

Functions of the Guanyin Image in Mediating a Christian Tradition: The Filianic Reception of Guanyin as a Case Study in Transreligious Theology

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Abstract

This paper aims to expand the understanding of Guanyin's reception in the West outside of immigrant and convert Buddhist communities by examining her role in the apologetics of Filianism—a new religious movement that first appeared in England in the 1970s. Although this religion participated in some of the same currents of thought that birthed contemporary feminist and Goddess spiritualities, it has historically defined itself against these and displays more commonality with its Roman Catholic origins. This study therefore focuses on how the symbolism of Guanyin has served Filianic writers as a touchpoint for mediating their relationship with Roman Catholicism, not only by explicating and legitimating their distinctive re-reading of Marian iconography, but also through leveraging Western receptions of Buddhism as a proxy for a criticism of the Second Vatican Council. Although Filianism is far from being the only movement originating in Europe to accord Guanyin a prominent place in its teachings and self-presentation, its theological focus on the nature of the bodhisattva in dialogue with received traditions of popular Marian veneration distinguishes it notably from the majority of non-Buddhist Western receptions of Guanyin, which have tended to employ her as a more generically “feminist” figure with comparatively minimal engagement with specifically Buddhist teachings. As a case study, Filianic readings of Guanyin therefore appear to offer the clearest example of a genuinely syncretic exchange in a Western context, expanding our perspective on the influence of Buddhist thought and culture within a reciprocal process of religious globalization.

Key words: Filianism, Guanyin, Madrian, easternization, mariology

The Filianic Reception of Guanyin: A Case Study in Transreligious Theology

The bodhisattva Guanyin is among the most venerated figures in large parts of Asia. Best known globally for her prominent role in the Mahayana Buddhist traditions of East and Southeast Asia, she is also frequently encountered within Daoist practices, among the folk pantheons of diverse ethnic groups, and in the cosmologies of various new religious movements, such as Zailiism, Cao Dai, or the teachings of Ching Hai.

Although the images of Mary and Guanyin may have first come into contact during the Song Dynasty (Halbertsma 2008, 79), the first encounters of Europeans with Guanyin appear to have occurred during the thirteenth-century Franciscan mission to China, and many scholars have proposed that Guanyin imagery was influenced by depictions of the Virgin Mary brought from Europe at that time (Arnold 1999, 141–143). A second wave of contact occurred with the Jesuit missions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which played a more obviously significant role in shaping modern Guanyin iconography (Clarke 2013, 29–30). The true reception of Guanyin as a devotional figure in the West, however, did not begin in earnest until the mid-twentieth century, when a loosening of restrictions on Asian immigration in Western countries, combined with a surge of popular interest in “Eastern” spiritualities among participants in various Western countercultures, led to the widespread proliferation of her image.

Outside of immigrant communities, however, Guanyin’s primary role in the West has been as a kind of feminist spiritual icon (Lee 2011) perceived as carving out a space for women amidst patriarchal traditions and leadership, both within Buddhism specifically and the domain of religion generally (Gelinis 2018). In recent years, a growing emphasis on “queer” interpretation of Guanyin can also be found in both popular practice and in the scholarly literature (e.g. Hedges 2011 and 2012). This trend has focused on the transformation of the historically masculine image of Avalokiteśvara into the now ubiquitously feminine figure of Guanyin and on assessing the implications of that ambiguity for contemporary gender theory and related social movements in Western societies.

This paper aims to expand the understanding of Guanyin’s reception in the West outside of immigrant and convert Buddhist communities by examining

her role in the apologetics of Filianism—a new religious movement that appeared in England in the 1970s. Although this religion participated in many of the same currents of thought that birthed contemporary feminist and Goddess spiritualities, it has historically defined itself against these and displays more commonality with its Roman Catholic origins. This study, therefore, focuses on how the symbolism of Guanyin has served Filianic writers as a touchpoint for mediating their relationship with Roman Catholicism, not only by explicating and legitimating their distinctive re-reading of Marian iconography, but also through leveraging Western receptions of Buddhism as a proxy for criticism of the Second Vatican Council. In so doing, it aims to diversify our understanding of the global reception of Guanyin and the diverse uses to which her image has been and is being put.

In addition, this paper's treatment of Filianism contributes to the broader study of new religious movements and alternative and goddess spiritualities in the contemporary West through documentation of a movement not previously addressed in the academic literature. Although Mark Sedgwick's history of Traditionalism, *Against the Modern World* (2004), briefly treats the British subculture of Aristasia—which overlapped extensively with Filianic communities in the 1990s and 2000s—and summarizes some of the key philosophical views of the Filianic writer Miss Alice Lucy Trent, Dr. Sedgwick's treatment does not engage with Filianism itself. The presentation offered here draws on primary documentary sources gathered by the author during six years of field work with online communities that identify with the religion.¹

Background to the Filianic Reception

From the first arrival of Catholic missionaries in China in the thirteenth century, the parallels between the images of Guanyin and Mary are impossible to miss. Both figures stood out for being female in male-dominated pantheons and in the practice of male-dominated clergies. Both possessed outsized roles in popular devotion as compared to their official status in formal theology. Both were renowned for their inexhaustible compassion and universal mercy. Though we know little about the pastoral travails of the Franciscans in China, the artifacts of their mission show even at that early date a tendency

to hybridize European and Chinese elements in religious art (Clarke 2013, 25). By the time of the Jesuit arrival in the sixteenth century, the two figures were sufficiently close that the Chinese frequently mistook images of Mary as representations of Guanyin (34), while the Europeans more than once misidentified images of and practices toward Guanyin as evidence of Marian veneration (Arnold 1999, 143).

