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GUADALUPE, KIBEHO, AND GIETRZWAŁD: GOSPEL ROOTS AND CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF MARIAN APPARITIONS

Abstract. This study investigates how Mary, through her apparitions, provides spiritual support within a cultural context. By analyzing biblical episodes—such as Mary’s intervention at the wedding at Cana and her visit to Elizabeth—it becomes evident that during her earthly life, Mary was attuned to the needs of others and intervened in ways that were both subtle and effective. These patterns of action are then examined in relation to contemporary Marian apparitions in specific cultural contexts: Guadalupe (Mexico), Kibeho (Rwanda), and Gietrzwałd (Poland). This interdisciplinary study explores how these apparitions reflect Mary’s care for people, particularly during the colonial period, when she adapted her messages to local cultures and languages. In doing so, Mary offered spiritual comfort and guidance, addressing the injustices of colonization. By examining Mary’s role as a protector in times of crisis, this work underscores her contribution to alleviating the effects of colonial violence, supporting local communities, and facilitating the integration of Christianity with indigenous traditions. Finally, the study explores Mary as a symbol of hope and renewal, offering resilience in the face of both historical and spiritual challenges.

Keywords: Mary, apparitions, adaptation, colonialism, support.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Marian apparitions, particularly those in Guadalupe, Kibeho, and Gietrzwałd, has been the subject of theological and exegetical scrutiny, revealing a profound interplay between spiritual experiences and historical contexts.¹ These mariophanias from the beginning raised questions and were extensively investigated in the field of their authenticity and credibility, particularly in their function as moments of divine intervention responding to crises such as colonial oppression or cultural upheaval.

In *Summa Theologiae* (III, q. 29, a. 2c), Thomas Aquinas emphasizes Mary's motherhood as the foundation of her unique relationship with Christ and the Mystical Body, which is the Church.² This perspective allows to see Mary not only as the Mother of God but also as a spiritual caretaker of all humanity, whose concern becomes especially evident during historical challenges, such as the experiences of colonialism, as reflected in her apparitions. Scholars like Czesław Bartnik emphasize the theological depth of Marian apparitions as manifestations of God's care through the mediation of Mary, situating these events within the broader framework of salvation history.³ Similarly, Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski underscores the factuality of these events, grounded in their transformative impact on individuals and communities.⁴ In the contexts of Guadalupe, Kibeho, and Gietrzwałd, these mariophanias not only reflect the cultures in which they occurred but also act as forms of resistance to colonial domination, integrating Christian beliefs with indigenous traditions in ways that reaffirm the universality of the Gospel. This dual role of Mary—both as a cultural bridge and a spiritual healer—is consistent with the biblical depictions of

¹ Piotr Popiołek, „Mariofania. Rola Maryi w dialogu międzyreligijnym,” *Teologia i Człowiek* 42, no. 2 (2004): 165–91, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12775/TiCz.2018.021>.

² Piotr Roszak, Jesus Tanco Lerga, „Marian Devotion on the Camino de Santiago during the Middle Ages,” *Religions* 13, no. 12 (2022): 1213, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121213>.

³ Czesław S. Bartnik, „Maryja – wielki znak na niebie,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 51, no. 3 (2004): 133–40.

⁴ Andrzej A. Napiórkowski, *Maryja jest piękna: zarys mariologii i maryjności* (Kraków: Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie, 2016).

her maternal care and Mary's unique ability to respond to human suffering with sensitivity and strength.

Despite their significance, the correlation between Marian apparitions and colonial history remains underexplored in contemporary theological discourse. The question arises whether these mariophanias can be viewed as an extension of Mary's earthly mission of care, providing therapeutic interventions in times of deep spiritual and social wounds. For instance, in Guadalupe, Mary's apparition addressed the spiritual and cultural alienation of indigenous peoples; in Kibeho, her messages urged reconciliation amidst ethnic violence; and in Gietrzwałd, she reaffirmed faith and unity in the face of partition-era oppression. This work aims to examine not so much the authenticity but rather theological, human and cultural implications of these apparitions, exploring how the Blessed Virgin Mary's presence during moments of colonial and historical crisis served as a profound response to the injustices and suffering of humanity.

