

The Virgin Mary at Coogee: A Preliminary Investigation

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In the context of modern Roman Catholicism, Marian apparitions are usually traced to that received by Catherine Laboure, a Parisian Sister of Charity, in 1830 (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: 26). Until the mid twentieth century, these apparitions grew in significance and were the medium for the transmission of increasingly apocalyptic messages. From the 1960s onward the Western world has become substantially secularised, with the influence of Christianity in public life being on the wane; and also re-encharmed by the rise in adherence to Eastern religions and esoteric traditions (Lambert, 1999). Marian apparitions continue to be an important part of Catholic piety, but some (such as Medjugorje, commencing in 1981 and continuing to the present) have attracted the attention of other Christians, pluralists and secularists, largely due to media coverage (Seward, 1993). The apparition of the Virgin Mary at Coogee, a seaside suburb of Sydney, was first revealed to the press in January 2003 by a local resident, Christine Cherry, of the Beach Street Gallery Laundrette. Throughout January and early February it drew increasing crowds. A crisis point was reached on Sunday 9 February, when it was discovered that during the previous night, the fence that facilitated the appearance of Mary had been demolished by vandals. However, the fence was restored and the phenomenon continues.¹ This paper considers modern Marian apparitions; traces the progress of the Coogee phenomenon; locates it in the context of other apparitions of the Virgin, including documented Australian cases; and makes some suggestions regarding the future of the Coogee apparition, which may be understood as a broadly spiritual phenomenon, open to all rather than confined to Catholics.²

Introduction

In Christianity the cult of the Virgin Mary, the human mother of the divine redeemer Jesus Christ, has traditionally been restricted to members of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, where ecclesiastical tradition is accorded authority along with the Scriptures. Among Protestant denominations, where scriptural authority is paramount, devotion to Mary has been mostly, if not entirely, absent (Warner, 1990: 296). The development of the cult of Mary was remarkable, because references to her in the *New Testament* are brief, and generally uninformative. However, throughout the Middle Ages Mary was a strong focus for popular piety; and apparitions such as that received by Lady Richeldis of Walsingham, England in 1061, were a frequent occurrence. Some of these,

including that of Richeldis, gave rise to pilgrimage sites and miracles (Stephenson 1970).

The Reformation in the sixteenth century quelled the fervent devotion to Mary and popular religious practices such as pilgrimage ceased throughout much of Europe (Seward, 1993). However, from 1830, when the Virgin appeared to Catherine Laboure in France to promote devotion to the Miraculous Medal, Marian visions have been steadily recorded, and it has become customary for Catholics to refer to the period from 1830 to the present as the 'Marian Age' (Delaney, 1961: 16). However, there are distinctive characteristics of modern apparitions that demarcate them from those of the medieval era. These are: the apparitions are generally serial and public, rather than single and private; the visionaries tend to be lay people, rather than professed religious; the Virgin communicates 'secrets' which may be personal or of global significance; the public message involves the transformation of suffering, personal and communal, into meaning; and the framework of interpretation is apocalyptic (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: *passim*).

These characteristics mean that apparitions of the Virgin have increasingly involved complexity and controversy, and there is a sharp divide between those phenomena which have been recognized as authentic by the Roman Catholic Church (La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima) and those which remain unrecognised, such as Medjugorje and Garabandal (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: 20). Scholarly, as opposed to apologetic, attempts to evaluate the phenomenon of Marian apparitions have often treated them as a subset of pilgrimage (Eade and Sallnow, 1991); this is an inadequate approach to the totality of the phenomenon, in that pilgrimage is the popular religious response of the broader community to the initial vision. The visionaries themselves experience ecstasies, forms of religious experience or mysticism. Scholarly approaches to mysticism and religious experience have argued that the social and cultural milieu shape the mystic's understanding of what s/he has experienced. The experience then empowers the mystic. (Hollenback, 1996: *passim*).