For the missionaries, the analogy of Guanyin and Mary was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it helped to make Mary more familiar to converts and eased the acceptance of Christianity by giving it the appearance of continuity with local traditions (Arnold 1999, 142). At its best, the cultivation of the analogy promoted a respectful acknowledgement of Guanyin as a kind of pagan typology of the Virgin (taking “typology” here in its technical Christian theological sense, as a symbol or episode from pre-Christian times ordained by God to prefigure or prepare the people for the arrival of the Christian Gospel).

On the other hand, confusion between the very different official theological roles of Mary and Guanyin was a source of constant missionary anxiety. The Jesuits frequently had to disabuse their Chinese hosts of the notion that the woman who loomed over the figure of the infant in the paintings they displayed and gave as gifts was the Savior or the object of Christian worship. Lay societies dedicated to Mary were a powerful tool in the missionary repertoire for mobilizing new converts (particularly women), but the tendency of these groups to simplify and culturally adapt Catholic liturgy (Song 2008, 117) often required correction for excessive prominence given to Mary. The broad thrust of these developments may also be inferred from the ease with which Marian veneration strayed into heterodox territory during periods in which the corrective influence of the missionaries was absent. By the time that Japan was reopened to Christian missionary activity in the nineteenth century, for example, many of the descendants of the persecuted seventeenth-century converts regarded the hybridized Maria Kannon [Guanyin] as a form of the Holy Spirit (Reis-Habito 1996, 59–60, 62).

In the very different context of twentieth-century Britain, however, early Filianists were keen to wield precisely this reverse side of the sword. The primary public face of this religion at the time was an order called Lux Madriana, which operated out of Oxford. Its core members were mostly young women of Roman Catholic background who had been brought into contact with the Traditionalist philosophy of René Guénon and Ananda

Coomaraswamy (Sedgwick 2004, 216). These two figures, active primarily from the 1920s through the 1940s, had taught that all of the major world religions could be understood as manifestations or dispensations of a universal “Tradition” (always with a capital T)—sometimes termed the “perennial philosophy” or the *religio perennis*. Among the elements of this “Tradition” was the belief that the world had begun in a golden age and was gradually descending through a series of ages, each more material and less spiritual than the last, with the present Iron Age (or *Kali Yuga*, from the Sanskrit) representing the nadir of human society. For Guénon especially, this long descent into barbarism was driven by a series of “inversions,” in which the “Traditional” social order (as understood by Guénonian Traditionalism) and metaphysical teaching were stood on their heads in one point after another. Phenomena ranging from the Enlightenment privileging of physics over metaphysics to Arnold Schoenberg’s rejection of traditional tonality in music were interpreted according to this paradigm.

In the midst of the feminist upheavals of the 1960s and the 1970s, the Madrians (as the members of Lux Madriana and related orders were called) added a distinctive doctrine to Guénonian Traditionalism. Contemporary with the work of Marija Gimbutas and other scholars who presented new arguments for claims going back to the nineteenth century that the most ancient cultures had been matriarchal (or “matrifocal”), the Madrians suggested that patriarchy was an “inversion” of the divinely-sanctioned Traditional order (Sedgwick 2004, 216–217). This was a key break with the main body of Traditionalist thought, insofar as Guénon and Coomaraswamy had applied no distinctively gender-based analysis in their work, more or less assuming the “Traditional” validity of patriarchal social structures found among the historical “civilizational centers,” and the first Traditionalist to incorporate gender into his approach, Julius Evola, had been “distinctly masculinist” (217). At the same time, however, the Madrian suggestion that patriarchy was an “inversion” of the true “Traditional” order was a decisive break with most contemporary forms of feminism, insofar as it led the Madrians to assert that social hierarchy and class stratification, corporal punishment in education, a sacerdotal religion of penance and ego-transcendence, and many other institutions commonly decried by feminist writers as oppressive innovations of the patriarchy were, in fact, legacies (albeit often corrupted), of the great female-centred civilizations of distant antiquity.