Poland is rarely described through the lens of postcolonial theory, which traditionally applies to nations subjected to direct colonial domination, such as Mexico or Rwanda. However, an analysis of Polish-German relations, particularly during the time of the Gietrzwałd apparitions (1877), reveals characteristics typical of colonialism, such as cultural domination, linguistic assimilation, and efforts to suppress national identity. The German policy of Germanization in 19th-century region of Warmia, including restrictions on the use of the Polish language in schools, churches, and public life, mirrors mechanisms of colonial hegemony aimed at eradicating the cultural distinctiveness of the local population. While placing Poland alongside Mexico and Rwanda in the context of postcolonial theory may initially seem surprising, there are compelling arguments to justify such a comparison. Edward Said pointed out that colonialism extends beyond physical occupation to include the imposition of a dominant cultural discourse and the devaluation of local identity.⁵ In this sense, the policies of the German authorities toward Poles in the 19th century can be analyzed as a form of "internal colonialism," where a hegemonic culture sought to dominate a subordinated minority. The fact that the Virgin Mary spoke

⁵ Edward W. Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review* 31.1 (1977): 162–206.

Polish during the Gietrzwałd apparitions can thus be interpreted as a symbol of spiritual resistance to this domination and an attempt to safeguard the threatened national identity. Another expert Homi K. Bhabha emphasized the significance of cultural resistance in shaping hybrid identities that merge elements of the colonizer's and colonized's cultures.⁶ The Gietrzwałd apparitions, deeply rooted in Polish religious traditions, exemplify such resistance, where language and religiosity become arenas for defending cultural distinctiveness. Similar mechanisms can be observed in the apparitions in Guadalupe and Kibeho, where Mary, by integrating elements of local traditions, becomes a symbol of spiritual support in the face of colonial crises. Also Ewa Thompson examines the colonial aspects of domination in Eastern Europe, pointing out that hegemonic powers such as Germany or Russia treated Poland as an "Oriental" territory, subject to exploitation and assimilation.⁷ From this perspective, the Gietrzwałd apparitions can be seen as an act of national renewal, akin to the apparitions in Mexico or Rwanda, where Mary symbolizes not only a spiritual mother but also a guardian of national and cultural identity. This interpretation legitimizes analyzing Gietrzwałd through the lens of postcolonial theory as a significant attempt to defend language, culture, and national distinctiveness against colonial domination.

John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, emphasized the universal role of Mary in the history of salvation, highlighting her ability to adapt to different cultures and eras, which makes her a model of solidarity, care, and intercession.⁸ This idea finds further development within the framework of typological and figural narrative as presented by Erich Auerbach.⁹ According to Auerbach, the events described in the Bible are not only historical but also figural, meaning that they possess significance beyond their immediate circumstances, becoming patterns for future events. The Marian apparitions will be analyzed as a continuation and develop-

⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (Routledge, 2012).

⁷ Ewa M. Thompson, *Imperial knowledge: Russian literature and colonialism* (Greenwood Press, 2000).

⁸ Ioannes Paulus II PP, *Redemptoris Mater. Lettera enciclica... sulla beata vergine Maria nella vita della chiesa in cammino* (Bologna, Edizioni Dehoniane, 1987), 59.1: 21.

⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).

ment of key moments in Mary's life as described in the Gospels, resonating within specific cultural and historical contexts in Guadalupe, Kibeho, and Gietrzwałd.