The apparition of the Virgin Mary at Fatima in Portugal in 1917 is an excellent example of a modern Marian vision. Three poor peasant children, ten-year-old Lucia dos Santos and her cousins, nine-year-old Francisco and seven-year-old Jacinta Marto, received six appearances of the Virgin, from Sunday 13 May 1917 at Cova da Iria (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: 77). They were urged by Mary to pray the Rosary, to pray for the conversion of Russia, and shown visions of the sufferings of the damned in Hell. They were also entrusted with three 'secrets', which were to be communicated only to the pope (Bergin, 1973: 139-43). Crowds gathered to watch the seers in ecstasy, and reports were compiled. As with all twentieth-century apparitions, the Fatima phenomenon was subject to considerable publicity, and took on something of a life of its own:

[w]hile it is clear from the report of August 13 that by late in the summer, for at least some of the religious seekers at Fatima, the apparition was no longer

dependent on the seers, it is also clear that for others, the seers were in a certain sense no longer dependent on the apparition (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991:81).

The two Marto children died shortly after these experiences, but Lucia lived into the 1980s and wrote four separate *Memoirs*, from 1935 to 1941, of the apparitions (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: 69). Politics played a large part in the popularity of the Fatima apparition: the repressive regime of Franco 'exploited the cult of Fatima' (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: 268); and the Catholic Church was passionately anti-Communist, and during the Cold War the apocalyptic tone of the messages was congruent with the *zeitgeist* (Delaney, 1961). The 1981 Medjugorje apparition, where the Virgin appeared to six young Croats, is in theme and significance the direct heir to Fatima. The visionaries (two male, four female) aged between twelve and sixteen, saw the Virgin on the Podbrdo hill, at Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the former Yugoslavia. The first apparition was on Wednesday 24 June 1981: the phenomenon grew rapidly and only four days later, on 28 June there were 15,000 people assembled to witness the experience, which always occurs around 6 PM (Benquet, 2002). Each visionary was also entrusted with ten secrets by the Virgin, and promised continuing visions.

This was another politically explosive apparition, in that Medjugorje was a Croatian Catholic enclave within a predominantly Serbian Orthodox area; and because the area was still under Communist rule at the time. The Vatican has been reluctant to grant approval to the Medjugorje visions, which have become something of a media and tourism circus. The visionaries travel the world, communicate Mary's messages via telephone and the Internet (<http://www.medjugorje.org/>), and when at home live in the glare of constant publicity and a never-ending stream of pilgrims and tourists. A formal enquiry into the apparitions was commenced in 1987 (Seward, 1993: 8) and Pope John Paul II encouraged pilgrims to go to the shrine before the outbreak of civil war in Bosnia (Mullen, 1998: 43). The apparitions continue to this day, still unrecognised by the Church, and the visionaries are now all in early middle age.

What is extraordinary about Medjugorje is the extent to which it has created interest among non-Catholic Christians (Cheston, 1992) and non-Christians (Seward, 1993). Medjugorje features prominently on New-Age influenced Internet sites such as Morgana's Observatory – Ancient Prophecies, Universal Myths (<http://www.dreamscape.com/morgana/index.htm>); UFO sites such as www.ufocity.com; and www.alternativeapproaches.com. In addition to the eclecticism of the New Age, there is the fact that the Medjugorje messages have stressed the equality of all religions: for example, '[i]n God there are no divisions or religions; it is you in the world who have created divisions'; '[a]ll religions are equal before God'; and '[e]ach one's religion must be respected, and you must preserve yours for yourselves and for your children' (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/9463/medjugorje.html>).

Zimdars-Swartz (1991) argues that 'a single, transcultural, apocalyptic ideology based on apparition messages' has emerged, focusing on 'images of

intercession and intervention' (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: 247). Marian devotees believe that when the Virgin appears:

she comes not just to alleviate personal suffering and impart grace to individuals but to alleviate communal or global suffering and impart grace to a particular community or to the world, through a message which brings understanding and illumination (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: 165-166).

The understanding of suffering is crucial: Zimdars-Swartz identifies knowing 'a great deal about suffering' (1991: 264) as the key personality characteristic of the Marian visionaries, both orthodox and unorthodox, that she has studied.

Pilgrimage and popular religious outpourings are time-honoured activities, in which ordinary people participate in an extraordinary experience. Victor Turner, in a classic formulation, suggested that going on pilgrimage was a liminal phenomenon: the pilgrim is separated from his/her daily concerns and allowed to concentrate on spiritual matters. The rituals which the pilgrim participates in have a 'curative, charismatic aspect' and the fact that they are completed in the presence of other pilgrims who are doing likewise creates a sense of fellowship, which Turner calls *communitas* (Turner and Turner, 1978). The institutional Church seeks to control the meaning of apparitions for the faithful, but the cult of Mary has an intense life of its own, which the esoteric author Geoffrey Ashe describes as 'the life of the Goddess, mediated through a living daughter of Zion' (Ashe, 1976: 229).

