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Hymns on Mary in Hindu–Muslim–Christian Dialogue

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Hymns on Mary in Hindu-Christian-Muslim dialogue

One of the fascinating comparisons that Francis X. Clooney suggests in his book *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*¹ is the comparison between the Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa, a hymn to the Hindu goddess Śrī Lakṣmī by Parāśara Bhaṭṭar in the 12th century, and the Byzantine Hymn of Akathistos dedicated to Mary. The dating of the Akathistos remains a matter of debate², but consensus among scholars strongly supports a fifth-century composition.³ However, there is a famous prooemium that was likely added right after the siege of Constantinople in 626. This introduction is left out of Clooney's translation and discussion, but it has to be mentioned here because it gives us the opportunity to include the Qur'anic voice in the wonderful Hindu-Christian comparative theology that Clooney developed in his book. Hence, I will first start with the political use of the Akathistos in this chapter. Then, I will look at Mary's role in salvation. In the last part, I will reflect on the idea of deep incarnation and how it is presupposed in the Byzantine text.

Methodologically, I will begin with my own appreciation and problematization of the Christian theological ideas found in the hymn to Mary. I will then look at the Qur'anic critique and use Clooney's insights on the Hindu hymn to find a response to the Islamic critique. In all three cases I seek to develop a Christian comparative theology that learns from the Qur'anic critique and that uses the Hindu text as a sort of third instance that renders the critique more productive for my own thinking.⁴

Critique of political theology

It is the second prooemium of the Akathistos that made the hymn famous and that brings it into direct dialogue with the Qur'an. The text says: "To you, our leader in battle and defender, ... Since you are invincible in power, free me from all kinds of dangers, that I may cry to you: 'Hail, bride unwedded.'"⁵ It is usually understood as a response to the attack of Constantinople by the Avars in 626; "the erect Constantinopolitans sang this song in defense, turning resolute chant into an impenetrable wall."⁶ Three contemporary sources have survived, all of which are in accord regarding the decisive role played by Mary in this military engagement: the sermon of Theodore Synkellos, the poem *Bellum avaricum* by the court poet George of Pisidia, and the *Chronicon paschale*.⁷ All these

¹ Cf. Francis X. Clooney: *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother. Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*. New York: Oxford University Press 2005.

² Cf. Thomas Arentzen: The Chora of God: Approaching the Outskirts of Mariology in the Akathistos. *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 4 (2021) 127-149, 5. I quote here from the postprint published by Johns Hopkins University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/joc.2021.0011> Hence the page number follow this reprint.

³ Cf. Leena Mari Peltomaa: *The image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*. Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill 2001 (The medieval Mediterranean, vol. 35), 216.

⁴ For the explanation of this method cf. Klaus von Stosch: *Einführung in die Komparative Theologie*. Paderborn et alia: Brill Germany 2021, 19-20.

⁵ Peltomaa 2001: 21.

⁶ Arentzen 2021: 6. In the next sentences and in some other short passages of this text I reuse formulations from Muna Tatari/ Klaus von Stosch: *Mary in the Qur'an. Friend of God, Virgin, Mother*. Translated by Peter Lewis. London: Gingko 2021.

⁷ Cf. Martin Hurbanič: *The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626. History and Legend*: London 2019, 3.

sources agree that the Byzantine capital was only saved by the intervention of the Virgin Mary.⁸ After the battle, as a mark of gratitude, Sergios, the Patriarch of Constantinople, organized a great procession to Mary's shrine.⁹ This provided the impetus for annual liturgical festivals, all of which commemorated the invincible Mary.¹⁰ It seems that the Akathistos was used in this context.