1. POSTCOLONIAL HEALING THROUGH MARY'S IMAGE

One of the titles given to Mary by the Bible and Tradition is the "Servant of the Lord." In the Annunciation scene, she refers to herself as a slave (gr: *doulos*, lt: *ancilla*), who voluntarily and wholeheartedly dedicates herself to God's plans. The culmination of Mary's obedient and sacrificial love occurs under the shadow of faith at the hour of the cross (Latin: *in umbra fidei*). The Mother of the Savior reverses the order of sin. Mary standing obediently under the tree of the cross is the first to taste the fruits of grace and new life.¹⁰ She becomes the Mother of a new humanity, redeemed by Christ and anointed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This pattern of action, which she displayed during her earthly life, is also repeated in Marian apparitions, where, as seen in postcolonial contexts, she becomes a source of support and hope for those suffering from crises related to colonization.

The biblical descriptions of Mary's life, such as the wedding at Cana of Galilee and her visit to Elizabeth, show that concern for others was a central element of her life. Mary's attentiveness to the fate of others continues in her apparitions, where she appears in moments of historical crises, such as during colonial periods, to provide support. These biblical stories indicate that Mary's manner of acting during her earthly life found its continuation in the apparitions, where she still recognizes the needs of her children and intervenes accordingly. Marian apparitions can therefore be interpreted as an extension of her concern for humanity, which Jesus entrusted to her on the cross.

¹⁰ Gianfranco Ravasi, *Maryja. Matka Jezusa* (Wydawnictwo Jedność, 2017), s. 120–125.

1.1. JOURNEY TO ELIZABETH: MARY AS THE SERVANT OF THOSE IN NEED AND OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE (MEXICO, 1531)

An evangelical example of Mary's care for people in need is her visit to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39–56). Mary immediately decided to make the long journey to visit her. Despite being pregnant herself, she did not hesitate to give up her own comforts and undertook a journey through the mountains to help and serve her cousin.

This story shows that Mary was always sensitive to the needs of others, especially those in situations requiring support. In the context of Marian apparitions during colonial times, a similar pattern can be observed: Mary, seeing the suffering of her children, undertakes a "long journey" from heaven to earth to help them. Her presence in places such as Guadalupe or Kibeho is a response to the specific needs of local communities, who were experiencing not only colonial oppression but also spiritual and social crises. Her apparitions can be understood as a spiritual journey to the suffering, similar to the one she made to Elizabeth, to bring support and hope.

The apparition of Our Lady to Juan Diego, a native, is one of the earliest examples of how Marian apparitions responded to the colonial context. Mary appeared as a mestiza (part native, part Spanish),¹¹ reflecting both indigenous culture and the presence of Europeans. In postcolonial terminology, the Guadalupe apparition can be interpreted as an event that allowed the indigenous people to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to the religious system imposed by the Spanish colonizers. Mary's appearance as a mestiza figure allowed the indigenous people to identify with her, creating a thread of unity between Christian faith and local beliefs. The encounter also functioned as a therapeutic force, offering spiritual refuge for the population suffering from the brutal consequences of colonial domination. The figure on the tilma is now seen as a symbol of Mexican identity, connecting indigenous and colonial heritage.¹²

¹¹ Stafford Poole, *The Guadalupe Devotion in Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

¹² Jeanette Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

The anthropological perception of Mary as a mother is key in analyzing Marian apparitions, especially in times of social and cultural crisis. In the context of colonialism, the indigenous population of Mexico was experiencing a deep crisis of identity, spirituality, and community, resulting from the brutal transformations imposed by the Spanish colonizers. At this moment, Mary's apparition to Juan Diego, in a form close to the culture of the indigenous people, can be seen as a response to this crisis. Mary comes to them at a time when their traditions, beliefs, and identity are threatened, and in Guadalupe, she appears as a Woman who supports the endangered community.¹³ From an anthropological perspective, Mary is thus not only a religious symbol but also a figure responding to the deep, universal needs for care, support, and hope, especially in pivotal moments in human history.