One of the primary challenges of articulating this idea in practice concerned the theology of religions. Traditionalism maintained that religions arose as acts of divine dispensation through special revelation and that they could be truly valid (i.e. “Traditional”) only insofar as they maintained an unbroken initiatic lineage from a prophetic source. Guénon, who had been raised Catholic, asserted for this reason that any hope of a spiritual regeneration in the West could only come from within Roman Catholicism, which preserved such an “initiation” through the Apostolic Succession (Chacornac 2001, 66). Guénon himself, thinking such a revival unlikely, converted to Islam, moved to Egypt, and lived out the latter decades of his life as a Sufi in Cairo, feeling that the initiatic chain this provided back to the Prophet Muhammad was more reliable in the present age.

The Madrians, too, affirmed that Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism were all true divine dispensations—the work of prophets sent by God to restore vanished truth to the world in forms adapted to the gradually diminishing spiritual and intellectual capacities of humanity through the Decline of the Ages (Angelina 1981). This set them at odds with those elements of the feminist and Goddess spirituality movements that rejected these traditions as merely human creations of patriarchy. At the same time, the Madrians’ belief that each of these represented only a partial truth—insofar as they had lost the image of God’s original self-revelation in feminine form—set them at odds with each of those traditions as well as other Traditionalist thinkers. To support their own claim to be re-presenting (as closely as the present age would permit) the “original” universal Mother God religion, the early Filianic teachers adduced comparative evidence for their conviction that the desire to approach God as Mother was so deeply rooted in the human heart that the history of religion could (and should) be read as the history of this belief perpetually re-manifesting despite the best efforts of official patriarchal theology to extinguish it.

Missiological and Pedagogical Functions of the Guanyin Image

It is in this context that Guanyin first appears in Filianic literature, with the earliest major treatment of her image appearing in an undated paper titled “The Daughter in the East,” circulated by the Madrian Literature Circle—the postal

library operated by Lux Madriana during the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is worth quoting here at length:

In the west it is well known how the image of the Goddess persisted through the semi-patriarchal and patriarchal periods right up to the present ... in various supposedly non-Divine forms, chiefly the virgin Mary. It is also well known that however low Her “official” status may have sunk, She always returned to the central and predominant position in the hearts, minds and devotions of the vast majority of the people. This was universally true ... in the Mary cult in mediaeval Europe, where dozens of popular legends, as well as the vast predominance of Her devotion testified to the supremacy of Mary over Christ and the male trinity everywhere except in the Church’s official dogma.

Above all, souls have always placed their hope in the Divine compassion of our Lady... This is powerfully represented in the prevalent mediaeval picture of “the two ladders to heaven”; the red ladder of Jesus from which many fall off into the fires of Hell, and the white ladder of Mary upon which every soul reached its glorious destination in safety. At this time it was also commonly believed that once a soul had entered Hell, even Jesus was powerless to save her, yet she might still be rescued by the infinite compassion of Mary.

...[W]hat is less well known in the west is that very much the same process has also taken place in the east. In China, for example, the worship of the Daughter under the ancient name of Kuan Yin was so prevalent that She was finally incorporated into Buddhist practice as a celestial bodhisattva, very much as Mary was incorporated into Christian practice as a saint, and quickly assuming the same predominant position.

Her life-story as a bodhisattva comes far closer to the Truth of the *Mythos* than does that of Mary. ... Another mark of the worship of the Daughter in all cultures is the faith of the people in Her power to deliver them from danger and suffering. This faith in the mediaeval west was enshrined in the opening words of the *Memorare*: “Remember, O most loving Virgin Mary, that it is a thing unheard of, that anyone ever had recourse to Your protection, implored Your help ... and was left forsaken.” In the Far East, this same belief finds its expression in a lengthy passage from the *Lotus Sutra*, the principal text of Mahayana Buddhism, which has been called “the Gospel of half Asia.” (“The Daughter in the East” n.d.)

The *Mythos* to which this passage refers is one of the constituent books of the Filianic Scriptures (sometimes known as *The Clear Recital*). It describes how, after the “First Maid” turned away from God and fell from the perfection of existence, God the Mother conceived a Daughter “that was not separate from Her” (Mythos 1:7) and Who, putting off Her own Godhead in a “taking on of fate upon Herself” (3:15), became “maid” (i.e. distinct from the Mother but endowed with the power of moral choice to return to Her) and voluntarily descended into the netherworld to suffer torture and death in order that the Light of the Mother might be brought into the place-where-She-is-not (Mythos 4), reconciling all creation to Her and establishing the material world as a state between true Pleromic existence and the annihilation of separation from God, permitting fallen souls to work their way back toward union with their Creatrix (“Being Human” 1978).

