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Author: Chris Maunder

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Abstract

This article comprises the text of a presentation given at the conference “New Beginnings: A Celebration of Marian Scholarship” at St Mary’s University, Twickenham, on 25th March 2023. Chris Maunder looks back over thirty years researching Marian apparitions in modern Europe, identifying the dominant themes while charting developments in the relevant literature. In the final section, there are some reflections added after the conference.

Author

Chris Maunder was a senior lecturer in Theology & Religious Studies at York St John University until his retirement in 2020. He has published widely on Marian issues, including *Our Lady of the Nations: Apparitions of Mary in 20th-Century Catholic Europe* (OUP 2016) and *Mary, Founder of Christianity* (Oneworld 2022). He currently serves as the Treasurer of the Centre for Marian Studies.

In 1991, I completed my PhD on Marian apparitions in Catholic Europe from 1830 to the present. It took me a further twenty-five years until 2016 to publish a monograph on the subject, although this time confining the historical scope to the twentieth century. I do not regret the long wait, as there was so much to add: (i) many new and detailed publications on Marian visions by various scholars; (ii) research visits that I undertook, to Ireland, Belgium, and Germany; (iii) my realisation that an analysis of the gender and age of the visionaries was crucial to a full understanding. The book, published by OUP, was titled *Our Lady of the Nations*, a hint at the one of the most influential apparition cases in twentieth century Europe, the 'Lady of All Nations' of Amsterdam. The title also informed the reader that the socio-historical contexts of the places where apparitions occurred was important to the subject matter. Visions are also reflections.

When I first proposed a PhD on Marian apparitions, my suggested topic restricted itself to one apparition site: Medjugorje. However, my supervisor, Adrian Hastings, himself somewhat of a generalist in Church history, preferred me to look at a range of apparitions, and hence we restricted it only to Europe and to the period after 1830. I think that, academically, this was probably a mistake; many of the really excellent pieces of work on apparitions since then have concentrated on one location, such as David Blackbourn's book on Marpingen in Germany. William Christian Jr. on Ezquioga in Basque Spain, Paolo Apolito on Oliveto Citra in Italy, Deirdre le la Cruz on visions in the Philippines, especially Lipa, Agnieszka Halemba on Dzhublyk in Ukraine¹ – all of these are detailed studies of specific apparitions, although they draw conclusions applicable to others. One of the first people I wrote to during my doctorate study was René Laurentin, the well-known priest Mariologist (who died in 2017, three weeks short of his hundredth birthday). He replied that my proposed

¹ David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); William A. Christian Jr., *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Paolo Apolito, *Apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Oliveto Citra: Local Visions and Cosmic Drama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Deirdre de La Cruz, *Deirdre, Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions and the Making of a Filipino Universal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Agnieszka Halemba, *Negotiating Marian Apparitions: The Politics of Religion in Transcarpathian Ukraine* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015).



wide study was impractical, as such a long time for research was required in each locale. Laurentin, I found out, had published thirteen thick volumes on the documents and history just of Lourdes!

Nevertheless, I have no regrets. I can thank Adrian for inspiring me to look at so many different places and their stories. I have learned a lot about modern Western European history, at least! I will always cherish the pleasing diversity and interesting stories of the apparition shrines, often in breath-takingly beautiful countryside, my visits including excursions to even older sites in their vicinities.

After publishing the book in 2016, I have been – with the exception of occasional talks, like this one – closing my notebook on apparitions. The multiplicity of cases and their presence on the Internet, and some of the fastidious Catholic debates around them, have become somewhat unmanageable! In this talk, I want to look back on some of the major themes of the subject matter and reflect on my own perspective.

The PhD attempted a Mariology of apparitions, much of which was largely absent from the book. This was because the Mariology is somewhat elusive, whereas a social history of apparitions is more straightforward and easier to make palatable to a wider readership. I had originally wanted to write Mariology as an insider, a devotee and a pilgrim at shrines myself. On the other hand, my theological viewpoint is strongly influenced by liberation and feminist theologies, which put me rather on the periphery of the pilgrim community. Yet, when it comes to a social psychological understanding of apparitions which would underlie any theology, I came to realise that I am not at all far from the position of mainstream Catholic theologians such as Benedict XVI and Karl Rahner.