1.2. INTERVENTION IN CANA: THE MOTHER WHO NOTICES NEEDS AND OUR LADY OF KIBEHO (RWANDA, 1981)

One of the most famous moments in which Mary acts with gentleness and tenderness is the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11). Mary was the first to notice the lack and asked Jesus for help. Then Mary, with full confidence, said to the servants: "Do whatever he tells you." This event can be seen as an example of Mary's actions in crisis situations. This can be compared to her message in Kibeho, where she appeared to high school students, warning of future tragedies and calling people to conversion, prayer, and love for one another. In Kibeho, the Virgin Mary appeared to the students during a time of ethnic tension that would eventually lead to the Rwandan genocide.¹⁴ Mary appeared as a dark-skinned woman, resonating with the African population.¹⁵ From a postcolonial perspective, this figure symbolized a spiritual intervention in a society divided by ethnic

¹³ Eric R. Wolf, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol," *American Anthropologist* 60, no. 1 (1958): 34–45.

¹⁴ Timothy Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Ilibagiza Immaculée, *Our Lady of Kibeho: Mary Speaks to the World from the Heart of Africa* (New York: Image Books, 2008).

divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi, divisions artificially constructed and exacerbated by Belgian colonial rule. In both cases, Mary perceives the threat and reacts, directing people's attention to the need for change to avoid a crisis.¹⁶ In Cana of Galilee, it was a physical need for wine, while in Kibeho, it was a deep need for spiritual renewal, which ultimately aimed at preventing a moral catastrophe. In both cases, her actions show that Mary plays the role of a caretaker who constantly watches over people, caring for their well-being.

From the perspective of cultural theology, the apparitions in Kibeho also have an inculturational dimension—Mary appeared in a way adapted to the culture and social context of Rwanda. Just as at Cana, she intervened, responding to the specific needs, in Kibeho, she responded to the spiritual needs of the African community, which was at risk of spiritual collapse. Both situations express her concern for human matters, which touch upon the deepest values of human life.

1.3. MOTHER OF ALL PEOPLE: MARY AS SPIRITUAL CAREGIVER AND OUR LADY OF GIETRZWAŁD (POLAND, 1877)

The Gospels also show that Mary is the mother not only of the elect, but of all people (cf. John 19:26–27). Jesus, by entrusting John to Mary's care, symbolically places all believers under her maternal care. This event has profound theological implications – Mary is no longer just the Mother of Jesus, but also the Mother of every human being, which underscores her role as mediator and protector of humanity in every time and place. The Gietrzwałd apparitions of 1877, the only Marian apparitions officially recognized by the Catholic Church on Polish soil, are part of this maternal role of Mary, whose care and concern extended to the entire Polish community during the difficult period of partition.

In Gietrzwałd, the Virgin Mary appeared to two young girls speaking in Polish and this is one of the few approved Marian apparitions in

¹⁶ Aimable Twagilimana, *Historical Dictionary of Rwanda* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

Poland.¹⁷ The context of this apparition was related to the Germanization policies of Prussia, which sought to suppress the Polish language and culture. Mary's choice to speak Polish can be seen as an affirmation of national identity, providing spiritual legitimacy to the people struggling to preserve their cultural autonomy under a foreign power.¹⁸ The appearance of Mary as a person speaking Polish in Gietrzwałd also emphasizes how religious symbols can empower populations to resist assimilation and preserve their cultural identity.

From the Perspective of Paul Tillich's Concept of "Religion as Ultimate Concern".¹⁹ The described Marian apparitions can be understood as a response to the fundamental concerns of humanity, which relate to spiritual survival and national identity. Tillich views religion as a response to the deepest existential questions that determine the meaning of human life. In this sense, Marian apparitions, particularly in Guadalupe, Kibeho, and Gietrzwałd, were responses to the "ultimate concern" of native communities—the need to preserve identity, faith, and spiritual freedom during times of oppression. Mary, appearing in a way adapted to the realities of the given culture, speaking in the native language, strengthened the nation, reminding people of the values that should shape life in difficult political and social conditions.