We do not know whether the proclaimer of the Qur'an or the early Muslim community was aware of this fact and whether they knew the Akathistos. Nevertheless, I argue elsewhere in some length that the theological idea of Mary's invincibility and invulnerability is criticized explicitly by the Qur'an.¹¹ For our context I only want to mention one very significant verse for the Qur'anic critique: *Unbelievers indeed are those who say 'God is Christ, the Son of Mary'. Say: 'Who then has the power to prevent God, if he so desired, from destroying Christ, son of Mary, and his mother and everyone else on earth, altogether?' The kingdom of the heavens and the earth and everything between them belong to God. He creates whatever he will. God has power over all things (Q 5:17).*

The verse confronts us with the idea that neither Jesus nor his mother Mary has power over God. Both can be destroyed by God at any time if God so wished. In other words, calling upon them does not afford a person any protection whatsoever from God's wrath. Dominion over the heavens and the earth and everything in-between belongs to God alone. In contrast to this the political theology at the court of Constantinople conceived Mary as the one who guaranteed the emperor's triumph. It was she who, as a military commander, put Constantinople's enemies to flight in the field. In the eyes of the imperial historiographers, it was her invincibility, strength, and power that were solely responsible in and of themselves for vanquishing the enemy. When Theodore Synkellos, for example, claims that there was no force that could withstand the Virgin, the proclaimer of the Qur'an could now retort that no one has power over God and that Mary especially, as a created being, is entirely dependent upon him.

This, of course, is not a direct contradiction to the Akathistos itself. However, within the hymn there are found some aspects of the political theology criticized by the Qur'an. For example, the Akathistos speaks of Mary as "unshakable fortress of the Church" and as "indestructible bulwark of the kingdom"¹². And Mary is venerated as the force that drives "the inhuman tyrant from his rule" (str. 9). Hence, Mary's force is witnessed in a way that can be misused in an imperial context and the Qur'anic critique addresses this danger.

Our Hindu hymn, the Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa, also praises the ruling power of the goddess Śrī Lakṣmī.¹³ However, it never mentions her power independently from Her eternal consort Viṣṇu. Clooney shows how Viṣṇu and Śrī are in a complementary relationship of mutual dependency. Viṣṇu's independence relies on Śrī's willingness to depend on Him. Clooney puts it this way: "He is 'the one who is totally independent' because he is also 'the one on whom Śrī confers full independence.' Because She gives unfailingly, His independence [which is dependent on Her] can be counted as of His essence."¹⁴ Viṣṇu's

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 248.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 269-270.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 285.

¹¹ Cf. Tatarski/ von Stosch 2021: 82-100, 202-218.

¹² Str. 23 of the Hymn in Clooney's translation cf. Clooney 2005: 48. I will quote these strophes from now on in brackets in the text.

¹³ Cf. Clooney 2005: 31-33.

¹⁴ Clooney 2005: 125.

sovereignty, absolute ruling power, and independence are only possible because of the complete surrender of Śrī who allows it. “She makes His protective power flourish.”¹⁵

This language makes it impossible to isolate Śrī from Viṣṇu. And in some sense this is also the strategy of the Qur’an, which underscores Mary’s complete surrender to God as a critique of imperial, political theology.¹⁶ Mary is nothing without God and has no power independent of God. This might be something all three religious traditions agree on. But for the Muslim and Christian traditions it seems to be problematic to see any complementarity between God and a human. Of course recent free will theology explores the possibility of speaking about God as willingly being dependent on human cooperation.¹⁷ And from a Christian point of view it might make sense that God is dependent on Mary’s fiat for his plan of salvation. But this dependency would be a freely chosen dependency and rooted in God’s free will. It cannot be conceived in mutual complementarity with a created being. That is why any attempt to use the Hindu concept of complementarity between Viṣṇu and Śrī as a response to the Qur’anic critique of Heraclios’s Byzantine political theology seems to lead to another concern: idolatry. Indeed, idolatry is also very prominently discussed in the context of the Qur’anic view of Mary and Jesus. We will deal with this concern in the next section by looking at the role of Mary in salvation.

Mary as gate of salvation?

The Akathistos calls Mary prominently the “gate of salvation” (str. 19). In the background of this title is a core idea of the hymn that Leena Peltomaa puts like this: “The basic theological idea of the Akathistos hymn is to praise the Theotokos [mother of God] for the sake of the incarnation, because it means redemption for mankind.”¹⁸ As incarnation and salvation only become possible through Mary’s willingness to accept her pregnancy, she is the gate of salvation. She is also called the living temple (str. 23), which shows that for the Akathistos she replaces the salvific function of the Jerusalem Temple. Both metaphors are closely linked with her virginity in the theology and Mariology of the Church Fathers.