The title I have chosen for this talk illustrates the threads running through the book and other material that I have written in articles across the years. I have called it 'Mary of the Visionaries: Wisdom from the Mouths of the "Uncultured"'. A study of Marian apparitions concerns Mary, what is believed about her and reported of her, but it also focuses on the visionaries themselves: who they were, what they aspired to, which social and ecclesiastical currents provided the framework for their experiences. The subtitle is a reference to

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Schleiermacher's 1799 work, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, which implies that the 'free thinkers' who opposed or abandoned religion in the Enlightenment regarded themselves as sophisticated, at the cutting edge of social development. This explains why Catholics in the century following took pride in the uneducated and/or youthful nature of many of the visionaries. While Schleiermacher provided an apology for Christianity in rational terms, Catholicism simply met the 'despisers' head on with a diametrically opposite worldview. The idea that God's wisdom may be spoken through those whose minds are less clouded by the philosophical and social trends of the day goes right back to the New Testament, and can be found as a standard motif in priestly support for apparitions right through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As apparitions occur very frequently in the Catholic community, indeed in other Christian communities too and in the world at large, one has to ask: why the great popularity of Lourdes? Why Fátima? And why 'epidemics' of apparitions, for example in Belgium in the 1930s. One answer is sociological: that Marian apparitions and pilgrimages are reactions to social and political change, and so these factors shape the response to a particular apparition, which is most likely to appeal in populations faced with stress. One cannot but notice that visions and the ensuing pilgrimage cults have often reflected hope and defiance against unwelcome social and political turmoil. In the modern period, visionaries have announced strong divine disapproval of socio-political systems: in chronological order, republicanism, communism, and secularizing liberalism (also Nazism for a time in German cases in the 1930s). Of these, secularizing liberalism has survived as the contemporary object of Marian visionary criticism.

In the book, I used the term 'alternative history' to describe the ways in which Catholic visionaries have interpreted social and political developments from the perspective of their belief in the maternal guidance of Mary. I wrote: 'The concept of "alternative history" describes how Catholics experience visionary phenomena as confirmation of the belief that God is ultimately in control of events and that human history relates to a divine purpose. This is particularly important when devotees feel powerless in the face of economic, social, and

political change'.² I derived the term from Robert Orsi's notion of 'alternative modernity',³ by which he reminded us that Marian devotees are far from being remnants of a bygone, superstitious age; rather, they are people living, like others, in a technological environment and making sense of the contemporary world around them using theological metanarrative as well as everyday explanations. Ruth Harris made a related point in her book on Lourdes,⁴ as she regarded the Lourdes phenomenon as a modern one (meaning belonging to the industrial age); it placed traditional Christian beliefs about the presence of the supernatural within the contours of the social, political, and technological landscape of the modern world. This is well illustrated by the use of travel in pilgrimage: Lourdes thrived more than other shrines of its time because of the enterprising decision to build a railway there. Now, in the twenty-first century, pilgrims travel by air, stay in well-equipped hotels, and use the Internet to find out about shrines, along with the latest news of visions and messages.⁵

However, to reduce the apparitions to social reactions alone is missing the point of 'alternative modernity'. Orsi was challenging the privileging of historiographies that omitted the presence of transcendent beings. For the believer, history without that important element is incomplete. Orsi says that 'Presence requires a history of its own'.⁶ In the world of Catholic Marian apparitions, historical developments are set in a theological narrative, one that Paolo Apolito described as 'cosmic drama', a battle between God and the Devil with Mary as God's prophet bringing warnings of disaster along with assurances of ultimate victory.⁷ Visionaries announce a future in which God's action would bring better circumstances. Optimistic messages are rarely unconditional, however, and always require a response from believers or the Church hierarchy: prayer, conversion, consecration.

² Chris Maunder, *Our Lady of the Nations* (Oxford: OUP, 2016): 84.

³ Robert A. Orsi, 'Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity', in Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen & Catrien Notermans (eds.), *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Farnham: Ashgate 2009): 215–25.

⁴ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Penguin, 1999).

⁵ See Paolo Apolito, *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experience on the Web* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁶ Orsi, 'Abundant History': 225.

⁷ Apolito, *Apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Oliveto Citra*.