One of the ways in which this 'life of its own' is manifested is by the response of people flocking to those places where the Virgin reportedly appears. Attention will now shift to Marian devotion and apparitions in Australia.

Marian Devotion in Australia

Roman Catholics formed the vast bulk of the convicts transported to Australia from 1788, and by 1852 'the Virgin Mary came to be known for the Catholic Church as Our Lady Help of Christians and patroness of Australia whose feast day is May 24' (Kahl, 1998: 29). In the twentieth century devotion initially grew, with the statue of Our Lady of Fatima being brought to Australia as part of a world pilgrimage tour in 1951, and the doctrine of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven being promulgated in 1954, which was proclaimed a Marian Year (Kahl, 1998: 30).

Since the 1960s attendance at Catholic churches has been declining, along with observance in all mainstream Christian denominations. Some have argued that the situation is now of a post-Christian Australia (Thompson, 1993: 113-137). Yet, it could not be said that interest in religious matters generally has declined; since 1980 there has been a strong trend towards interest in 'spirituality' rather than organised religion, which manifests itself in the New Age movement, the popularity of Western Buddhism, and other 'alternative' beliefs and practices (Possamai, 2001).

In the current religious climate, which combines increased secularisation with an attitude of spiritual 'seekership' and the proliferation of religious alternatives (Lambert, 1999), Australia has distinctive manifestations of Marian devotion, both orthodox and unorthodox. The importance of Medjugorje can be seen from the numbers of Australians travelling there, and also to other major Marian pilgrimage sites. Other evidence of Marian devotion include the planting of 'Mary Gardens' and the establishment of pilgrimages, such as those to Penrose Park, New South Wales, and Marian Valley, Canungra in Queensland, both administered by the Pauline Fathers (Mullen, 1998: 25-29). All these manifestations of Marian devotion discussed so far are orthodox, and contain no supernatural elements.

However, Australian Marian devotion has also featured supernatural occurrences: mystics transmitting messages from Mary; apparitions such as those at Yankalilla and Coogee (both cases where the Virgin is seen through the medium of physical matter; firstly, a plaster wall; and secondly, a wooden fence); and other paranormal phenomena such as weeping statues (Bennett, 2002). In September 2002 the Australian press paid attention to reports of a weeping statue of the Virgin Mary in Rockingham, Western Australia. The statue, of Our Lady of Lourdes, was owned by parishioner Patty Powell. Sceptics were openly scornful of this phenomenon (<http://abc.net.au/news/newsitems/s787389.htm>), but it remained in the press for some time.

Most controversial are the groups led by two visionaries who have been denounced by Church authorities: William Kamm, known as The Little Pebble, based at Nowra in New South Wales; and Debra Geileskey, leader of the Magnificat Meal Movement, based in Helidon, Queensland (Murray, 1986; Roberts, 1997). Both these groups incline towards the heterodox idea that Mary is the co-redemptrix of humanity with her son Jesus Christ, and have millenarian tendencies. Kamm and Geileskey are mystics, transmitting messages from Mary that have inspired widespread popular interest.

Closest in tenor to the recent Coogee phenomenon was the apparition of the Virgin Mary first witnessed in the Christ Church Anglican church at Yankalilla, South Australia in August 1994 (Kahl, 1999). The image appeared in the plaster on the right-hand wall, and was of the Virgin holding the infant Jesus. Canadian Father Andrew Nutter, the parish priest, is High Anglican, and welcomed the apparition; over the years Marian imagery has become more prominent in the life of the parish. A miraculous stream was discovered, and Aurora Moore, a member of the congregation, has 'received messages from the Virgin who is concerned there is too much suffering in the world' (Kahl, 1999: 36).