The Eastern Gate of the Jerusalem Temple (the Golden Gate on the Temple Mount) was seen by the Church Fathers as the gate through which the Messiah would enter.¹⁹ And the Church Fathers associated the closure of this gate with Mary’s virginity.²⁰ According to this interpretation, Mary – as the typological embodiment of the Temple and the Church – had the capacity to accept the Messiah

¹⁵ Clooney 2005: 140.

¹⁶ Cf. Tatar/ von Stosch 2021: 286-287.

¹⁷ Cf. John Sanders/ Klaus von Stosch (ed.): *Divine Action. Challenges for Muslim and Christian Theology*. Paderborn: Brill Germany 2022 (Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie, vol. 35).

¹⁸ Cf. Leena Mari Peltomaa: The Tomus ad Armenios de fide of Proclus of Constantinople and the christological emphasis of the Akathistos Hymn. *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 47 (1997) 25-35.

¹⁹ Cf. Angelika Neuwirth: *Der Koran 2/1: Frühmittelmeckkanische Suren. Das neue Gottesvolk: ‘Biblisierung’ des altarabischen Weltbildes*. Handkommentar mit Übersetzung. Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen 2017, 612: “The closed Eastern Gate of the Temple, through which, according to Ezekiel 44:1 f. God exited Jerusalem; it has remained shut ever since and, according to Jewish and subsequently Christian tradition, should only open again to permit the entry of the Messiah.”

²⁰ Cf. Zishan Ghaffar: *Der Koran in seinem religions- und weltgeschichtlichen Kontext. Eschatologie und Apokalyptik in den mittelmekkanischen Suren*. Paderborn: Brill Germany 2020 (Beiträge zur Koranforschung, vol. 1), 32.

into herself through the sealed Eastern Gate (i.e., in her intact state of virginity) and to bring him into the world. In a Christian–patristic context, talk of the Eastern Gate evolved as an allegory of the portals of heaven, through which our High Priest will descend to us – a typological interpretation which was applied in equal measure to the Virgin Mary and the Church, both of which were seen, like Jacob’s Ladder, as joining heaven and earth.²¹

Attending carefully to the Virgin Mary’s function as bridge enables us to understand better why the Akathistos also calls her “my body’s healing” and “my soul’s salvation” (str. 23). Of course this healing and saving function is conceived through her union with Christ. When “she leads everyone to divine knowledge” and when “she is the radiance enlightening the mind” (str. 21), these ideas are grounded in a high Christology. If the Akathistos agrees with the Hindu hymn that “it is through the female ... that union with the divine is achieved,”²² then this achievement is completely dependent on Christ who is the foundation of Mary’s significance. In contrast to the Hindu concept of complementarity between Viṣṇu and Śrī, it is always clear that she is subordinated to God. However “she becomes the primary focus of veneration and devotion”²³ because she surrenders herself so completely to God’s will that you encounter God’s will when you trust in her. God is also so delighted through her righteousness, beauty, and surrender that God is pleased by her veneration. Or as Clooney puts it: “God is glorified when she is the center of attention, for She is the delight of His heart.”²⁴ She is venerated “more than theology can justify.”²⁵

The Qur’an shares with the Akathistos some of the fascination for Mary. *And remember when the angels said, ‘O Mary! Surely God has selected you and purified you. He has chosen you over all women of the world.’* (Q 3:42) The proclaimer of the Qur’an grants the greatest of all conceivable distinctions to Mary. But he does this only as long as this distinction does not compromise her status as a created being. It is important to him that these distinctions do not derive from human merit but are the result of divine acts of salvation. Humans do not gain God’s attention and election through their own efforts; rather, it is the case that election and cleansing by God set a person free and grant him or her beauty and purity. In the Qur’an’s eyes, this is unreservedly true for Mary too, and even from a Christian standpoint one can only agree with this. Indeed, the Church Fathers themselves would in all likelihood have concurred with the Qur’an’s critique here if they had been asked for their expert theological opinion. Notwithstanding their theology, their poetic texts frequently tend to be misleading, especially if they are not studied very precisely in context. They can lead to popular religious observances of the kind deplored by the Qur’an.