There is of course much debate among Catholic apparition devotees as to which visions are genuine. One must not see the devotee community as monolithic. Agnieszka Halemba pointed out that, when considering fairly recent apparitions in Ukraine: ‘Ontological considerations are not innocent but are structured by power relations in particular locations.’⁸ Her book is entitled *Negotiating Marian Apparitions*.⁹ So the visionary movement involves a multiplicity of voices in relationship. Those involved in the apparition cults in some position of power (priests or respected lay people) attempt to shape the narratives of visions to give them consistency. Before Halemba, Paolo Apolito also made this point in his study, *Apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Oliveto Citra*, and Sandra Zimdars-Swartz referred to the editing process by which apparition narratives are shaped when writing about visions in Ireland.¹⁰

In my PhD, in attempting a theological analysis I concluded that, understood positively, apparitions worthy of belief involve the transformation of places and people in movements of religious and social renewal. ‘Transformation’ seems to be a key theme in Catholic discernment of apparitions: transformation of seer, devotees, the wider community. Yet, of course, one can debate as to what positive transformations might look like: more people going to Mass and confession, or movements for peace and reconciliation or, ideally perhaps, both. Too often the criteria stress the former and not the latter. Nevertheless, as a general point, positive transformation bears witness to divine presence. The alternative history of Marian apparitions is an account of a world in which Mary, sometimes together with the Christ Child, is *present* as the messenger of the Triune God. The perception that the presence of Mary is concentrated in a particular locale explains the phenomenon of pilgrimage to apparition shrines more than any other factor.

⁸ Agnieszka Halemba, ‘Apparitions of the Virgin Mary as Decision-Events’, in James Laidlaw, Barbara Bodenhorn & Martin Holbraad (eds.), *Recovering the Human Subject: Freedom, Creativity and Decision* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018): 95-112.

⁹ Halemba, *Negotiating Marian Apparitions*.

¹⁰ Apolito, *Apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Oliveto Citra*; Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, ‘Popular Devotion to the Virgin: The Marian Phenomena at Melleray, Republic of Ireland’, *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 67 (1989): 125–44..

In the book, I tried to provide a counterbalance to the understanding of apparitions merely as reactions to social and political change by painting a warm and respectful portrait of visionaries, especially those not heralded in the Catholic canon. I agree with another of Agnieszka Halemba's observations that apparitions are 'sites of religious experimentation and innovation'; therefore one can conclude rightly that creative people are involved.¹¹ Most nineteenth and twentieth century Catholic visionaries who reached public attention were women and children.¹² They were not only 'uncultured' from the point of view of secular society, but also from the standpoint of the Church itself. Many were sensitive women living in a violent era of rapid social change, brought up in a Church where, with a few exceptions such as St. Thérèse of Lisieux, female voices were marginal. The visionary mode was often the only one in which a woman could make a substantial contribution to the thought world of Catholicism.

Visionaries are often charismatic and creative individuals whose devotional formulations have influenced great numbers of people (even if the creative aspect is unconscious and they ascribe the initiative to Mary). Understanding these ideas is not necessarily a simple matter.¹³ One could suggest that apparition events provide a tableau of images and narratives that aid understanding of a particular context and the way it changes. In my book, I proposed that apparitions gather 'a complex range of emotions, hopes, memories, social and historical observations, and within a single story make them memorable and accessible'.¹⁴

Recognizing the creative nature of visionary experiences and messages, and drawing on the concepts of 'popular religion' and 'ordinary theology',¹⁵ I coined the term 'popular theologian' to describe visionaries, particularly women, who dedicated themselves to

¹¹ Agnieszka Halemba, 'Apparitional Movements as Sites of Religious Experimentation: A Case Study from Transcarpathian Ukraine', *Nova Religio* 21.2 (2017): 45-58.

¹² See the figures in Maunder, *Our Lady of the Nations*: 52-3.

¹³ See, for example, Eugene Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Maunder, *Our Lady of the Nations*: 15.

¹⁵ For ordinary religion, see Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), for popular religion see, for example, Ellen Badone (ed.), *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

promulgating messages from the Virgin Mary and interpreting them. This is irrespective of whether the Church has approved them or not; they are popular theologians if they gain an appreciable following. This does not involve systematic or academic theology, of course; it is intuitive and expressive, as one would expect from visionary experiences. However, it does have its own consistency and inner logic.

In modern Europe, generally, it has been much harder for an adult female visionary to gain acceptance by the bishops than for a teenager or child (although that is not so much the case elsewhere, such as in Latin America). One could posit that adult females pose a much greater threat to priestly authority, as they have often expressed themselves in terms that expressed or implied criticism of the hierarchy, or made claims about world events that were open to refutation. Children's narratives, on the other hand, have usually been straightforward rearticulations of accepted devotional formulae.

