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Anglican Experiences of Mary: An English Perspective

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This paper will explore the different traditions within the Church of England and their relationship with and attitudes towards the Blessed Virgin Mary. An autoethnographic element will narrate the author's personal journey from charismatic evangelical sceptic, through ordination formation at an Anglo-Catholic monastery in West Yorkshire, to recent lived experiences at a small Italian village church festival.

The range of influences that shape the Church of England's different traditions are perhaps unique compared to other denominations across the wider Christian faith, as the Anglican Church provides a home where happy-clappy, arm-waving charismatics and conservative bible-carrying evangelicals live alongside incense-brandishing Anglo-Catholics and questioning liberals. Not always an easy union, each grouping has its own activities, such as summer events and festivals, and particular associated organisations, that together almost form brands, visible banners behind which their followers can unite. Whilst it is challenging to view these four aspects of Anglican traditions as being wholly separate, because in reality there are many crossover points, not only as individuals develop in their Christian faith, it is important to recognise the impact of inhabiting the 21st century, with the background of the postmodern environment that enables contrasting and sometimes opposing views to be held in conjunction with each other.

It is within this context that this paper will explore the attitudes and motivations of churchgoers and clergy towards Mary, and their experiences, within the Church of England.

Key Words: Mary, eventisation of faith, Church of England, Malta, Anglican Church

Introduction

This article is based on a presentation at the *International Conference on Niche-Market Formation for Faith-Based Tourism*. It is a qualitative autoethnographic reflection (Denzin, 2014; Anderson, 2006). It is a narrative of the author's personal journey: this is my experience. I would characterise this reflection as an acknowledgement of my hermeneutical lens, shaped by personal experience, context and circumstances (Holgate & Starr, 2006).

Few social science researchers would today argue for an objective, independent form of research, and in this article, there is a strong personal motivation and self-identification as an 'insider' (Koens & Fletcher, 2010:33) with the study matter. It is argued that the integration of such personal knowledge with participant observation in a study is of benefit (Bryman, 2008). From a theological perspective, the value of recognising the researcher's hermeneutical lens is formed by the development of philosophical understanding, underpinned by Ricoeur, Gadamer and

Heidegger, 'placing the human experience at the centre of the research or reflection process' (Fawkes, 2010:6). The principle of hermeneutics has a strong link to theological activity in interpreting Biblical texts, for example, with ' "commitment" and "engagement" as a condition of understanding social life'. Reflection by the researcher is therefore not viewed as an 'impediment'; indeed, it could be regarded as a 'necessary condition' for such research (May, 2001:15).

This article does not aim to be 'All about Mary'. In discussions for planning the conference, I was asked by Dr Dane Munro to present a paper on the Blessed Virgin and my initial response was, 'but I don't know

1. The author is a priest in the Church of England, and an academic at the UK Centre for Events Management, with over thirty years as a strategic and operational professional events practitioner, including ten years' operational venue management and promotional experience. She is co-author of the book 'Event Planning & Management', and other publications on the nature of the relationship between events and the experience of church.

anything about Mary'. However, through the process of writing the paper I discovered that I do know some things about Mary, and this article charts my story of how I came to that realisation. But it is also important for me to express the diversity within the Church of England. When the Maltese government is seeking to encourage people to come to Malta as tourists, through the process of identifying target religious markets, it is important to recognise that not all Anglicans are the same. And so it is also the case that not all Church of England members share the same view of Mary.

Anglican Tradition

As an events practitioner and academic, the lens through which I view the world is greatly influenced by this events experience; and through my theological studies I have learned to appreciate that theology is a key discipline that not only recognises the existence and power of the hermeneutical lens, it has consciously developed a range of interpretive standpoints, from feminist to queer, to liberation, Asian, black or ecological (Gooder, 2009). Hence, as a researcher, I agree with Bryman, arguing 'for consciously value-laden research... [and] conscious partiality' (2008:25).