Filianists understand the term *Mythos* in the fullest sense, as signifying an inspired representation to the human mind of spiritual Realities that cannot be communicated in any other form. The story of the Mother Creatrix and Her sacrificial Daughter, understood monotheistically (from either a trinitarian or a modalistic perspective; the Godhead being completed by an apophatic figure that does not concern the present analysis), is therefore taken to be the underlying truth at the heart of all “Traditional” religious expressions. Christianity, for instance, is read as both having “patriarchalized” the *Mythos* (in the sense of the underlying story, and not necessarily the specific text used by contemporary Filianic groups) by rendering the Creator as a “Father” and the Divine Child as a “son,” as well as having “historicized” it by transposing a transcendent event that takes place within eternity (namely, the sacrifice of the Divine Child) into historical time and space by locating it on Golgotha in the first century (much as Roman mythology transposes Indo-European mythic events into the time of the kings and the early Republic). As seen in the passage quoted above, however, Filianists hold that the sublimated figures of Mother and Daughter are providentially preserved within Christianity by the image of Mary.

It is important to note, however, that in saying this they do not refer to the first-century historical figure, but to the iconography risen around her. Hence the qualification used by Sister Angelina, the most publicly prominent teacher within Lux Madriana, in calling Christianity “the religion which has preserved for a millennium most of the matriarchal festivals and traditions of Europe, as well as being a providential vehicle for the manifestation of Our Lady Herself

(in the guise of Mary) to countless millions of souls in the Iron Age” (Angelina 1981, 5). The “guise” is the use of the historical person of Jesus’ mother as a catalyst for the re-crystallization of the image of the “one eternal Mary, before Christianity, before Abraham...” (“The Divine, Eternal Mary” n.d.) whose “Holy Image is replete with the ancient and orthodox iconography of Our Mother God,” which God “bestowed ... upon the Western World as a Grace and blessing in the dark days of patriarchy” (“The Blessed Virgin Mary” n.d.). This understanding of iconography as “not just a question of human ‘borrowing’, but of a living Iconography, which, like Myth itself, transcends the human mind” is well illustrated in an analysis of the Marian depiction of the crushing of the serpent:

One of the most notable features of many Mary statues is that Our Lady stands on a serpent. This is a truly fascinating example of the living power and providential Grace of Marian iconography. In the earliest known European creation story, the Creatrix ... bruised the Serpent’s head with Her foot. The Scriptural passage which gives rise to the equivalent iconography of Mary is based upon a *mistranslation* of the Septuagint (the early Greek translation of the Bible). Just as the living grass springs vibrant and perfect through every crack in the concrete paving, so even the “accidents” of the patriarchy allow the living symbolism of Our Mother God to take its place in Her Providential Images. (“Choosing a Virgin Mary Statue” n.d.)

In a more explicit engagement with St. Alphonsus Liguori’s treatment of the same mistranslation, which he recognized but held to be a *felix culpa* pointing toward the truth of Mary’s role in the overcoming of the powers of hell, the *Chapel of our Mother God* (the largest and most trafficked contemporary Filianic website) explicitly connects his understanding with the bodhisattva role of Guanyin (“Creation Myths” n.d.), and this conception of iconography as an effective channel of continuing revelation is crucial to the way in which the figures of Mary and Guanyin are brought together throughout Filianic thought. Just as the *Chapel* asserts that Guanyin, “despite a Buddhist ‘overlay’, still clearly represent[s] the pure Saviouress of all beings” (“Choosing a Virgin Mary Statue” n.d.), it presents the history of Christianity as a shining through of iconographic truth amidst the dead letter of theological proclamations:

[A]s Christianity settled and developed in the West, the traditional symbols of Our Mother God continued to attach themselves to the Virgin Mary: for iconic symbols are not mere arbitrary signs, but living realities rooted in the very essence of this created world and in what lies behind and beyond it. We may say that the Image of Our Lady is not a mere product of human hands and minds, but the living, growing iconic Form of Our Mother God. (“Choosing a Virgin Mary Statue” n.d.)

There was no room doctrinally for the Creatrix and officially, the importance of the Blessed Virgin Mary was simply that she was the physical vehicle of Christ’s incarnation. However, both Her titles and Her iconography told a different story. Despite the official theology, the image of the Supreme Mother was returning to the West. ... Within the strict patriarchal economy of Christianity, the Blessed Virgin Mary cannot be recognised as God; but in Her iconography, her [sic] titles and Her devotional *cultus* (none of which have a great deal to do with the biblical and historical Mary), She is clearly God the Mother. (“The Blessed Virgin Mary” n.d.)

A further development of this argument quotes the Dalai Lama in support of identifying the miraculous appearance of Marian images in the West with the Tibetan phenomenon of *rangjung*—the appearance of images of Tara in natural rock faces (“Rangjung” n.d.). Against this backdrop, mariological arguments within the history of the Christian church become implicitly analogized to arguments within Buddhist scholarship over the relative significance of elite and popular manifestations, as described by Hedges (2012, 9) in discussing the work of John Blofeld:

She [Guanyin] is a scriptural bodhisattva, but Blofeld notes that he was led by encounters with her devotees to see her as a goddess of compassion, but was criticized for this by scholars; however, we may note that such criticisms from scholars came at a time [1977] when the mainstay of religious scholarship was centred upon textual studies, from which perspective he was ‘wrong’, however, as we have noted, this is not the Guanyin who is commonly revered and adored.