The predominance of female visionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might make us think of the theory that religion was 'feminised' in that time, that is, that people expected women to have greater spiritual sensitivity.¹⁶ Certainly, in contrast, previous centuries had seen a roughly equal number of male visionaries, but females become predominant after 1830. Yet, as Tine van Osselaer has noted in her research,¹⁷ there were also male visionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even if they made up the minority. Male adult visionaries in Europe have not fared much better than females: the two who gained acceptance in the Church in the nineteenth and twentieth century were useful in its mission as celebrated converts (Alphonse Ratisbonne from Judaism and Bruno Cornacchiola from militant atheism); both had their experiences in Rome, and both achieved an audience with the pope of the time.

The most famous of the twentieth century female visionaries I wrote about was Sister Lúcia of Fátima (1907-2005) who, as an adult, reflected in her memoirs on the visions she

¹⁶ For the feminisation thesis see, for example, Patrick Pasture, Jan Art & Thomas Buerman (eds.), *Beyond the Feminization Thesis: Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Tine van Osselaer, 'Sensitive but Sane: Male Visionaries and their Emotional Display in Interwar Belgium', *Low Countries Historical Review* 127.1 (2012): 127-49.

experienced as a child, and provided a lot of new information about them.¹⁸ She wrote about the importance of devotion to the Immaculate Heart and began to reveal the ‘secrets’ entrusted to her in childhood. I also focused on two other twentieth century contemporaries of Lúcia, both of whom reported visions in adulthood only: Jeanne-Louise Ramonet of Kerizinen in Brittany, and Ida Peerdeman of Amsterdam.¹⁹ In all these cases, there is the development of ideas and the resulting contradictions and adaptation that occur in formal theologians. These visionaries took existing formulations of devotion and re-shaped them in a way that made sense to their contemporaries, supported by powerful imagery. Ramonet’s central symbol was the unity of the Sacred and Immaculate Hearts, and Peerdeman’s, the Co-redemption of Mary that is established by her place at the Crucifixion.

The outcomes were rather different. Sister Lúcia, who died in 2005, is likely to be canonized as her fellow visionaries already have been. Her influence has been immense. Yet Ramonet, despite the support of many Bretons who saw this as their own regional modern apparition, died in 1995, never achieved recognition by the Church at episcopal level, whereas Peerdeman, who died one year later, only received it posthumously after decades of opposition. Peter Jan Margry described how the once ostracized Amsterdam cult around Ida Peerdeman did finally achieve reconciliation with the Church.²⁰ Even then, local diocesan approval has been qualified by an intervention from the Vatican.²¹

Both Ramonet and Peerdeman inspired religious orders of women to be established at their shrines. The Amsterdam operation has global links and enjoys the support of a worldwide movement led from America. Ida’s famous image of Mary as ‘the Lady of All Nations’ (a development of the familiar Immaculate Conception image) is a notable inversion of anxiety into confidence in the Madonna who presides over the nations as she stands at the

¹⁸ For Fátima, see Jeffrey S. Bennett, *When the Sun Danced: Myth, Miracles and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Portugal* (Charlottesville, 2012); Maunder, *Our Lady of the Nations*: 21-39.

¹⁹ Maunder, *Our Lady of the Nations*: 109-21.

²⁰ Peter Jan Margry, ‘Marian Interventions in the Wars of Ideology: The Elastic Politics of the Roman Catholic Church on Modern Apparitions’, *History and Anthropology*, 20 (2009): 243–63.

²¹ It seems now that the diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam, which approved the visions in 2002, has joined the Vatican in reversing the diocesan approval of 2002 and restating the twentieth century rejection of the supernatural provenance of Ida’s apparitions. The resignation of bishop Jozef Punt, who authenticated the visions, seems to have been a key turning-point.

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foot of the cross. Ida's apparitions created a great campaign movement, arguing for the dogmatic definition of Mary as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate. In this she was inspired by the dogma of the Assumption, announced by Pope Pius XII in 1950. The Kerizinen shrine established by Jeanne-Louise Ramonet is impressive, actually larger than that at Amsterdam, thanks to the enthusiastic support of Breton Catholics and others who became interested during the post-war years. Yet all the signs are that the shrine is dying. The religious order, which never received diocesan approval, was down to four women during my visit in 2014. One can only admire their perseverance.