Immediately after the angels’ remarkable eulogy to Mary, she is called upon by them to show humility and submission before God. Then she is expected to bow her head in communal prayer. At this point, the Qur’an is clearly alluding to Islamic ritual prayer, which involves both the act of bowing one’s head and ritual prostration. However, the text inverts the usual sequence of the ritual prayer: Mary’s act of self-prostration precedes the bowing. The Muslim commentarial tradition acknowledges this peculiar feature without being able to convincingly explain it. If we look at Syriac intertexts, we are able to

²¹ Cf. Michael Schmaus: *Mariologie*. München: Kösel 1961, 294: “The Church and the Virgin are the Ark of the Covenant, Jacob’s Ladder, heaven’s gate, and the Eastern Gate through which our High Priest will enter – the great gate that affords entry to the Lord of Israel.”

²² Clooney 2005: 149.

²³ Clooney 2005: 148.

²⁴ Clooney 2005: 151.

²⁵ Clooney 2005: 222.

understand this inversion better, as Zishan Ghaffar has shown recently.²⁶ As he demonstrates, it had become commonplace among the Syriac Church Fathers to believe that the angel must have prostrated himself before Mary during their encounter, because as the Theotokos she was ranked above the angels in the hierarchy. In Jacob of Serugh's writings, for example, Gabriel has to prostrate himself in adoration before Mary before he announces God's promise to her. The verb that is used for prostrating oneself is identical in both Jacob and the Qur'an (Syriac *sjed* /Arabic *sajada*).²⁷ If one visualizes this scene, it becomes clear that the Qur'an carries out an inversion here which is meant to remind us that Mary is a human being created by God. Here, therefore, the proclaimer of the Qur'an is criticizing the patristic and imperial veneration of Mary and is attempting to sustain the idea of reverence for Mary while at the same time retaining her human nature and her humble subordination to God. His remedy is to take her into the community of believers. She should not be a separate entity before whom people prostrate themselves but should become part of the whole community that bows before God.

Hymns like the Akathistos contain more details regarding the veneration of Mary and they, too, are challenged by the Qur'an. When the Akathistos calls Mary the "server of holy nourishment" (str. 11), the Qur'an makes clear that she gets her nourishment always directly through an angel, which shows her intimate relationship with God (Q 3:37). When the Akathistos calls her the living temple (str. 23), the Qur'an shows how important it is that she was raised in the Temple and lives in close harmony with God (Q 3:36-37). When the Akathistos identifies her body with the Eastern gate of the Temple and makes a correlation between the closed gate and the virginity during the birth, the Qur'an defends Mary's virginity before the birth (Q 19:20), but is critical of some of the implications of the idea of virginity during the birth (Q 19:23). The East remains the place where, from a Qur'anic perspective as well, the Virgin Mary is informed that she will give birth to a child (Q 19:23), but Mary or her womb is not identified with the Eastern gate. Hence the Qur'an tries to find a language that does not stop the veneration of Mary, but which always stresses her humanity and leaves salvation to God alone.

In much the same way as happened at the Second Vatican Council, these Qur'anic interventions effectively liberate Mariology from Christology and soteriology and transform it into part of the doctrine of the community of believers. As one of the faithful, Mary is expected to perform the ritual prayer and prostrate herself before God like the rest of us. Mary appears as the ideal type of the believer, a fact now also made evident in her observance of prayer and spirituality. Interestingly, in the Qur'an her devotional practice does not take place in the privacy of her home – which is otherwise common practice for women. She also has no children to look after, which would prevent her from attending ritual prayers within the community. Instead, she is united with those praying beside her. And these fellow supplicants are designated in Arabic with the generic masculine noun, so that we can envision here a communal prayer session involving both men and women, of the kind that still takes place today in Muslim communities during the *hajj*. In this respect, Mary might become a bridging figure between the sexes, leading to a prayer practice that could bring together men and women more visibly than is currently the case in many places. In Q 3:43, therefore, Mary is addressed as the typical Muslim woman, performing the same ritual prayer observances as her fellow supplicants. In other words, the hymns for Mary are picked up and Mary's special honor is voiced, but this acknowledgement is not used as a springboard for praying to Mary, but rather for praying alongside her. To some extent this also picks up the idea of Mary as the archetype of the Church, except that she

²⁶ Zishan Ghaffar: Kontrafaktische Intertextualität im Koran und die exegetische Tradition des syrischen Christentums. *Der Islam* 98 (2021) 313-358.