Yankalilla attracted pilgrims from the surrounding region and interstate, and the movement grew. However there was discontent within the parish, as Father Nutter drew on Catholic (including Medjugorje) tradition and charismatic practices in the creation of a 'pilgrim mass'. A confraternity, the Servants of the Humility of Jesus and Mary, was formed. However, the Parish Council, dominated by traditional Anglicans, eventually voted that Father Nutter resign, which he declined

to do. Conflict and animosity eventually marred the site and the apparition, as Father Nutter introduced non-Christian practices such as Buddhist meditation (Jones, 1998).

Marian devotion, even within the Catholic community, has become increasingly radicalised and 'fringe' since 1980 throughout the affluent, secularised Western world. Those countries in which it is still a vibrant force, like Ireland, Spain and the former Yugoslavia, are often economically disadvantaged (OhOgain, 1985) and politically troubled. Australian Marian apparitions are minor when set in a global context, and they are not completely definable within the context of Roman Catholicism. Australia's contemporary religious scene reflects the Western phenomenon of seekers, defining themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' and investigating different phenomena while constructing a personal spirituality. Many of these people have flocked to see the apparition at Coogee, which significantly is not contained within a church or other ecclesiastical context, but is at the seaside.

The Virgin at Coogee

Sydney residents were first informed of the Marian apparition at the seaside suburb of Coogee by the *Southern Courier*, a local newspaper, on January 22 2003. Christine Cherry, owner of the Beach Street Gallery Laundrette, told reporter Wendy Fitzgibbon that the apparition had first appeared nearly two months earlier, 'about the time Randwick Council voted to rename the headland Dolphins Point in honour of the 18 Eastern Suburbs residents who died in the Bali bombings in October' (Fitzgibbon, 2003a: 3). Ms Cherry had not been the first visionary; that honour was reserved for her anonymous manageress. The apparition is said to be visible between 3.15 and 4.30 PM each day when the sun shines. This simple story was taken up by the *Sydney Morning Herald* two days later (Wyld and Moses, 2003). Both these early stories pointed out that the cause of the 'vision' was an optical illusion created by the fence edging the headland. The *Herald* noted that Catholics were flocking to the site.

The *Herald* followed up the story on January 28 and January 31: no new details obtaining to the apparition were offered, but the responses of viewers and locals were canvassed. Unsurprisingly, the Catholic authorities were cautious: the parish priest Father Denis Holm of St Brigid's Coogee stated that it was an optical illusion; and spokespeople for the archdiocese suggested that it would be appropriate for the parish priest to consult with the archdiocese (Burke, 2003: 3). More interesting were the responses of those who believed: Irene of Kensington said that '[s]he is coming here because there are so many naked girls on the beach. She comes in her veils, head to foot, to say "Cover yourselves"' (Hornery and Moses, 2003). Voices of sceptics also appeared; Tony Burrows, owner of the café The Coogee Bite, commented that the apparition was good for business, and that having a drink might facilitate your apprehension of the Virgin's presence.

The next contribution to the press coverage of the Coogee apparition was again Wendy Fitzgibbon in the *Southern Courier* on Tuesday 4 February 2003, noting the escalating growth of the crowds at Dolphins Point. The day after Christine Cherry first spoke to the *Southern Courier* one hundred people arrived, and by the weekend of 1 and 2 February there were hundreds. Interestingly, in the light of a 'post-Christian' Australia and the growth of personal spiritualities, the people Fitzgibbon interviewed included Joyce Radi, who declined a denominational label but said 'I have faith,' and Nunia Roko, described as a 'born again Christian', who (despite Protestantism's suspicions of Mary) said 'I can feel it – this is holy ground. The Lord wants to send a message to the people of NSW and Australia. The message is: we need to change the way we think and the way we see' (Fitzgibbon, 2003b: 8). Others, including 'spiritual' people and the curious, were mentioned.

The journey to Coogee would best be classified as a form of modern secular pilgrimage (Digance and Cusack, 2001) where behaviour which would traditionally have been regarded as religious takes place outside of a formal religious context. Typical pilgrimage activities were witnessed at Coogee, including the leaving of votive offerings and the sale of religious souvenirs: Wendy Fitzgibbon reported that 'the section of the fence which casts the shadow that forms the apparition was covered with flowers, rosary beads, [and] pictures of Mary' (Fitzgibbon, 2003b: 8); and Christine Cherry was reportedly selling 'small Mary medals and candles' (Harvey, 2003) to pilgrims. For the phenomenon to become established, some direct message from Mary would seem to be necessary. The major Marian apparitions all feature seers and visionaries, who mediate between the Virgin and her human devotees. However, the Coogee phenomenon has significant differences from traditional Marian apparitions. These include the fact that there is no designated visionary and no special message. The apparition is serial and public, but supernatural intervention would also seem to be minimal or absent.