Sister Lúcia, Jeanne-Louise Ramonet, and Ida Peerdeman, in different ways and in different countries, felt it was their mission to promote devotion to Mary in a way that established her central place in the narrative of redemption. In that respect, their expressions of Mariology were 'Christotypical', in that Mary is described in ways analogous to Christ (even though these visionaries would not have challenged Catholic orthodoxy in that Mary was and remains purely a human being, even if exalted beyond any other because of the fact that the Word was Incarnate in her).²² Their ideas have been enthusiastically taken up by Catholics who dislike the apparent decline in Marian veneration since Vatican II, an unintended by-product of the ecclesiological emphasis on Mary at the Council, that is, the content on Mary placed in the constitution on the Church and her mediation qualified by the statement that Christ is the one mediator, deriving from 1 Tim. 2.5. So apparitions belong, unsurprisingly, to what has been called a 'high' Mariology. The three women we have been considering expressed this in striking symbolic forms.

Nevertheless, my own appreciation of these visionaries does not mean that I necessarily share their socio-political or theological worldview or that of their followers. I concur with the official Catholic view that the apparitions should be understood as 'private revelations', even though some of them have been taken up into Catholic life at an international level. Rahner and Benedict XVI, writing when Cardinal Ratzinger, both regarded

²² For definitions of Christotypical and ecclesiological Mariology and the Mariological issues at Vatican II see, for example, René Laurentin, *Mary's Place in the Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1965).

apparitions as not objective but imaginary phenomena, which draw on cultural and psychological factors.²³ From a Catholic perspective, the ‘genuine’ ones can be seen to be influenced by divine initiative but the actual content of messages is always subjective, and no Catholic is required to believe in them.

Reading Nicholas Lash’s *Easter in Ordinary*²⁴ helped me to conclude that, despite the sensational nature of their claims, visionaries can be regarded as being divinely inspired in much the same way as other people in more mundane circumstances: teachers, artists, preachers, social activists. In these cases, one does not have to accept everything that is done or said as being of crucial import. A critical insider like me can therefore pare down the messages and ideas presented by a visionary in order to retain some belief in apparitions while avoiding the need to commit to all of the messages. In the PhD, I found the core objective revelation as subsisting in just three simple concepts: the power, presence, and authority of Mary.²⁵ Of course, this is just as agenda-driven as anybody else’s view. But at least it does not reduce apparitions to nothing but the subjective. Benedict XVI’s little book on Fátima²⁶ upset some devotees because they thought that positing a social, cultural, and psychological shaping of visions did exactly that.

Apparition events, when they are convincing, make real to the believer the presence of Mary, sometimes accompanied by the Christ Child. Child visionaries can be particularly dramatic in their enactment of that presence, such as the children at sites like Casanova

²³ Karl Rahner, *Visions and Prophecies (Questiones Disputatae 8–10)* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963); Tarcisio Bertone & Joseph Ratzinger, *The Message of Fatima* (Vatican City: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000).

²⁴ Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

²⁵ Among Catholics, there are Christocentric interpretations of the fact that the Mary of apparitions is sometimes a single figure without Christ and accorded great authority. For example, at La Salette, 1846, the expression: ‘I have given you six days to work’ which seems to suggest Mary’s divinity is seen rather in terms of her status as a prophet, as the Hebrew prophets often spoke in the first person representing God. At Banneux, 1933, where Mary led the visionary to a spring, the water of the spring is identified as Christ, the ‘living water’; thus Mary leads the believer to Christ. The most notable scholarly analyses of La Salette and Banneux are by priests involved in the shrine movements: Jean Stern, *La Salette; Documents Authentiques, Dossier Chronologique Intégral*, 3 vols. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer/du Cerf, 1980, 1984, 1991); René Rutten, *Histoire Critique des Apparitions de Banneux* (Namur: Mouvement Eucharistique et Missionnaire, 1985).

²⁶ Bertone & Ratzinger, *The Message of Fatima*.

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Staffora (1947-56), Heroldsbach (1949-52), and San Sebastián de Garabandal (1961-5) in their interactions with the Christ Child, which included carrying the invisible infant or presenting him to the crowds. This can be understood in the specific or general sense, i.e. that Mary and the Christ Child are actually there at that particular place in some special sense, or that the visionary – perhaps guided by the Holy Spirit – is creatively enacting something which is generally true, the presence of Mary and Christ in the world at large. The latter would be near to my own view.