In all these cases, Mary's appearance resonates with the experiences of the local population related to colonization and the loss of culture. Her adaptive abilities—appearing as a native figure or speaking in the local language—highlight the intersection of faith and cultural survival. Marian apparitions can be seen as postcolonial acts of healing, offering therapeutic relief to oppressed communities by affirming their cultural identity within a colonized religious framework. The integration of local cultural symbols with the Christian image of Mary allows for an understanding of the multi-dimensional forms of piety that soothe the wounds caused by colonialism.

¹⁷ Maria Zientara-Malewska, *Gietrzwałd: dzieje polskości* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1976).

¹⁸ Norman Davis, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, vol. II: 1795 to the present (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Paul Tillich, *The courage to be* (Yale University Press, 2008).

Tanya Marie Luhrmann, analyzing how people develop a sense of the reality of gods and spirits, emphasizes that religious and spiritual experiences are shaped by cultural, emotional, and psychological practices that “awaken” the presence of invisible beings.²⁰ Similar processes can be observed in the context of the Marian apparitions under discussion. Mary becomes real in the consciousness of the faithful not only through the apparitions themselves but also through the way local communities engage in rituals, prayers, and interpretations of these apparitions. In the apparitions in Guadalupe, Kibeho, and Gietrzwałd, as in the spiritual experiences studied by Luhrmann, Mary’s ability to adapt to local cultural conditions plays a key role.

Luhrmann also highlights how emotional and psychological engagement helps “embody” the gods.²¹ Thus, it is important to analyze how Marian apparitions responded to colonial traumas through emotional support and comfort. In Kibeho, the apparitions occurred before the dramatic events of the Rwandan genocide, where Mary called for repentance and prayer, thus offering spiritual hope and protection from the looming crisis.²² From Luhrmann’s perspective, these actions can be seen as “awakening” the reality of Mary as a spiritual mother, who perceives and responds to the needs of her children. In the context of Gietrzwałd, the apparitions took place during the time of Germanization, and Mary spoke in Polish—which was of great importance for preserving the national and religious identity of Polish believers. As Luhrmann shows, the way religious figures become real is closely tied to their ability to engage in dialogue with the emotional and cultural needs of the faithful. In Gietrzwałd, Mary was not only a spiritual caretaker but also a symbol of the fight for freedom and identity.²³

²⁰ Tanya M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

²¹ Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*.

²² Ilibagiza Immaculée, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (Carlsbad: Hay House, 2006).

²³ Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists 1945–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

2. POSSIBLE WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING

2.1. MARY AS A CULTURAL MEDIATOR IN A POSTCOLONIAL REALITY

Postcolonial theory, represented by scholars such as Homi Bhabha²⁴ and Gayatri Spivak,²⁵ suggests that colonization not only imposes its structures of power but also deeply interferes with the cultural fabric of the conquered nations. Marian apparitions in postcolonial contexts can be interpreted in the spirit of Bhabha's concept of "hybridization," where Mary adapts to local traditions to create a new form of religiosity that allows for the survival and revival of local cultures. Mary as a hybrid figure—mestiza in Guadalupe, dark-skinned in Kibeho, or speaking Polish in Gietrzwałd—becomes a symbol of mediation between the supernatural world and local traditions.

At the same time, it is worth considering whether these phenomena are truly a form of resistance to colonialism or rather a strategy of adaptation that allowed the survival of colonized cultures within a new order. Asking this question leads to deeper reflection on the extent to which Christianity—often associated with colonial power—could become a tool of adaptation and survival and when it was a means of cultural subjugation.