In the context of Christian activity, events and summer festivals demonstrate for me a breadth of diversity, in terms of theology and practice. I have identified four festivals that take place in the UK, that are attended (though not exclusively) by Anglicans. These festivals might be viewed as representing different attitudes to Mary, even though they all involve similar activities: camping, a wide range of speakers, formal debates and informal discussions, with sessions held in marquees and big-top style temporary demountable structures, activities including crafts, lots of music and dancing.

The first of the summer festivals and events to be considered is the *Walsingham Youth Pilgrimage* (http://www.walsinghamanglican.org.uk/education/youth_pilgrimage.htm). This festival is at the heart of the Anglo-Catholic movement in the Church of England, and is perhaps more in concert with the views, practices and experiences shared by many Maltese Christians. Participants at the Walsingham Youth Pilgrimage are akin to a target market in line with the shared beliefs, values and rituals of Maltese Christians. These attendees speak the language of Catholicism, albeit from an Anglican perspective. The primary focus of this event could be characterised as being about 'Mary', more so because for almost a thousand years, the location has been a site of pilgrimage in honour of a vision of the Blessed Virgin,

'our Lady of Walsingham' (www.walsingham.org.uk). The site includes a Roman Catholic national shrine and basilica, as well as an Anglican shrine. The Anglican youth pilgrimage, held every year in July / August, was attended in 2017 by about 800 young people, as well as the Anglo-Catholic Bishop of Burnley, the Rt. Revd Philip North, who spent the summer of 2017 visiting three summer festivals associated with the Church of England (<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2017/8-september/comment/opinion/bibles-arm-waving-and-incense>). Camping is available in the nearby village of Little Walsingham (close to the Shrine), while Mass is celebrated in a Big Top marquee. Other festival activities include Bible studies, all-night liturgy, ancient pilgrimage on the Holy Mile, crafts workshops, dance, sport, drama, music, inflatables, café, barbecue, disco and karaoke.

Another event is the *Keswick Convention* (<https://keswickministries.org/convention/2017>), home to the conservative evangelical, it is a place for serious Bible study. If you are comfortable walking around with a big Bible under your arm, and having really serious conversations, you belong at Keswick. Initially influenced more by Free Church evangelicals (independent / house church Protestant) than Anglicans, this convention sits in a beautiful Lake District location in the town of Keswick. For the past 140 years, this free-to-attend three-week-long summer event has hosted thousands of attendees; in 2017, some 12,000-15,000 participants came for the purpose of hearing and receiving the Word of God. The focus is very much on preaching and listening to people preaching for hours, along with scriptural exegesis (expounding on and teaching what it says in the Bible), worship, prayer, fellowship, and meeting with God. Theologically traditionally Protestant, there are associated publications, online resources, and other events. If I were to suggest the primary characteristics, the two most important aspects of this event community are Jesus and the Bible.

New Wine (<https://www.new-wine.org/events>) is an organisation that may wish it had outgrown the 'happy clappy' label, but its summer festivals are thoroughly charismatic evangelical, with dancing and music led by worship leaders who include Anglican priests – although they are likely to have tattoos, play guitar or drums, and have unreservedly embraced the 'bearded hipster' look (Maly & Varis, 2016:639). In its formation, New Wine was deeply influenced by the Vineyard movement that John Wimber (<http://www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/about/john-wimber/>), brought to the UK in the 1980's with 'Signs and

Wonders' conferences that introduced new charismatic experiences to churches across the world. New Wine aims to connect church leaders and is strongly focused in the Church of England. Many of the 'gatherings' at New Wine's United (<https://united.new-wine.org/>), a two-week summer event, consist of indie-band style worship sessions that more resemble a secular rock music festival. Other events include training for church leaders, whilst the values espoused by the New Wine organisation comprise ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit, concern for the poor by changing culture, family and relationships, and providing support and encouragement for local church leaders. The summer events also have camping and activities, with speakers, seminars, worship and a music festival atmosphere, arts workshops and proclamation (Gospel preaching). New Wine events see themselves as being relevant to the needs and aspirations of culture and provide a wide range of resources for churches and their leaders. The characteristic or focus here would be the Holy Spirit, and the Bible. If you were having a conversation with someone at New Wine, they are most likely to ask, 'would you like me to pray for you?' and they would lay their hands on you, saying, 'come Holy Spirit'.