Fitzgibbon also interviewed Tongan Malia Selui, who had previously seen 'an apparition of Mary on a tree in Salt Lake City, USA' (Fitzgibbon, 2003b: 8). Ms Selui's contribution to the development of the Coogee phenomenon was her impression that the Virgin touched her shoulder; this had apparently been witnessed by her sister. This promised well for the future of the apparition. The next issue of the *Catholic Weekly* repeated Father Holm's remarks about the apparition being due to an optical illusion, but tolerantly, calling him 'Desmond' (Rodrigues, 2003). However, the next slew of newspaper articles concerned a crisis for the future of the apparition: vandals had destroyed the fence that facilitated the illusion.

That there was tension in Coogee had been signalled in the *Herald's* January 31 article. Resident Henrietta Dean commented: 'I see a fence post. And I have seen that same fence post for many years. If all these people want to come to Coogee then that's wonderful, but the parking has become horrendous' (Burke,

2003: 3). Similarly, resident Alan Wilton complained about his ocean views being spoiled by ‘crowds of people’ (Cazzulino, 2003). Other residents were equally sure that the watchers were a nuisance: ‘no more can we enjoy our leisurely walks or jogs through Dunningham Park, thanks to the thousand or so gullible sightseers’, said John Robinson (Fitzgibbon, 2003c: 5). Parking and issues of access are often ‘coded’ ways of discouraging unwanted religious activities in communities affected by popular outpourings (Digance, 2003). However, the announcement on Sunday 9 February that the fence had been pulled down by vandals was genuinely shocking, even to those who were merely onlookers.

The vandalism included chaining a toilet bowl to the fence, and splashing red and green paint on the fence (Harvey, 2003). The Mayor of Randwick, Dominic Sullivan, cut to the heart of the matter when he stated: ‘I’m extremely angry because in committing this despicable act, these low dogs also tried to smash people’s hopes and beliefs’ (Leggatt & Cox, 2003: 3). In addition to hostility to the site, Christine Cherry, the first witness to the vision, had been receiving death threats and abuse. Ms Cherry, interestingly, is not a Christian, but has spoken of herself as a ‘spiritual’ person throughout. It was she who initially linked the apparition to the deaths in the Sari Club bombings in Bali on October 12 2002, and on Sunday 9 February she again drew attention to contemporary events: ‘I think the vandalism is disgusting. It is absolutely senseless when it has given something spiritual to a lot of people at a time when we’re on the verge of war’ (Harvey, 2003).

In the wake of the Coogee phenomenon, people are asking questions about what it means. In a perceptive piece in the *Herald* on Tuesday 11 February, Ephraem Chifley noted that dealing with the grief generated by the senseless, violent deaths of the young in the Sari Club tragedy on October 12 2002 is a difficult process. He viewed the Coogee phenomena as part of this process:

Sydney’s beaches after the tragedy became shrines to the fallen. Rituals at the water’s edge, however concocted and self-conscious, signalled a new seriousness in our religious expression... It is only human that anxiety about an increasingly uncertain future should seek to manifest itself outwardly. By providence or coincidence a trick of the light has become an opportunity to deal publicly with that grief and fear. It is not something anyone could have planned. While archbishops might wince and unbelievers rail, the pious and some of the not-so-pious will come to have a look and perhaps even stay to pray (Chifley, 2003: 11).

A less sensitive article had appeared in the ‘Heckler’ column (where perhaps sensitivity is not a prerequisite) in the *Herald* the previous day. The contributor suggested that the Virgin might more usefully spend her time ‘appearing at the United Nations General Assembly, where her advice may be useful, or even at the Vatican, where it would probably cause panic’ (Bock, 2003: 18). Interestingly, while Sydney was mourning the loss of the Virgin of Coogee on Sunday 9 February, Ivan Dragicevic, one of the six Medjugorje visionaries, was visiting Sydney: at the Sutherland Entertainment Centre, where thousands gathered to see

him receive his evening vision of the Virgin. He was at the Sutherland Entertainment Centre because he 'has been banned from receiving his visions in any church in the Sydney diocese' (Glendinning and Burke, 2003: 3). Bock, it seems, may have had a point: the Virgin appears outside Church property because she is too radical for Church interiors (Bock, 2003: 18).

