', *Missiology: An International Review* 43.1, 2015, 17–26 and 'La

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

The singing of birds prepares the ground for a divine relation and, therefore, when Mary appeared Juan Diego did not take her for a ghost. Her appearance, which was different from the goddesses of the indigenous people, confirmed that she was the mother of Jesus the Christian God. The revealing of her name affirmed that she was both the mother of God and the mother of Jesus. The indigenous people believed that the creation can be a trustworthy medium of God. This is well reflected in Boss's summary of John Scotus Erigena's view: 'The work of creation is the descent of the divine Goodness into created things: "that which is properly thought of as beyond all essence is also properly known in all essence, and therefore every visible and invisible creature can be called a theophany, that is, a divine apparition".'<sup>76</sup> Consequently, 'at the heart of the humblest of creatures is nothing other than the divine Goodness'.<sup>77</sup>

In the apparition, Our Lady of Guadalupe sends Juan Diego to the bishop with a message for constructing a chapel at the site of the apparition. During the first two occasions of his request to the bishop, he was sent away by the bishop who doubted the veracity of the apparition. But the third time, as he goes to the bishop carrying flowers from the mountain, he is accepted. An important element that deserves attention in this incident is that the message that was sent, through a person who was considered barely human,<sup>78</sup> enjoyed no recognition from the bishop, whereas the flowers sent through Guadalupe prove the integrity and truth of Juan Diego. They also restore the full humanity of this poor man. Nature has the potential to help us understand God's revelation in a new light. At times it reveals the truth of God's message to us. In a sense, it can be said that it also becomes a messenger of God. Hence, when nature is disfigured and degraded, we destroy the capacity which these mediums contain and thereby fail to understand God's message. Disrespecting God's message is also disrespecting God's person. By destroying nature, we block the flow of God's presence

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Virgen de Guadalupe as Mother and Master Icon for the New Evangelization', in *To All the World: Preaching and the New Evangelization*, ed. Michael E. Connors, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016, 12–21.

<sup>76</sup> Boss, *Mary*, 97-98.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>78</sup> Juan Diego and his defeated people were considered by Spanish conquistadors no more than minors because their full humanity was debated and questioned by Spanish thinkers of that time. See Elizondo, *Guadalupe*, 48, 53 and Jeanette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican American Women*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994, 14. For a detailed historical study on Juan Diego see Anderson and Eduardo Chávez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe and Saint Juan Diego: The Historical Evidence*, translated from Spanish by Carmen Treviño and Veronica Montaño, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.



in nature which brings healing to us. We distance ourselves from the presence of God and avoid taking His message to our heart.

Nature helps the least and the poor to claim their identity, to affirm their dignity. It is the presence of the flowers which restored the full human dignity of Juan Diego. It happened also in the apparitions of Lourdes and Fatima.<sup>79</sup> For instance, the fountain in Lourdes still gives witness to the historicity of the apparitions to Bernadette. It has also become a source of healing and blessing, restoring fullness and integrity to the body and to the spirit of millions of people. At Fatima, the great miracle involved the sun and a fall of flowers. The elements of nature in each case validated the testimony and the message of the poor and the least. Thus, when nature is destroyed, we do horrible harm to the poor and to the least. We make them defenceless and strip them of the possibility to defend their dignity. Eco-Mariological reflections are necessary in India to help the poor and the less privileged understand that to defend their basic human rights and dignity they must defend nature.