Greenbelt Festival (<http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/about/>) began in 1984 with a focus on arts, faith and justice: today it sees itself as asking different questions, offering a hermeneutic of scepticism, both within the church and the wider world. Festival attendees tend to include more liberal Christians, politically-engaged activists, whilst the festival showcases arts, discussions and music, describing itself as, 'an idea, a way of seeing, a gathering of the clans – part movement, part moment'. Artists & activists participate in 'inspirational, provocative and fun' activities, taking 'a progressive Christian worldview ... inclusive, open-minded, participatory and generous in spirit.' In 2016, I was able to go to Greenbelt to research their sustainability, an issue of importance for Greenbelt, which positions itself as liberal and open, asking difficult questions, in fact some might not recognise it as a 'Christian' festival. In terms of the key characteristics of Greenbelt Festival's focus, justice continues, and is joined by what one observer described as 'deconstructing and reconfiguring faith' (Marszalek, 2017).

So what has this got to do with Mary? The description and characterisation of these different festivals and their connected community identities provides a view of the range of diversity within the Church of England.

Moving on to the context of my own English church experience; when I was planning my conference presentation on Mary, I turned to my Father for wisdom and advice. In his mid-80's, he had been a Christian all his adult life, and for decades he was a Methodist local preacher and missionary. When I told him that I have to do a talk about Mary, his response was, 'Mary who?' I replied, 'Mary in the Bible', and he clarified, 'Oh Mary Magdalene?' 'No', I explained, 'Mary the Mother of Jesus'. And his reaction? 'Oh, she's invisible'. My Father was an active Christian, a religious studies teacher, a local preacher, a missionary; but for him, Mary was 'invisible'. And that shocked me, but I realised that, for many people, not just Protestant Christians, this was a common reflex. The assumption that everybody knows and understands and recognises the Blessed Virgin at the same level, in the same way, is unhelpful, as there is a wide variation, as demonstrated by the variety of Christian summer festivals.

How can the people of Malta encourage others to come and explore the depth of experience and significance about Mary in Malta? It was in asking this question that I found where my own experience sits. This is my context, in terms of understanding and appreciating Mary; this is where my story starts.

Preaching about Mary

The images in Figure 1 are taken from PowerPoint slides from the few sermons I have preached about Mary. They cover some of the themes of Mary's life: she visits Elizabeth; we see Mary travelling to Bethlehem on a donkey, and; her involvement in Jesus' ministry. The text in Table 1 indicates my sermon perspectives on Mary.

In summary, in preaching about Mary, themes emerged for me of:

- a woman of untold influence in the Christian story
- a woman of strength, of independence
- a woman of integrity
- a woman who gives us insights into feminine spirituality
- Mary, standing as proof of Christ's humanity
- Mary as the mother of Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords
- both as a woman, and as a mother, Mary's was a life that knew deep sorrow.

In the past, I have been asked to preach about Mary by two male vicars, possibly because I'm a woman, and