²⁷ Cf. Ghaffar 2021: 328%.

now no longer stands for just the Church but for every godly person. It is intriguing to note that, despite being incorporated into the community of believers, and for all the stress that is placed on her as a human being, she still remains the person whom the angels address as having been selected over all women and purified by God. One needs not therefore immediately see in her the gate of salvation. But it is already striking that, although she does prostrate herself before God on the orders of the angels, conversely the angels proclaim her special distinction over all other women.

Even if we are able to accept the Qur'anic interventions concerning Mary because Christians would not see her as divine, things become more problematic if we look at Christology.²⁸ But let us keep the focus on Mary in this article. Are there ways of following the Qur'anic concerns and should we find less understandable ways to venerate Mary with the help of the Qur'an? Or can Clooney's reading of the Hindu tradition help us to defend the legacy of some bolder Mariological claims? I think that Clooney mentions two paths that are worth exploring in more detail. The first is his interpretation of salvation as flourishing, which he learns from Grace Jantzen.²⁹ If we build religion around flourishing, not around salvation (Clooney 2005: 11) or if we understand salvation as flourishing, it becomes less problematic to accept that humans can help us in this process. As the love of my wife or a good friend will help me to flourish, it does not endanger God's transcendence and sovereignty to accept that Mary can help me to flourish. Śrī has a unique role in human liberation. "She represents the ideal of divine and human flourishing, and in Her particular way She makes it possible to obtain the ideal."³⁰ Such a liberating power could be attributed also to Mary as long as it is clear that she surrenders to God. In the Hindu spirituality engaged by Clooney, again the surrender is conceived as "a plunge into the divine couple's delight."³¹

We should be careful to distance ourselves too quickly from this way of thinking. The author of the Hindu hymn Parāśara Bhaṭṭar is a theologian in the tradition of Rāmānuja.³² This is a philosophical tradition that can be combined with a clear monotheistic interpretation. "The worshiper of a divine couple does not have to be a polytheist, since Hindu theologians have commonly sought ways to maintain divine and cosmic unity even in light of the gender distinction."³³ If Śrī's surrender to Viṣṇu and their complementarity can be reconstructed within monotheism, it might be understandable how the complete "surrender to Śrī who becomes their everything"³⁴ avoids idolatry. And for a Christian reading, it is extremely stimulating that the goddess who offers "protection and refuge"³⁵ and who counts alone as my refuge³⁶ is the same who "suffered much rejection"³⁷ at the same time. Such an approach helps to integrate the tradition of the *mater dolorosa* and the theology of the cross in the account of salvation as flourishing. And it would be fascinating to investigate how this is possible in the

²⁸ Cf. Mouhanad Khorchide/ Klaus von Stosch: *The other prophet. Jesus in the Qur'an*. Translated by Simon Pare. London: Gingko 2019.

²⁹ Cf. Grace Jantzen: *Becoming Divine. Toward a feminist philosophy of religion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998.

³⁰ Clooney 2005: 112.

³¹ Clooney 2005: 131.

³² Clooney 2005: 109.

³³ Clooney 2005: 220.

³⁴ Clooney 2005: 138.

³⁵ Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa, str. 2, quoted from Clooney 2005: 29.

³⁶ Ibid., str. 60, quoted from Clooney 2005: 41.

³⁷ Ibid., str. 53, quoted from Clooney 2005: 39.

Hindu tradition. But even if a Muslim finds a way to relate to this kind of theology,³⁸ the question remains why we should go in this direction with the help of Mary. What do we gain through this tradition and especially through her veneration?