Coda

The demolition of the fence on Dolphins Point is not the end of the story of the Virgin Mary's appearances at Coogee. Faced with the devastation, Kimberley Gomes of Saint Mary's, one believer who travelled some distance to experience the phenomenon, was confident: 'I think if she is going to appear then she is going to appear. With or without the fence. I think she comes when the world is troubled' (Leggatt & Cox, 2003: 3). Other pilgrims left their offerings at the violated fence, as they had done before the damage happened.

The Council moved swiftly, sending workmen to repair the fence. They laboured amid an assembly of the faithful who 'sang hymns, blessed one another with water and filmed the progress of the two workers' (Cazzulino, 2003). At the low point when the damage was first reported, a University of Sydney physicist, John O'Byrne, was interviewed to explain how the optical illusion worked (Leggatt & Cox, 2003: 3). This, however, while adequate as a rational explanation, failed to deter the faithful.

The *Herald* reported on 11 February that the fence had been re-erected, insofar as possible, on exactly the same spot, but that the weather conditions were not conducive to the Virgin appearing, as it was cloudy (Hornery & Wyld, 2003). That interest is by no means diminishing is clear from the *Daily Telegraph's* website which encourages readers as follows:

Have you seen the Coogee Madonna? If so, please share your experience with us, and other *Telegraph* readers. If you haven't seen it, how do you evaluate the claims of those who say they have? (www.dailytelegraph.news.com.au).³

This invitation reaffirms pilgrims' belief that their experiences are of value and need to be discussed widely with both believers and non-believers.⁴ Miracles, albeit of a minor sort, have been reported. The Radio National 'Breakfast Show' on Friday 21 February reported the account of one pilgrim whose rosary bead chain was being transformed from silver to gold. This is a fascinating development, as 'rosary beads changing colour' is one of the commoner signs which pilgrims report at multiple Marian sites (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: i).

The same phenomenon was reported by believer John Rifkin to *Sun-Herald* journalist Miranda Devine (Devine, 2003:15).

Other evidence that the Marian phenomenon had survived the vandals includes Premier Bob Carr's announcement that he supports the Randwick Council move to re-name the headland Dolphins Point, after the six members of the rugby league team who had died in the Sari Club blast; the requests by Marian watchers

for the Council to post security guards at the fence to protect it from further vandalism, reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Thursday 13 February; and the setting up of an e-mail address by Christine Cherry: www.virginmaryofdolphinpoint@hotmail.com to which people are invited to post comments.⁵

There are other avenues for Marian religious expression at Coogee still to be explored which neither the media nor devotees seem aware of. Coogee is of further significance to Catholics and other Marian devotees. It was home to Eileen O'Connor (1892-1921) whom many Catholics believe will be the next Australian after Mary McKillop to be canonized by the Vatican. O'Connor, crippled for most of her twenty-eight years, and her friend Father McGrath, a decorated war hero, founded 'Our Lady's Nurses to the Poor'. Her devotion to Mary was passionate. She was initially buried in Randwick Cemetery, but her body was exhumed and re-buried in Our Lady's Home in Coogee on 19 January 1936. She is buried in the chapel, where many still come to pray (www.atv.com.au/~luken/oconnor.htm).

Christine Cherry and Ephraem Chifley are substantially correct: people are anxious about the state of the world. Since September 11 2001 terrorism has seemed a greater threat; and it is reasonable to assume that Australia felt the effect of the Sari Club bombings in Kuta, Bali on October 12 2002 more acutely than the attack on New York's World Trade Centre. The comforts offered by institutional religion have increasingly been less comforting to many people: the religious tone of the age is more personal and experiential. Pilgrims to Coogee are joining in an age-old religious practise, older than Christianity, and it functions to alleviate stress experienced by the community. It can be argued that 'once this stress is experienced by the populace at large, some very definite (and differentiated) folk formulations of the crisis tend to emerge' (OhOgain, 1985: 71) and that the distance between the folk formulations and official ecclesiastical formulations is crucial.