Figure 1 : PowerPoint slides from sermons about Mary

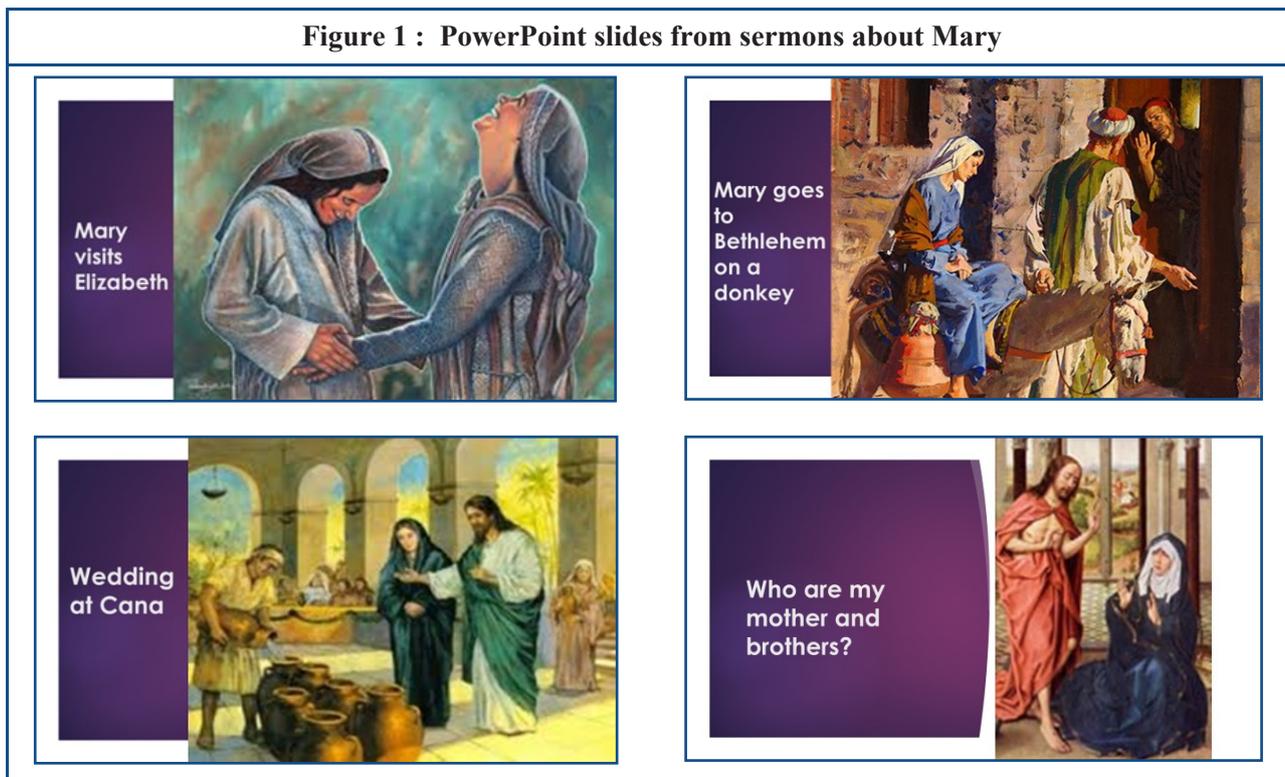


Table 1 : Sermon perspectives on Mary

We are thinking about Mary, a woman of untold influence in the Christian story, a woman of strength, of independence, a woman of integrity, a woman who gives us insights into feminine spirituality. It is Mary who stands as proof of Christ's humanity. And in the reading this morning we see the part of Mary's story, as she stays with her cousin Elizabeth, two women together, sharing in that close family relationship the experience of pregnancy. Perhaps this was a time of retreat, a time of solidarity, as they cared for one another, a time preparing them both for their lives as mothers of young men led by God, when eventually their sons would be seen as outcasts, misunderstood by society, and both women, as mothers, coming to know deep sorrow as their sons obediently follow the paths laid for them by God.

So, Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, who had always been thought to be barren, yet who now in her later years is pregnant, and carrying a special child.

I wonder what Mary thought as she lived her life?

How often did she look back to her time with Elizabeth? Did she sometimes think it had all been a dream? Did she muse over it in her mind? Did that experience come back to Mary, time after time?

An angel appears to Mary. Unlike the angel that appeared to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, Mary's angel has a name: Gabriel. This fact alone indicates superiority; already Jesus' importance is being implied. (1:26)

To add to this, Gabriel is no minor angel, but an archangel, one of the leading lights.

Traditionally, the church has called Mary the first disciple. She was the first to believe and the first to obey.