This leads me to the second path that Clooney suggests and that seems to me promising for modern theological reconstructions of the role of Mary. Clooney repeats several times that the hymns are “meant to be sung in acts of worship.”³⁹ We know that many monastics on Mount Athos, for instance, learn the Akathistos by heart and integrate it into their daily prayer life.⁴⁰ This way of integrating the text and its veneration of Mary helps one to have a personal encounter with her. Very similarly the Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa “is also an invitation to encounter Her personally.”⁴¹ This personal encounter can be understood as an encounter with the one God either because the one God is understood as the integration of gender polarity or because Mary is understood as completely surrendered to God. Thus, the personal encounter with Mary or Śrī helps one to have a personal encounter with God. It makes this encounter easier and it highlights the “risk of becoming involved.”⁴² Becoming involved in a personal encounter with God is the very foundation of human flourishing not only in Hinduism and Christianity, but also in Muslim tradition. Hence the “theology in direct address”⁴³ that has been developed by the Akathistos and the Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa can be extremely helpful for salvation understood as flourishing. The significance of Mary and Śrī in this context lies in their accessibility. Clooney puts it like this: it is “the same Śrī who is nearby, every day”⁴⁴ who is the key and gate for salvation. And the same can be said for Mary who always represented the most accessible part of Christianity in popular piety.

Clooney suggests that “[g]ender specification ... is part of making the divine female and male into concrete, real beings.”⁴⁵ This might be a way to understand why it is so important to integrate a female figure in popular piety if we want to encourage the search for a personal relationship with God. The fact that God has to be conceived beyond gender should not close our eyes to the many male metaphors that we are using in our approaches to God. These metaphors can be balanced by Mary – as Clooney shows very convincingly in his book. But of course this needs some more reflection on the benefits of integrating female characteristics in the talk of Divinity.

Cosmic harmony and deep incarnation

In a very intriguing recent interpretation of the Akathistos, Thomas Arentzen develops an ecocritical reading of the Akathistos. He reminds us that from the very beginning of the hymn “the Akathistos evokes creation. Already the prologue to the Gospel of John had literally connected the birth of Jesus to the creation of the world in Genesis, but it did so without explicitly acknowledging a Marian presence. The Akathistos picks up the theme of creation but writes it into the limbs of the

³⁸ As for example Khorchide in Khorchide/ von Stosch 2019: 184-201.

³⁹ Clooney 2005: 24.

⁴⁰ Cf. Arentzen 2021: 1.

⁴¹ Clooney 2005: 113.

⁴² Clooney 2005: 25.

⁴³ Clooney 2005: 24.

⁴⁴ Clooney 2005: 137.

⁴⁵ Clooney 2005: 132.

Theotokos.⁴⁶ The interpretation of the earth as something maternal is of course common to many indigenous religions and it shapes the veneration of Mary until today. We might just remember the importance of Pachamama in the andine vision of the cosmos and the way how Mary takes over her role.⁴⁷ It is obvious that this tradition also resonates with Hinduism. What we can learn from Arentzen is the fact that the imagination of the “earth as a personal and maternal figure was common in early Christianity.”⁴⁸

If we reread the Akathistos with this association in mind, we will become aware how many ecomorphic metaphors are on stage in it. In some sense Mary’s humanity is so decentered that the whole creation is involved in her labor pains⁴⁹ – a theme which Paul picks up on and extends into the present in Romans 8:22.⁵⁰ There is a “forceful resemblance between virginal mother and the broader created earth.”⁵¹ This parallel becomes exciting when we look at the idea of Mary as a new creation. Of course it is not a new insight that the concept of Mary as second Eve is very dominant in the hymn.⁵² This well-known point becomes very thought-provoking if we understand how this typology is connected with the new creation as a whole. “When the genesis happens anew, it takes place *as* or *in* or *through* the Virgin.”⁵³ The countryside becomes a Marian landscape.⁵⁴

Epiphanius of Salamis, for instance, “sensed that the Virgin had a distinctly spatial quality as a space that might be compared to the landscape (the sky and the earth) that was able to encompass and give shape to the Divine.”⁵⁵ In this perspective Mary becomes the key for the vision of a new creation that is completely shaped by God, and she is not only the new Eve, but the sign for the new cosmos. She is the space, the Chora of this new cosmos. When she is venerated as the place (Chorion) for the spaceless, “she reveals herself as ungraspable—formless, perhaps, as a creative space, a fertile void.”⁵⁶ Hence, the very personal metaphors come together with a cosmomorphic metaphorology that opens up the possibility of a spatial understanding of Mary. “There is dark chora in the beginning, before creation, an undefined and vast and ungraspable spatiality.”⁵⁷ And Mary’s veneration relates us to this cosmic opening for God’s presence.