The value of such a comparison in re-contextualizing medieval Marian devotionalism as a valid source of theological insight is obvious.

The embrace of Guanyin in the West has often been laden with more or less explicit Marian nostalgia, in which Guanyin has been seen as a means of rescuing the one element of new devotees' former Christian practice to which they maintain emotional attachment. Jeff Wilson (2008) noted that, "for women who have left Catholicism, she [Guanyin] is a warm reminder of the Virgin Mary." Jonathan Lee (2011, 299) recorded a number of stories of Western devotees' journeys to Guanyin, including that of Jack Veasey, who recalled that

I grew up Catholic. Many things about Catholicism were negative and hurtful to me, but one thing that wasn't, was Mary. In Mary I found a kind, gentle, compassionate, healing female deity I could turn to in a way I could not to a harsh, angry, judgmental, male God. Many have noticed the similarities between Kuan Yin and Mary—not in formal religious thinking, but in the way common people relate to her.

In this account and many others like it, the reversal of the old missionary typologies becomes evident. Where the Jesuits often used the figure of Guanyin to introduce converts to Mary and to provide a familiar touchstone in embracing Christianity, contemporary Western converts to Buddhism have often bridged their way into that tradition by drawing a connection between Mary and Guanyin.

What Filianic writers did in the 1970s and 1980s was to deftly reverse this reversal. The analogue of Guanyin worked as evidence for the universal truth of Madrian claims of a natural human tendency to turn toward God in a feminine image (in addition to bolstering the universalist soteriology taught by Filianism, which is unfamiliar to most Christians), but among those acquainted with Guanyin already through contact with feminist, Goddess, and other alternative spiritual circles, her image seems to have been thought also to offer an important conduit by which such individuals could be re-introduced to Mary in the very different form that Filianic teaching presented.

Closely related to this *analogue* function, then, is a function for Guanyin's image as an *explication* of the theology of the Daughter and, therefore, much Filianic re-interpretation of Marian symbolism. This is often implicit in older Madrian sources, but a clear statement with explicit reference to Guanyin appears in an article at the *Chapel* likely dating to the mid-2000s:

As we shall see, this Form [Guanyin] of the Universal Dea [God] is of great relevance and importance to our current world, providing us with a means of approach to the Daughter-Savior stream of Divine Compassion.

Instinctively many people in the West who love God the Mother turn to Quan Yin. This is a very sound and important instinct, because Her *cultus* is probably the most important surviving form of the ancient *cultus* of the Sacrificial Savior in Her original feminine form ... [A]lmost miraculously – but in fact Providentially – the *cultus* of Quan Yin is closer to the original than any of the more ancient versions ... There is no male consort here. We are back to the pure and simple story of the noble and compassionate Dea giving Her life for the salvation of all beings. ... In one important story, Quan Yin is depicted as being murdered and descending into Hell. There, She played music, and flowers blossomed around her, turning Hell into a paradise simply because She was there. In other versions, we are told that she released Her accumulated good karma thus freeing many suffering souls back to Heaven. This is the equivalent of the Harrowing of Hell in the Christian *mythos*.

These tend to be dismissed by both profane and Buddhist scholars as “legends” or “folk traditions” irrelevant to the actual Buddhist doctrine of the Bodhisattva. Actually they are far from irrelevant... the Bodhisattva doctrine and the story of the descent and sacrifice of the Daughter are *theologically identical*.

In Buddhism the Divine is seen in non-personal terms, and from the “subjective” point of view (i.e. as a state of being – Nirvana – rather than a Being). ... Enlightenment, in the Buddhist sense, *is* the state of being Divine – of returning to Godhead in Theistic terminology. Therefore the refusal of Enlightenment by She who *is* in fact Enlightened is the same as God putting off Her Own Godhead. Thus the mystery of Dea separating Herself from Herself to become Her Own Daughter is expressed *precisely* in Buddhist language by the Vow of Quan Yin Bodhisattva. (“Quan Yin” n.d.)

Notably, Guanyin appears in this capacity even on pages of the *Chapel* site that are not devoted explicitly either to analyzing her iconography or that of Mary, such as the page on the Filianic holiday of *Luciad*, which observes that, “In doing this [“taking on Fate”] the Daughter is taking on mortality, an act that is seen as parallel to the Bodhisattva’s Vow taken by Quan Yin. In each case, a Being who is inherently Divine puts aside Her own Divinity for the salvation

of beings. And since there is only one Divinity, we may see these two stories as two different perspectives on one universal Truth” (“Luciad” n.d.).