And in Luke's story, we get the impression that here was an ordinary young woman – really a teenage girl – who showed extraordinary courage and faith in God to be able to say, 'Let it be to me according to your will.'

To put it more simply, Mary said 'yes', and through her, God began the extraordinary work of salvation for all people.

So, for Mary, the great miracle was the simple act of obedience, of saying yes to God.

Before Mary's pregnancy becomes apparent, she goes to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who responds with joy! And Mary shares her story with Elizabeth, not keeping it to herself.

Three months later, Elizabeth has had her baby, and Mary, by now visibly pregnant, returns home – how does that go down, I wonder?

And in the time that the two women spent together, what did they do? I imagine them making preparations together, sitting and chatting whilst resting with their feet up.

As Mary lived her life, I imagine that she re-played that time with Elizabeth many, many times, perhaps seeing it as a time of comfort, closeness, more than friendship, sisterhood – supporting each other, caring for each other.

And how often did both Mary and Elizabeth look back to that time, as their sons lived their precarious lives, and died their terrible deaths.

How often did they think, ‘this is all too much’? How often did they want to give up, or run away and hide?

BUT Mary was one person in a long line of people who encountered God, and in the blink of an eye saw their whole life change. Abraham had to move away from the land of his fathers and raise a child in his old age. Moses found a bush on fire and ended up speaking before the rulers of Egypt on behalf of the Ruler of the Universe. David, the youngest boy in a long line of brothers – he was just watching sheep one day when someone called him in from the field. And there were many others.

And then there was Mary.

But God didn’t ask her to go anywhere. Or speak to anyone. Or liberate a nation of slaves. God asked her to have a child. And her life would never be the same again.

Each and every one of these people said a simple ‘yes’ to God.

They didn’t set out to know all things, to change the world, or even to change their town. They simply said ‘yes’ to God. And God said it was enough. And it was enough.

And Mary said, ‘Let it be to me according to your will.’

We catch glimpses of Mary throughout her life, in relationship, with her husband Joseph, with her relative Elizabeth, with Jesus, with her other children, and with the disciples.

And, Mary can be a model of relationship for us.

So what is God asking us to do? Mary’s role summons all of us, women and men, to contribute both to our own salvation and that of others, through relationship.

What is God asking us to do with the people we know, the people in our lives? Our families, our friends, our neighbours, our work colleagues.

The Nativity is a story about how God comes to earth to forgive people for their sins, to show us how much he loves us, and to align himself with the poor, the defenceless, and the homeless. If we really hear this story, it could be pretty unsettling. So much better to wrap it in pretty paper, sweeten it up and – when all else fails – deny that it’s true. We’re all much safer when it’s a fairy story or the subject of an archaeological study or critical analysis. Otherwise we might see through the red-nosed reindeer, Santa’s, tinsel and baubles, and see God, coming naked into the world – wrapped by his mother, Mary – and lying, helpless, in a manger.

So as we approach the birth of the Christ-child, let us, too, listen for the voice of the angel, calling us to live our ordinary lives in an extraordinary way.

Let us ask God for the courage that Mary had.

Let us build close supportive relationships with one another, in times of joy and in times of sorrow. And let us pray for God to use us, where we are.

Here.

Today.

because I'm a mother, their thinking may have been that I could connect with Mary, which is a not uncommon perspective (Gray1989).

In preparing to preach about Mary, some of the things I learned were helpful, but my view of Mary was simply as a role model, as a woman, which was insightful, but not in any way developing a perspective of Mary that might be shared in common with the more Catholic wings of the Anglican Church.

In my Home

In my preparations for my paper, I looked around my home, and I realised that Mary is there too. There are four places where Mary is in my home. First is a small white porcelain statue, about a foot tall, in my dressing room, and another is a wooden statue of the Holy Family, in my living room (see Figure 2). In my study is a nativity scene is set in a small box that we bring out at Christmas, and the latest version of Mary is a new painting of a black Caribbean Madonna and child, also in my study. So, Mary is actually there, residing in my house. But how did she get there?