Mary, the gate of salvation, opens up the cosmic harmony, which is expressed so beautifully in the Akathistos, with Mary as “mother of lamb and shepherd” who defends us “against unseen wild beasts” and who is the “opening of Paradise’s gates!” (str. 7). However, it is God’s mystery and power that becomes present through this gate; they are “centered in her” – as Clooney states in his interpretation of the Akathistos.⁵⁸ What are the consequences for Christology if we follow this ecocritical interpretation of the hymn?

⁴⁶ Arentzen 2021: 9.

⁴⁷ Cf. Klaus von Stosch: Apu Yaya Jesucristo – Suchbewegungen nach einer inkulturierten Christologie im andinen Kontext. *Religionen unterwegs* 24 (2018) 5-10.17.

⁴⁸ Arentzen 2021: 9.

⁴⁹ Cf. Arentzen 2021: 10.

⁵⁰ Creation’s “labor pains” are ongoing in Pauline theology. I thank Joseph Kimmel for this observation.

⁵¹ Arentzen 2021: 11.

⁵² Cf. already Peltomaa 2001: 212.

⁵³ Arentzen 2021: 11

⁵⁴ Cf. Arentzen 2021: 12.

⁵⁵ Arentzen 2021: 18.

⁵⁶ Arentzen 2021: 22.

⁵⁷ Arentzen 2021: 24.

⁵⁸ Clooney 2005: 147.

Arentzen is convinced that the concept of *deep incarnation* in the sense of an all-comprehensive taking possession of all creatures can be defended as background of the theology of the Akathistos. "Incarnation reaches deep into the dark soil, into the roots of the created world."⁵⁹ Thus, incarnation cannot be reduced to the incarnation in Christ. But through Christ we see the presence of God's logos everywhere – a theology very prominent among the Church Fathers since Justin Martyr. All natural forces, even the thunder, serve this one goal of deep incarnation – so the interpretation of str 21.8-9. This interpretation can also help in framing some of the bold claims of the hymn that were misused in political theology. And it helps the reader to get a broader understanding of the mystery of incarnation and the significance of Mary. "Early Byzantine Christians celebrated their liturgies in churches adorned with vines and meadows, flowery fields and animals, with mosaics of trees and birds and humans. If we take the Akathistos to have been performed in such a rich space, maybe we can start to imagine how the incarnation could be conceived of as something broader, something more deeply entangled, something less anthropocentric."⁶⁰

Arentzen even suggests that the repeated designation of Mary as "νύμφη unmarried" (for example on str. 1,18) can be interpreted in this ecocritical framework. The term νύμφη cannot only mean bride, but it can also be understood as "some sort of nymph among trees and springs"⁶¹. "Indirectly, then, the refrain situates the incarnation between trees, in the forest, adjacent to creeks."⁶² It is interesting to compare this cosmomorphic interpretation with Mary as Pachamama in the context of all fertile forces of nature and Christ as cosmic force and power with the Qur'anic vision of the birth of Jesus at a remote place resembling the desert (Q 19:22). Of course we cannot assume that the proclaimer of the Qur'an reacts to Thomas Arentzen's ecocritical theology. But still, the Qur'anic intervention seems to have objections against such an interpretation. And Jesus who is affirmed as God's logos in the Qur'an (Q 3:45; 4:171) is not understood in the sense of deep incarnation, but integrated in a theology of God's covenants with humanity. His word is first of all a very concrete one for Mary's defense and shows God's mercy for her.

Perhaps the enormous importance of mercy in Qur'anic theology, especially when dealing with Mary and Jesus, can be a starting point to bring together the Qur'anic intuition at this point with some of Clooney's findings in the Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa again. Clooney explains that compassion is immeasurable in Śrī and especially Her patience with wrongdoers is stressed.⁶³ Moreover, "compassion overflows into a vulnerability ... Her vulnerability is suddenly also His."⁶⁴ Hence, in the end it is God's compassion and mercy that becomes visible and tangible through Śrī - and this is a kind of theology which is in some harmony with the Qur'anic vision of Jesus and Mary.⁶⁵ However, the Qur'an does not claim vulnerability in God and will still distinguish sharply between Mary as a creature and her creator.