This view of Guanyin’s *cultus* as the most theologically accurate traditional preservation of the underlying story of the *Mythos*, and the concomitant belief in its basic fungibility with Filianic thought and practice more broadly, is confirmed and elaborated in two other statements by the *Chapel*. One concerns the selection of images for maintaining a home shrine, noting that, “It is generally considered that images of the Blessed Virgin Mary should be combined, in a house or place of worship, with images from other *living* traditions, such as Kuan Yin, Tara or Mahalakshmi, which are able fully to recognise Her Divinity” (“The Blessed Virgin Mary” n.d.). Here, we see the figure of Guanyin invoked as a complement to that of Mary, supplying perceived deficiency in her representation owing to the limitations Christian theology placed on recognizing her as a face of God. The second, and more startling, statement reflects the concerns over the validity of “Tradition” in a Guénonian framework previously discussed:

Filianists claim that although their precise version of the story [of the *Mythos*] appears to be of recent origin, it is the closest thing possible to the true original *mythos* and is the proper devotional framework for devotees of Dea in this late Kali Yuga.

However, for those who feel uneasy with a “new” *mythos* (most Filianic material seems to have appeared on earth some thirty years ago), the *cultus* of Quan Yin provides the Daughter *Mythos* in a form that is part of a living tradition, is theologically accurate and largely untainted by patriarchal redaction. The “folk legends” (that is, a close equivalent of the original *mythos* preserved in folk-memory) allow us to approach not only the exact theological equivalent, but even the *mythos* itself...

Even among Filianists, the image of Quan Yin is often seen as the perfect representation of the Sacrificial Daughter. Statues and images of Quan Yin are likely to adorn the altars and places of worship of Filianists and non-Filianists alike.

And for those of us who adore the beauty of the Filianic faith and festivals while having some reservations about something that seems to approach a “new revelation” even though of something indisputable [sic] ancient and traditional, the image of Quan Yin makes a perfect halfway stage. (“Quan Yin” n.d.)

Here we may perceive a third function of Guanyin in Filianic apologetics, as an *alternative* to Filianism's distinctive scriptures and liturgy. Within the context of the broader structure of Filianic theology and praxis, the above statement could be taken as tantamount to endorsing the practice of Filianism as a *Guanyin religion*, akin in this specific respect to new religious movements in Asia that take her as their central figure in representing the totality of God, such as Zailiism.

In contrast to those movements, however, what makes the devotee's ability to practice a form of Filianism as a Guanyin devotion (rather than simply employing Guanyin's image in Filianic devotion) so distinctive is that Filianism's origin does not appear to have been connected with the transmission of Chinese religious practices to Europe (except in the indirect sense that these were treated by the Traditionalists in presenting their arguments for ecumenical consensus on key metaphysical issues). Instead, while suggestive of diverse influences, the core origin point of the religion appears to have been in Roman Catholicism. Hence, it is instructive not only to look at the mediating role Guanyin assumed between Filianism and diverse non- and post-Christian spiritualities as indicated above, but also at how her image obliquely impacted Filianic writers' treatment of the changes occurring within the Roman Catholic Church at the time.

Functions of the Guanyin Image in Mediating a Christian Tradition

Seen in an internal Catholic context, early Filianic writing seems to cultivate implicit analogues between the processes visible in the Western reception of Buddhism (and Guanyin's role in those processes) and the changes wrought within the Roman Catholic Church by the "spirit of Vatican II."

Western receptions of Buddhism have long exhibited an impulse that has sometimes been read as a "Protestantization," shaping convert Buddhist traditions into forms "comparatively aniconic and opposed to supernaturalism" (Wilson 2008, 285; see also McMahan 2008, 27–60), and the role of bodhisattvas in Buddhist practice was often de-emphasized by Western practitioners. A variety of cultural shifts in Western convert communities conspired to change this during the 1970s and early 1980s, and the figure of Guanyin was located near the centre of all of them. She was stubbornly persistent in the practice even of

many Chinese and Japanese schools admired by Western Buddhists for their “nonritualistic” approach, and she figured prominently in the koan literature that proved to be of tremendous interest in convert communities. Even more prominently, the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s created a rapid increase in female leadership within Buddhist communities in the West who often looked to Guanyin as a model and as a source of validity within a patriarchal space. A series of crises involving abuse of authority by male leaders starting in the early 1980s emphasized the need for such a corrective influence (Wilson 2008). Taken together, these forces put the figure of Guanyin at the forefront of a shift that opened many Western converts to previously downplayed “ritualistic” and “supernatural” aspects of the Buddhist tradition. From a Filianic perspective, it was natural to perceive these changes as vindicating the Filianic thesis that authentic religion depends on the feminine God-image, falls into decay when this is replaced with masculine or impersonal alternatives, and can be restored only by a return to the Mother.

Guanyin as a symbol of the turn toward a more “supernatural” and “devotional” form of Buddhism in the West is never explicitly addressed by Filianic literature, but that turn is often felt as a backdrop to critiques made within the frame of Christian tradition. Writers in the Filianic theology of religions have often, in keeping with the Traditionalist school generally, been critical of Protestantism for what they perceive as its exotericization of Christian practice and its fusion of democratizing and rationalizing elements into the faith (“Light In the Darkness” 1981). Protestantism’s de-emphasis of Marian devotion and of the cults of the saints and the angels—which runs directly counter to the Filianic understanding of the apparitions of Lourdes and Fátima as theophanic as well as the religion’s distinct traditions of angelology and the veneration of saints—was viewed by Filianic writers as a particularly virulent spiritual deficiency, albeit one recognized as in keeping with the trajectory of the Decline of the Ages (Angelina 1981).