2.2. APPARITIONS AS A RESPONSE TO AN IDENTITY CRISIS

In each of the discussed cases, Marian apparitions occurred in the context of a deep crisis of national and cultural identity. In Mexico after the Spanish conquest, in Poland during Germanization, and in Rwanda on the brink of genocide. Mary appeared as a figure who, through her closeness to the local people, offered not only spiritual comfort but also affirmed their cultural and historical value. The identity functions of Marian apparitions can be interpreted through the lens of Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, which emphasizes that identity is always a historical construct, formed

²⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (Routledge, 2012).

²⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

in dialogue with the dominant discourses of power.²⁶ In this context, Marian apparitions act as a tool for reclaiming identity by those who had been deprived of it by colonizers.

An interesting question that can be posed in further discussion is whether these apparitions were a response to identity crises resulting from colonization or a tool for redefining national identity on new, syncretic foundations. Does Mary, as a religious figure, not only symbolize the preservation of local traditions but also their conscious transformation in the spirit of Christianity, which in turn carries colonial elements?

2.3. THE THERAPEUTIC DIMENSION OF APPARITIONS – RELIGION AS A TOOL FOR HEALING

Another important issue is the understanding of Marian apparitions as therapeutic events. Referring to Paul Tillich's concept of cultural therapy, which views religion as an expression of "ultimate concern" (the deepest concern of human beings),²⁷ Marian apparitions can be seen as moments when transcendent religious experiences help people process and understand their experiences of colonial trauma. In a postcolonial context, it can therefore be argued that Marian apparitions act as a form of spiritual healing, allowing people to regain a sense of community, value, and identity in the face of colonial exploitation.

The role of apparitions in healing historical traumas also raises questions about the function of religion in decolonization processes. Can Marian apparitions be understood as "healing" phenomena for colonial communities, enabling them to emerge from the traumatic experiences of domination, or are they a form of religious subjugation that reinforces colonial power structures, offering comfort instead of radical change?

²⁶ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory* (Routledge, 2015), 392–403.

²⁷ Paul Tillich, *Theology of culture* (Oxford University Press, 1959).

2.4. RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

Through the lens of religious syncretism theory, it is also worth considering how Marian apparitions in the colonial context integrate Christianity with local beliefs, creating new forms of spirituality. This syncretism can be seen as a form of resistance to the complete hegemony of the Christian religion of the colonizers but also as a way to meet the spiritual needs of local communities, which preserve their traditions by transforming them into a new religious order. Here, Édouard Glissant's theory of "the Other"²⁸ is relevant, as he observes that syncretism is not merely a fusion but a process of dynamic interaction between different traditions that can be a form of creative reconfiguration of identity.

This opens the field for further questions: To what extent can Marian apparitions in postcolonial contexts be considered a form of syncretic resistance to religious domination? Was this syncretism an authentic expression of local spiritual needs, or was it a tool for assimilating Christianity on the colonizers' terms?

3. FINAL DISCUSSION

Marian apparitions in the postcolonial context reveal the complex relationship between religion, culture, and politics. Mary, appearing in various forms and speaking in national languages, becomes a symbol of both closeness to the suffering and resistance to colonial power structures. Through her apparitions, Mary emerges as a symbol of hope and healing, helping colonized communities reclaim their dignity and identity. At the same time, these apparitions demonstrate how Christianity adapts to local realities, creating new forms that integrate the traditions of indigenous communities with Christianity.

The figure of Mary, with her universal maternal love embracing all people, emphasizes the Christian unity in diversity. Her apparitions in

²⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997).

these contexts indicate her responsiveness to the cultural and social challenges of each particular situation. In the postcolonial era, Marian apparitions offer valuable insights into how Christianity can evolve, remaining both local and universal.

Can the figure of Mary, then, be understood as a symbol of postcolonial Christianity, one that adapts and evolves in response to local cultural challenges? Do Marian apparitions reflect an ongoing dialogue between Christian universal and local identities, addressing the spiritual needs of communities in ways that transcend the binaries of colonialism and decolonization?

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