### **Conclusion – the Indian Context**

Corporate companies, which focus solely on profit, have distanced many farmers from their land in India. No doubt, they have caused a disconnection between the farmers and the land. Many farmers were forced to sell their lands either by persuasion using great sums of money or because of climate change which does not assure them a good and profitable harvest. Yet there is a great majority in India that still depends on the land for survival. And, as I have already indicated, they are polluting the environment because of ignorance. In this context, I see Marian devotion as a powerful medium to bring awareness to the farmers and aid the general populace to respect and defend nature. For this, I have proposed that more attention be given to the way Mary appeared than to the message that she conveyed. Her apparitions validate God's pervasive presence in nature and nature's capacity to function as

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<sup>79</sup> For historical information over apparitions, the message, and the physical appearances of Mary of apparitions see Roy Abraham Varghese, *God-Sent: A History of Accredited Apparitions of Mary*, New York: The Crossroad, 2000; and over Lourdes and Fatima see 101–105 and 107–114. See also Louis Lochet, *Apparitions of Our Lady: Their place in the life of the Church*, trans. John Dingle, Freiburg: Herder, 1960; Rene Laurentin, *Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary Today*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, trans. Luke Griffin, Dublin: Veritas, 1991; and Donal Anthony Foley, *Marian Apparitions, the Bible, and the Modern World*, Leominster: Gracewing, 2002.

## Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth

God's messenger. Since in India Mary's apparitions at Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima are well known, eco-theologies must be developed through the ecological interpretations of the apparitions. This article can be an invitation for such theologizing and further it can facilitate eco-theological reflections on local apparitions. If the importance of nature is explained to people through those popular beliefs which are dear to them, they will resist the corporate companies who distance them from their lands. Thus, rural and land-based communities can resist the environmental exploitation on the spiritual grounds that nature has value as a reliable medium in the experience of God's healing presence. When the earth is disfigured, it prevents the continuous communication of God's care for humanity and the entire cosmos. Hence, I argue that an eco-theology of Mary or, as Boss names it, a 'green Mariology'<sup>80</sup> is needed to assist rural communities to understand the disadvantages of the consumerist and profit-oriented culture and thereby to resist such exploitation. Furthermore, they need to become aware that their celebrations aimed at appeasing deities degrade the land, air, and water. It will also bring them to an awareness of their paradoxical actions: on the one hand they appease gods and goddesses through their ritual acts for preserving nature and for the flourishing of the earth and, on the other hand, these actions damage and are hazardous to nature.

Though Christianity is a minority religion in India, as I have already mentioned above, many Hindus and Muslims join Christians in venerating Mary for her many blessings. In this process, they participate in many ritual acts organized by the Christians. Their participation in the Eucharist celebration can be an effective moment to disclose to them the ecological importance of Marian devotion. As I have described above, convincing sermons have remarkable impact on hearers. It will oblige them to avoid exploiting and harming nature. People of different religions, who inhabit in the villages, work together on one another's agricultural land. These can be profitable moments for Christians to spread awareness of the damage done to nature through the various religious ritual acts and explain to them the ecological demands of being a devotee of Mary. People of different religious faiths in India do not want to displease Mary or disobey her messages. But, in order to spread this awareness to the people of different religions, Christians themselves should be well informed. For this purpose, the seminarians, religious, pastoral workers, catechists, priests, and bishops must

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<sup>80</sup> Boss, *Mary*, ix.



be introduced to the ecological demands of green Mariology. To do that, Indian theologians must develop eco-theological articulations of legends, apparitions, and miracle stories associated with Mary who is venerated with different names and in different images in India. This will enable priests and religious to play an indispensable role in organizing a celebration of green Marian festivals. A spark can become a great fire.

If the countries where a dense population lives do not take initiatives to protect the environment soon, the earth may become uninhabitable. We need to learn to acknowledge that the earth is one and, if somewhere earth is degraded, then its effects can be felt in other parts of the world as well. It is the only precious home for human beings and all creatures. While the academic world is busy finding ways and means to defend the created world against degradation, it has not paid enough attention to the majority of people living in the developing and underdeveloped countries who pollute the environment at an alarming rate. Respecting the freedom of every country, we can utilize the phenomenon of popular devotion to teach the vast majority living in India. While intellectual articulations may raise tension with their demonstration of the irreconcilable differences between religious faiths and cultural diversity, popular devotion provides an opportunity for unity and communion among a great majority. Popular devotion can bring people to self-awareness in contrast to legalized rules which force them to obey.