The pilgrimage site gains a special value as a sign of Mary's presence in the world and, as we have seen, one could suggest her divinely-bestowed power and authority, as well. The presence of Mary includes or implies Christ's presence too; the union of Mary and Jesus Christ is a central theme in the apparition tradition, especially in the motif of the unity of Jesus' Sacred and Mary's Immaculate Hearts. Other supernatural presences may also feature in the vision drama: most notably St Joseph; St Michael; recently deceased saints, such as Padre Pio; or even the Devil, who is thought to stalk shrines to thwart the transformations into holiness that are occurring there (and therefore provides a convenient reason to explain problems occurring at the site). These are part of the imaginative tableaux created by the visionaries.

Many of the visionaries that the Church has approved in Europe have been children or teenagers under eighteen. In the twenty-first century, this raises issues that might not have been apparent before. The youngest visionary that I have come across is Gilles Bouhours of Espis in France whose visionary vocation began at two years old (in 1947) and ended at fifteen with his death.²⁷ How seriously should Catholics take the imaginative articulations of children? Should young visionaries not be protected from prolonged scrutiny, including both adulation and scorn? The visionaries of Fátima were ten, eight, and seven when plunged into the glare of publicity. In reading the accounts now, one gets a strong sense of the pressure that they were under and the fatigue that they suffered, and this troubled one of the priests involved in the investigation. The fact that the youngest two were dead from Spanish

²⁷ Alan Guiot, Alain, *Les Apparitions de la Vierge Marie à Gilles Bouhours* (Paris: Lanore, 2010).



Influenza within three years may or may not be related to their ordeals, but certainly one would not want children today to be subjected to this treatment.

Mary is not the only focus for pilgrimage. The visionaries themselves become cult figures. Common Catholic assumptions about visionaries assert that they are unimportant people, chosen for a time but otherwise unremarkable, which is reinforced by the visionaries themselves for whom modesty is an important virtue and sign of authenticity. However, this is qualified by the honour in which the visionaries are held; they are acclaimed as popular saints because they are believed to have been selected to mediate the presence of Mary. It is clear that, where apparition narratives survived the clamour and excitement of popular response and rival claims, and visionaries weathered the storm of scrutiny by ecclesiastics, journalists, psychologists, and state functionaries, they were quite extraordinary individuals, even if supported by many relatives, friends, and priests.

Thus the cult of the visionary is a central aspect of pilgrimage to apparition shrines. Sometimes the house of the visionary is preserved to the point where one can see the rooms as they were when lived in, with clothes, implements, and furnishings. This is not an uncommon legacy of popular saints across Catholic Europe. Visionaries Leónie van Dijck of Onkerzele and Jeanne-Louise Ramonet of Kerizinen left houses which have become museums in the same way as that of others, such as the stigmatic Therese Neumann. Ida Peerdeman's house, where she lived during her last years, incorporates the shrine chapel. One can also view the houses where children lived at the time of the visions, for example in the small village Aljustrel near to Fátima, the location of the two houses of Lúcia dos Santos and her cousins, the recently canonized brother and sister Francisco and Jacinta di Marto. Mariette Beco's house at Banneux was at an early point incorporated into the newly emerging shrine.

When I started out on my research into apparition shrines, I visited Medjugorje, Lourdes, and Fátima, with their great crowds and endless gift shops; I also went to smaller scale but still well-visited sites like Beauraing and Banneux in Belgium. As time went on, I began to enjoy spending time at even smaller places. Their histories are not so well known but just as compelling. My wife and I visited the visionary Angela Volpini in Casanova Staffora in the Apennine Mountains of northern Italy; she experienced apparitions as a child in the

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1940s and 1950s and is now in her eighties. The shrine at Casanova Staffora is important to people from the local region, but English-speaking people and probably many others do not know anything about it.²⁸ Angela is a charismatic personality; her politics tend to the left and her theology is unorthodox. She presents at least one exception to the general perception that apparitions are reactionary. In 1956, the sixteen year old Angela experienced her last vision during which she qualified her previous messages, which had followed the normal formula of the promises of divine miracles and chastisements. Angela announced that God's punishments were not to be implemented because of divine mercy and that the promised divine miracle was to be realized in a movement of spiritual growth. To promote this, she founded the *Nova Cana* community, which has involved links to liberation theology and support for rural co-operatives. So Angela, as she grew up, adapted the ideas of supernatural intervention and emphasised instead the potential of human endeavour and community. Altogether, her message is optimistic about humanity, unconventional, and remains popular in Italy, where she lectures and sometimes appears on television. Certainly, Angela is a 'popular theologian' whose ideas resonate with my own more than any other visionary.