Less easily forgiven was the “Protestantization,” as Filianists of the 1970s saw it (“The Downward Path” 1981; “Matriarchy and the Nature of Ritual” n.d.), of the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council. The Council received criticism on a number of points, but above all for what was perceived as an effort to root out the vestiges of the cosmic Marian image of the Middle Ages and to replace it with the carefully circumscribed portrait of an historical first-century woman as a means of curtailing Marian devotionism. In its advice on

the selection of statues for the Filianist's home shrine, the *Chapel* observes that, "Pre-Vatican 2 Mary statues are more likely to be iconographically correct, and their supposed 'sentimentalism' depicts Mary as Universal Loving Mother (or Saving Daughter) rather than as a human individual" ("Mary Statues" n.d.).

It will not surprise the reader to learn that the iconographic significance of the pre-Vatican II forms is persistently explained with reference to Guanyin. On a page devoted to the Royal Ease Posture, we learn that, "The right hand rests on the right knee in the *mudra* (gesture) of boon-granting (comparable to the Distribution of Graces posture in statues of Lady Mary) ..." ("The Kuan Yin Royal Ease Posture" n.d.). Elsewhere, the thousand-armed image of Guanyin is analyzed and "We see the solar rays emerging from Kuan Yin even as they emerge from the Immaculate Heart of Mary, showing the all-encompassing radiance of the Solar Mother" ("Video: Thousand Hand Kuan Yin" n.d.)—a comparison reiterated on another page with special reference to Our Lady of Guadalupe ("Our Lady of Guadalupe" n.d.). One of the more detailed expositions occurs in a commentary on the text of the Catholic Hail Mary prayer:

This image of Our Lady showering grace upon the world is by no means restricted to the Western figure of Mary. In the East, Quan Yin is frequently depicted holding a vase containing the sacred dew or nectar of grace or wisdom which She showers upon suffering beings.

Quan Yin may hold the vase either upright or inverted. If it is inverted it is exactly equivalent to the Marian Distribution of Graces icon – showing Her in the act of showering Her grace upon the world ... Interestingly, the upright vase might be said to correspond to the formula 'Hail Mary, full of grace', while the inverted vase corresponds to the words 'Hail Mary, fount of grace.' [a Filianic version of the same line] ("Hail Mary" n.d.)

Though the changes occurring in convert Buddhist circles in the West during the 1970s were not explicitly contrasted by Filianic writers of the period with the transformations wrought by the "spirit of Vatican II," they provide a key context for understanding how the symbol of Guanyin functioned in Filianic thought and participated implicitly in an internal Catholic discourse. Lux Madriana's social criticism frequently presented Marxist Communism and Western capitalism as two sides of the same coin—twin movements equally hostile to religion, tradition, and the family on account of being driven by

the same rationalist-materialist worldview. Among the many symbols of this fundamental sickness of modernity that recurred in their writing was “the grey-uniformed masses of ‘people’s’ China” (Angelina 1980, 4), but the persistence of many Chinese in devotion to Guanyin during the Revolution was held up as a testimony to God’s grace and as a sign of hope in dark times. In this way, a chain of inferences could be drawn. If Guanyin’s image could persist even under the tyranny of the Chinese Communist Party (Hedges 2011, 219), and if it could reassert itself even against the skeptical intellectualism of Western Buddhist converts, then there was reason to believe that Mary’s image, too, could endure its perceived rejection by the Church and flourish in its own strength even amidst the waning of Christian belief in the West.

Guanyin and the Integrity of the Christian Tradition

Hsui Chen Julia Ho (2014, 9) has argued that “because China did not have a native tradition of universal saviors, Guanyin could and did occupy this space with amazing success.” Filianic literature leverages the image of Guanyin to highlight the lack of universality in dominant Christian understandings of the Atonement and to present Mary as a “universal savior” capable of filling a similar vacuum in the West. This is made clearest in the Filianic juxtaposition of Guanyin’s bodhisattva vow with the image of the “white ladder of Mary”—a comparison that is, to the present author’s knowledge, found nowhere else. Bringing these two images into dialogue implicitly assimilates folk Chinese concepts of compassion as a quintessentially “feminine” virtue (used in opposition to traditional Buddhist genderings in explaining the Miaoshan form of Guanyin; see Hedges 2012, 13) to medieval European manifestations of universalist soteriology, which are often associated specifically with female mystics such as Julian of Norwich (Watson 1997). A broader body of Filianic writing on the nature of femininity, combined with the frequent conjunction of adjectives depicting the “angry, masculinized god” (“Hail Mary” n.d.), reinforces a close link between the teaching of universal salvation and the iconographic significance of the depiction of God as Mother, which spirals back into the image of the white ladder of Mary set against the “red ladder of Jesus”. It may also be noted accordingly that, when explicating Catholic texts, the *Chapel* often appeals to the idea of the Marian mantle sheltering devotees from the

“winds of ... *samsara*” as a clarifying corrective to the idea of intercession with a wrathful God (“Hail Mary” n.d.).