Mary partly came into my home because my training for ordination as a priest took place at an Anglo-

Catholic monastery at Mirfield, the home of the Community of the Resurrection, where I discovered and experienced some of the more Catholic elements of my Anglican faith.

Italian experience

And then came Italy. The underlying context is a subtle recognition that Mary is there in my life, but how important is she? I was privileged to spend four weeks in Italy in the summer of 2017, partly at a conference. And whilst I was in Italy, four people that I knew died, including one of my students, another was my Spiritual Director and mentor, and two people who I had been praying for, over quite some time (several years in one case).

In the final week of my visit I was staying in a small hamlet, and I went to church on the Sunday morning, as I had done the previous week. At 10am there was due to be a service, but when I walked up to the church it was closed. Whereas the week before, the church was open before 10am, there was a priest inside, and I had participated in the service. Outside the closed church, the men of the hamlet were busy cleaning, and when I asked what was happening, they told me to come back at 6pm, when there would be a 'festa' (local

Figure 2. Mary in My Home



religious feast) and procession that I could join in. They said it was a festa for the Virgin. (Anyone with an inkling of important dates for Mary would have realised that it was the Sunday following 15th August, the Feast of the Assumption of Mary into heaven. Apart from me.) Later that day, I went back, joining the packed congregation as they spilled out of the church and processed around the village, carrying a statue of the Virgin. And so I took part in the procession, and I stayed to the end of the service. But in my heart there was a deep feeling of sadness, because of the people that had died. Some of them were very close to me and some were less close – but I was mourning. I was struggling with my feelings of sorrow and wondering how I might address these emotions.

At the end of the service, the congregation was invited to venerate the Monstrance, which I did for the first time. (A monstrance is a large object, usually made of precious metals, containing the host, the consecrated communion wafer, at its centre. To venerate the monstrance one would kiss it, often while genuflecting). This was quite liberating, an amazing experience for me. Afterwards, I came back into the church as I wanted to light some candles, and to just sit and pray in the silence, because I have learned that you can have all the dancing and clapping you like, but there is nothing like sitting in the silence for meeting with God. It is very important as an experience, and I should never forget that. I sat down next to a lady, she stood up to leave. And so I sat, alone, as tears were flowing down my face, and I felt – I experienced – Mary. Mary interceding with me, for those people who had died. I met Mary in that church. And that changed my perspective. Partly it was about being open to new experiences and asking questions, and being able to ask questions without causing offence.

Opportunity

In conclusion, the religious tourism opportunity for Malta is based on an understanding of who Mary was, of who Mary is.

There is an opportunity to introduce people like me, who do not share the same background, and to introduce others to Mary, as part of the spiritual connection that we talked about throughout the two days of the conference which prompted this paper (see <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/irtp/icnmf/>). This idea of having a spiritual connection is important, because it has the potential to make a difference to visitors' experience of Malta. I will always remember that moment, in that tiny remote Italian church, where I experienced Mary. That changed my life. And how can the people of Malta help other people to have that life change? In this regard, I have some suggestions.

Firstly, there are places and organisations to learn from. In the UK, and elsewhere, there are church heritage organisations, just as there are in Malta. One of the aims of developing religious tourism is to begin to learn from each other and to start to share ideas. I would call that 'industrial tourism', investigating what other people do, going and experiencing it, and then asking, how can we apply this here, in this context?

The second approach is by identifying existing organisations that might be interested in coming to Malta in the first place, for example, The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, and the Society of Mary in the UK, as part of the Church of England, who are open to this aspect of faith. Additionally, I suggest secular organisations such as the Brussels-based 'Future for Religious Heritage' (<http://www.frh-europe.org/>), that can add value to the development of programmes and knowledge, there are growing numbers of academic researchers with an interest in the area of religious tourism and pilgrimage (<https://arrow.dit.ie/ijrtp/>).

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