Then there are places where apparitions have all but been forgotten. Ham-sur-Sambre in Belgium attracted pilgrimages from the 1930s to the 1950s whilst also being condemned by the Church: it was even mentioned in *L'Osservatore Romano* by Alfredo (later Cardinal) Ottaviani as an example of deviant devotion. It did not survive this, but the site is still there even if overgrown. After drawing a couple of blanks in our search for the site, my wife had the excellent idea of asking older people visiting the cemetery! The first person we asked remembered taking part in processions from the parish church to the apparition site as a child, and guided us to it. There are several other remnants of 1930s apparition shrines in Belgium, also with hard-to-find memorials of the events that happened there nearly ninety years ago.²⁹ The one unapproved 1930s site in Belgium where pilgrimage has survived to the present day is at Onkerzele, the Flemish alternative to Beauraing and Banneux. All of this creates a rich tableaux by which the student of apparitions learns a great deal about the places in which they occur.

²⁸ Maunder, *Our Lady of the Nations*: 128-31.

²⁹ Maunder, *Our Lady of the Nations*: 84-98.

The process of approval has become ever more problematic in the Catholic Church. The continuing debate in Catholicism over the controversial apparitions at Medjugorje which started in the 1980s – with the local bishop still opposing them, the visionaries as global celebrities claiming experiences wherever they travel, and the results of a Vatican investigation not yet published – is crucial. It may set new benchmarks for how apparitions are to be approached. Medjugorje is one of many shrines where pilgrimage continues with vitality and enjoys the support of clerics but the apparitions are not approved, and so the evidence is that the ecclesiastical emphasis of the near future will be on *pilgrimages* to apparition shrines and their orthodoxy and contribution to Catholic life, rather than questions of authenticity and discernment as to how the pilgrimage came to exist in the first place. However, for the pilgrim, the link between pilgrimage and its origins in apparitions is undeniable, and so any ecclesiastical acceptance of pilgrimage will suggest an implicit approval of the apparitions that brought the shrine into being. That is the dilemma for the Catholic Church today.

As a generally rather disobedient Catholic in other matters (!), with regard to Marian apparitions I find myself for once reasonably close to the Vatican position. My personal take on the Marian visionary shrines in Europe and elsewhere is that they serve in various contexts as signs of the presence and importance of Mary in the world at large. Like other pilgrimage sites, they bring the visitor into contact with that presence by means of narratives which help to make it real. The prominent visionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have presented images and ideas whereby they seek to promote a Mary who is worthy of exaltation and should be understood as being in union with her Son, Jesus Christ. Thus far, I can remain a believer.

However, this central theme is often surrounded by a plethora of apocalyptic messages and sometimes an emphasis on devotions as opposed to Christian action for justice, and with this I am less comfortable. It is true that the Mary of history lived in a Church with a post-resurrection expectation of *Parousia* which we can call apocalyptic – that is, relating to an epoch-making or even world-ending divine action – and so priestly observers like Rahner and Laurentin have noted that apocalyptic in itself is not problematic; it is part and parcel of

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the life of the Church.³⁰ But the visionaries make predictions that are detailed and specific, while speaking of secrets entrusted to themselves alone. It is well-known that the Church largely bought into the secrets of Fátima visionary Sister Lúcia because John Paul II regarded the third secret as referring to himself, but elsewhere the Church is less enamoured with the narrative of future chastisements and miracles at certain dates known only to the visionaries, as at Garabandal and Medjugorje. These have become very popular, for obvious reasons: secrets and sensational prophecies are very enticing. But it will take a quite remarkable fulfilment of prophecy before the Church takes them seriously. Even Sister Lúcia's reassurance that consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart would bring peace rings rather hollow after recent events, although Pope Francis did renew the consecration when the invasion of Ukraine began, reminding us of the influence of certain visions and prophecies in the Church.

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That concludes the talk as given on the 25th March 2023, but I would now like to add some reflections on the idea of the 'alternative history' of Marian presence. The most famous apparitions in modern Belgium were at Beauraing and took place to five children from the 29th November 1932 to the 3rd January 1933, and also at Banneux from the 15th January to the 2nd March 1933 to an eleven year old girl, Mariette Beco. Meanwhile, the National Socialists were the largest party in elections held in Germany on the 31st July and 6th November 1932 and, although the Nazis never achieved a majority, Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor on the 30th January 1933, which of course led to dictatorship.³¹ The visionary and political events are largely contemporaneous.