This conjunction of medieval Marian themes with Guanyin is highly distinctive and sets Filianic receptions apart notably from Wilson’s (2008) observation that, “Kuan-yin’s importance for New Age practitioners is less in her particularity as the patroness of great compassion or her ability to assist in the quest for nirvana than in her generality as another affirmation of female spiritual power and worth.” Far from appearing as a generalized “Goddess” figure devoid of specific doctrinal meaning, the image of Guanyin—while acknowledged as a valid and self-sufficient approach to “our Mother God”—is especially deployed by Filianic writers to turn Western readers back toward the image of Mary and to encourage them to find in her iconography a very different (and quite specific) theological content from the teachings to which Christian religious education has accustomed them. Though “Eastern” sources are drawn upon robustly to elaborate this new understanding, they are continually tied back to sources within the Western tradition, in keeping with the observation of Colin Campbell (2007) that contemporary processes of “Easternization” depend on pre-existing Western cultural substrates for their efficacy. The figure of Guanyin, in this mode, becomes an “Eastern” influence that points the way back toward the West’s own vernacular and dissenting doctrinal traditions.

Thus we return to an essential problem in the Filianic theology of religions, as observed earlier—the assertion of continuity with a Judeo-Christian tradition which is ostensibly being radically broken with, not only over the gender of the divine image, but over universal salvation, reincarnation, and a host of other beliefs and practices that, while represented in minority Abrahamic traditions, have not historically been normative within Abrahamic religions. This is problematic for Filianic theology insofar as, much like Traditionalism more broadly, the religion is a distinctively contemporary system of thought that derives its legitimacy from a claim to represent the *consensus fidelium* of a timeless past. In considering the Miaoshan legend’s place in Confucian society, however, Hedges (2012, 11) observed that,

Her [Guanyin’s] act of reintegration, while affirming her as a filial daughter, actually involves bringing her father around to seeing things from her point of view, and thus, she becomes ... the mother of a new family, as the spiritual

head, with her father as a spiritual son. This is, far from being a capitulation, a radical revision of the normal Confucian social order.

It could well be argued that, in bringing the figures of Guanyin and Mary together and presenting them as complementary mirror images of God, the Madrians sought to recreate exactly this paradox of filial piety and philosophical reversal with the Holy Father in Rome.

Conclusion

Since at least the thirteenth century, the images of Mary and Guanyin have been juxtaposed in the European and Chinese imaginations. For the first seven centuries of their relationship, however, the flow of influence was mostly unidirectional. Missionaries leveraged the image of Guanyin as a means of drawing converts closer to Mary, while actively resisting reciprocal influences through the suppression of syncretic tendencies. While such tendencies did find expression, as in the Japanese development of Maria Kannon, the impact of such figures was generally localized and the spread of movements based around them was hindered by persecutions of Christian minorities.

During the twentieth century, a greater openness on the part of Western cultures toward both Asian immigration and Asian cultural influences made it possible for the figure of Guanyin to make notable inroads. The effect was largely to change the direction of influence, however, and not to open it to reciprocal effects. Converts to Buddhism were sometimes led to embrace Guanyin owing to personal histories with the figure of Mary during Christian upbringings, but most such individuals were looking specifically for an alternative to Christianity and seem largely to have replaced the one figure by the other, rather than bringing them into any explicit theological dialogue. A greater degree of dialogue can be found in receptions of Guanyin by feminist and Goddess spirituality groups, which often place her alongside Mary in a roster of global depictions of the “divine feminine.” However, the tendency in these movements has been to link both images back to a concept of “the Goddess” that has theological bases quite distinct from those behind either Christian conceptions of God or Buddhist concepts of the role of the bodhisattva. While these groups sometimes show an academic interest in the

historical and cultural origins of the figures of Mary and Guanyin, the key point of reference in elaborating their own teaching tends to be the femaleness of both figures and iconographic elaborations of meaning generally derive from this, rather than from elements of either figure's traditional religious symbolism (postures, vestments, associated devotional practices, etc.).

As a case study, the new religious movement of Filianism appears to offer one of the clearest examples of a genuinely syncretic emergence in a Western context, expanding our perspective on the influence of Buddhist thought and culture within a reciprocal process of religious globalization (Borup 2015).

Notes

- ¹ Other aspects of the author's research on Filianism have previously been presented at the PAEAN conference (MoChridhe, 2017) and serve as the basis for forthcoming publications on the work of the Filianist writer Annelinde Matichei (MoChridhe, 2020a) and on distinctive pilgrimage practices in Filianism (MoChridhe, 2020b).

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