It could be argued that to interpret the Coogee phenomenon as a response to grief over the Sari Club deaths is simplistic. Certainly the apparition at Coogee is radically indeterminate where meaning is concerned. Nevertheless, it would be within a tradition of Marian apparitions, which trace:

the transformation of private experience into public belief and the transformation of suffering, the suffering of particular people but also, finally the suffering of a community and of the world, into meaning. This is a transformation which... is usually accompanied by a sense of pending crises of the sort that are commonly called apocalyptic (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: xiv).

Australia has been shaken by the events of September 11 in America, and the Sari Club bombing on 12 October 2002. The Coogee apparition grew in popularity throughout January and February as world leaders George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Australia's own John Howard, prepared for war with Iraq. That the people were deeply troubled by these pending crises is clear from the massive marches for peace on the weekend of Friday 14 to Sunday 16 February, worldwide.

The grief and anxiety that is experienced includes mourning for those who are already dead, and preparing for the fact that many, many more will die if the coming war is not averted. In analysing the apparition of the Virgin at Coogee, it is clear that the phenomenon is heterogeneous, in that people of vastly differing beliefs and lifestyles may participate, and as has been noted, there is no special seer or authority interpreting the message (Chifley, 2003). The pilgrims and tourists interpret the Virgin's appearance or non-appearance as they wish. Moreover, the beach has long been regarded as a secular sacred site for Australians, making Mary's appearance there more likely to draw a crowd than if she had appeared in any church. Yet in an important sense the phenomenon is also unified: put simply, people can go to Coogee; they can experience the phenomenon for themselves. As Chifley suggests, the very activity may bring some comfort and peace into a troubled world.⁶

Endnotes

¹ This paper is subtitled 'A Preliminary Investigation' because it is a first attempt, not merely on my part, but for the scholarly community in Australia, to attempt to capture a very new phenomenon, for which there are no academically reputable sources. The Coogee apparition has been chronicled thus far in local and major newspapers, and in brief segments on radio. None of these sources are 'academically' reliable or reputable, but they must be collected for the record before academic investigation can proceed. It may be that the Coogee apparition will be a short-lived phenomenon, and this paper a resultant one-off. If the apparition lingers, survey-based research could be conducted, and other avenues examined. For the present, my intention was to chronicle the phenomenon and provisionally contextualise it, so that the freshness and immediacy of this spontaneous outbreak of popular religious feeling might not be overlooked.

² This paper would never have been written without the students of my University of Sydney Centre for Continuing Education Thursday night and Friday morning classes. We are presently in the middle of a course on 'Medieval Pilgrimage' and students have eagerly discussed how the Coogee phenomenon fits the pattern of medieval pilgrimages, such as that to the Holy House at Walsingham, Norfolk. Students have also provided me with copies of newspaper articles and other relevant material, including Eileen O'Connor's devotion to Mary and connection with Coogee.

³ The is confirmed by the fact that the popular radio station 2DAY FM, on Wednesday 12 February had as the clue for the '2DAY FM Fugitive' hunt from 3 PM to 5.30 (prize standing at \$9,000) 'there's something about Mary' (referring to the recent Farrelly Brothers comedy starring Cameron Diaz). Virtually all the callers between 3 PM and 4.15, while I was listening, asserted that the Fugitive would be apprehended at Coogee, because that was where Mary was currently appearing.

⁴ I have also discussed the Coogee Virgin briefly by e-mail with Marian researcher Janet Kahl, who has visited the site twice, before and after the demolition of the fence. She reported that on neither occasion had she seen the Virgin, although cloudy weather marred the first visit and crowds the second. However, she added that the apparition had been making news on Adelaide radio, where her mother lives. It occurs to me that this may be because of the Adelaide interest in the earlier Yankalilla apparition.

⁵ I visited Coogee on Sunday 23 February, a sunny day. A small group of approximately fifteen people were still watching for Mary at 5.30, nearly two hours after the optimal viewing time. I observed their behaviour and took photographs. I have also been in telephone contact with Christine Cherry, and told her about this paper. We spoke on Friday 28 February.

⁶ My thanks are due to Don Barrett for his sympathetic interest in my researches and his patience in discussing issues and assisting me to clarify my ideas prior to, and during, the writing process.

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