Beauraing is a near neighbour of the larger town of Dinant, which suffered one of the worst atrocities of World War I, while Banneux is not far from the German border. It is not difficult, therefore, to suggest a psychological link between the critical events taking place in Germany and the apparitions in Belgium, which in 1940 was to be invaded for the second time in the twentieth century. At Banneux, Mariette Beco related that Mary had led her to a spring

³⁰ Rahner, *Visions and Prophecies*; René Laurentin, *The Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary Today*, trans. Luke Griffin (Dublin: Veritas, 1991).

³¹ I discuss these connections in *Our Lady of the Nations*: 84-6.

that was to be ‘reserved for all nations, to relieve the sick’ (it is quite possible that Ida Peerdeman, in neighbouring Netherlands after the war, was inspired by this to refer to Mary as the ‘Lady of All Nations’).

Nevertheless, a Mariology of apparitions will not limit them to social psychology; they also suggest theological interpretations. The alternative history in the Belgian case is one in which Mary (and consequently, with her, Christ and the Trinitarian God) take centre stage in 1932-3 and not Adolf Hitler. Mary’s presence held significance ‘for all nations’. Just as Protestants Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth, and their associates at Barmen proclaimed Christ as Lord against the Nazi claim over the Church in 1934, the Catholic child visionaries in Belgium in 1933 testified to a Marian authoritarian presence, in which relief for the suffering was paramount as opposed to a total disregard for human life and wellbeing. The children at Beauraing saw Mary’s golden heart – with its associations among Catholic pilgrims with the Immaculate Heart devotion, simultaneously promoted by Sister Lúcia of Fátima – which symbolically suggests maternal love and care.

Other examples of connections between apparitions and extreme social crisis can be identified, such as the 1980s apparitions in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kibeho, Rwanda, both of which prefigured genocide in those countries in the 1990s. The visionaries at Medjugorje proclaimed Mary the ‘Queen of Peace’ and those at Kibeho ‘Our Lady of Sorrows’, pre-existing titles which resonated with these new contexts. Most other visions do not occur in such stark situations but, nevertheless, they do stand in a context of social tension: perceived decline in religiosity, political unrest, and moral uncertainty stand behind many apparitions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The ecclesiastical contribution to the Marian movement and its recognition of Marian presence consists in proclaiming Marian doctrines, primarily the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary, crowning and transporting statues, and supporting new shrines.

Of course, the Marian movement has frequently promoted an entrenched anti-communist or anti-progressive agenda which can be very one-sided politically and consequently ignores the voices of the poor and marginalised. It is the responsibility of the Mariologist to discern a better way forward for an understanding of Marian presence. And

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this, of course, must have a robust but very carefully thought out biblical and evangelical base. Otherwise, Mary as a cultural icon will be surrendered to social forces which fall far short of the divine inspiration that is the gospel message to which Mary in her lifetime witnessed and contributed. For the presence of Mary in the world today is none other than the presence of Mary of Nazareth who lived in Israel all those centuries ago. If apparitions suggest something other than this, then it will be difficult to argue for them as genuine Christian charismata. There is no better example of an apparition demonstrating biblical coherence than Mariette Beco at Banneux declaring Mary to be the 'Virgin of the Poor'.

The Amsterdam visionary Ida Peerdeman had a prayer revealed to her which included the sentence: 'May the Lady of All Nations, who once was Mary, be our Advocate'. In 2005, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith objected to the phrase 'who once was Mary' on the grounds that the visionary was thereby inventing a new identity for Mary. The Bishop of Haarlem-Amsterdam was obliged to change the prayer to 'May the Lady of All Nations, the Blessed Virgin Mary, be our Advocate', despite the fact that Ida – she had died in 1996 – had insisted on the original version.

I think that the original phrase 'who once was Mary' in the prayer is helpful in that it reminds the devotee that the Lady of All Nations and Mary of Nazareth are one and the same person. But the 'was' presents a problem. The Mary of the apparitions, for whom the Lady of All Nations is an appropriate title, *is* Mary of Nazareth. She has not evolved into something else. For that reason, the task of the Mariologist (in the same way as the Christologist with reference to Jesus Christ) is to understand what the biblical witness reveals to us about Mary and her history. This is, of course, a very demanding task which requires sensitivity to the issues raised by hermeneutics. But apparitions, if they are to represent the presence of Mary in the contemporary world, have to conform to the biblical and historical Mary. It is for that reason that I have undertaken an exploration of the historical Mary (recently published by Oneworld in 2022 as *Mary, Founder of Christianity*) which is not as detached from my work on apparitions as it might appear at first sight.