As we have already seen above, the Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa disagrees here and develops a theology of complementarity between Viṣṇu and Śrī. "Yours in Him, His in You"⁶⁶ is one of the poetical expressions of this complementarity in the hymn. One of the arguments for this complementarity that are

⁵⁹ Arentzen 2021: 28.

⁶⁰ Arentzen 2021: 38-39.

⁶¹ Arentzen 2021: 31.

⁶² Arentzen 2021: 33.

⁶³ Clooney 2005: 113.

⁶⁴ Clooney 2005: 135.

⁶⁵ Cf. Tatarj/ von Stosch 2021: 107-110.

⁶⁶ Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa str. 33, quoted from Clooney 2005: 35.

reconstructed in Clooney's careful reading of the hymn and its commentators is the following: The hymn wants to explore "the mutuality of enjoyment of a divine male and a divine female constantly taking deeper delight in one another."⁶⁷ Hence, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar is very careful that Śrī's importance will never change "the maximality of the claims about Viṣṇu."⁶⁸ Gender complementarity is simply used as a tool to describe divine perfection in an accessible terminology; "their gender differences exist for their own enjoyment" (125). And what makes this idea theologically relevant is the following observation: "In gendered divine pleasure, alienation and exclusion are overcome."⁶⁹ The dialectical relationship between dependence and independence as it is explained in the relationship of Viṣṇu and Śrī opens up a way that includes human diversity in God's simplicity – just as a dialectical understanding of gender polarity. I do not want to assert that this dialectical understanding has to be developed in terms of essentialized gender polarity. Hegel uses this dialectical understanding famously in his justification of the trinity without the example of gender polarity.⁷⁰ And there are other ways than dialectical mediations of identity and difference. However, it remains a challenge for each monotheistic theology how to reconcile unity and diversity. And theology should be able to develop a convincing negotiation of the simplicity of God's essence and the diversity of God's names before criticizing too quickly the traditional Hindu ways of dealing with these problems⁷¹ – or before criticizing the doctrine of the Trinity.⁷²

If we ask how to understand and appreciate cosmic harmony and human autonomy in the light of divine simplicity and sovereignty, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar might simply say that "the pleasures of the cosmos and of all its animals, humans, and divine beings are Śrī's"⁷³ – which is a way of expressing their dependency and independence at the same time. It shows a kind of balance⁷⁴ which seems to be of utmost importance for Parāśara Bhaṭṭar and which is also expressed in the beauty of the hymns.⁷⁵

The beauty of the Qur'an is also of utmost importance for Islamic theology. It might be possible to use this beauty also to reconcile diversity, contingency, and unity in Islamic theology. At the least, balance is also a key concept within classical Islamic thinking. And perhaps it is the absence of such a balance in the Mekkan understanding of Jesus and Mary which leads to some of the critique found in the Qur'an. At least it seems to be a dispute about "the ranking of Jesus in the pagan pantheon"⁷⁶ that leads to the theological conflicts that the Qur'an addresses when criticizing Christology (Q 43:58).

⁶⁷ Clooney 2005: 112.

⁶⁸ Clooney 2005: 112.

⁶⁹ Clooney 2005: 132.

⁷⁰ Cf. Klaus von Stosch: *Trinität*. Paderborn: utb 2017.

⁷¹ Cf. as a first overview Klaus von Stosch: *Selbst, Welt und Gott im Spannungsfeld von Einheit, Verschiedenheit und Nicht-Dualität. Ein Gespräch zwischen Advaita Vedanta und christlicher Trinitätstheologie vor dem Horizont modernen Freiheitsdenkens*. In: Claudia Bickmann/ Markus Wirtz (ed.), *Selbstverhältnis im Weltbezug*. Teil 1, Nordhausen 2010 (Weltphilosophien im Gespräch; vol. 4), 49-69.

⁷² Cf. Muna Tatari/ Klaus von Stosch (ed.): *Trinität – Anstoß für das islamisch-christliche Gespräch*. Paderborn et alia: Schöningh 2013 (Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie, vol. 7).

⁷³ Clooney 2005: 124.

⁷⁴ Cf. Clooney 2005: 139.

⁷⁵ Clooney 2005: 235.

⁷⁶ Angelika Neuwirth: *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang*. Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen 2010, 492.