During the final stage of the Cold War pope John Paul II was an influential player on the global political scene. While many mainstream books discuss this pontiff in the context of his peace efforts, political science publications tend to omit the fact that one of the central political motivations for John Paul II were the prophesies received at Fatima in Portugal during a series of Marian apparitions.

This is just one out of many examples for a highly political Marian apparition, yet to date these apparitions have received little attention from political science scholars. Both the status of Marian apparitions and their interpretations are contested by Catholics and non-believers, yet the political relevance and impact of this form of strong religion of millions of people is undeniable. It is the aim of this paper to offer an overview of the most central Marian apparitions and their relation to modern politics. In particular the paper discusses what features these apparitions share with regard to their political message and asks what methodologies lend themselves to the study of the Marian apparitions’ political aspects in academia.

How can Marian apparitions be defined? René Laurentin (1994: 85), probably the best known person writing on Marian apparitions from within the church, defines an apparition as "the visible and unexpected manifestation of someone or something, the sight of which in such and such a place, or at such and such a moment, is unusual or inexplicable in the normal course of events." Laurentin thus defines apparitions mainly as an unusual or even inexplicable form of perception.

Cardinal Ratzinger also tried to define the perception occurring during an apparition. He distinguishes in general between exterior bodily perception, interior perception, and spiritual vision and states about the perception during an apparition that it "is clear that in the visions of Lourdes, Fatima and other places it is not a question of normal exterior perception of the senses: the images and forms which are seen are not located spatially, as is the case for example with a tree or a house. [...] we are dealing with the middle
category, interior perception. For the visionary, this perception certainly has the force of
a presence, equivalent for that person to an external manifestation to the senses." 1 Ratzinger's
claim that the images and forms are not located spatially is however not
accurate. First to the seer the perception of the apparition does not have to appear
supernatural at all. This is best illustrated by the fact that the seer children at La Salette
mistook Mary at first for a woman from a neighbouring village who was crying bitterly
because she had been beaten by her husband. Also, an apparition would be no
apparition (in the sense of something appearing) if all of the perceptual processes would
occur only within the seer. Ratzinger might try to locate the apparitions exclusively in
the visionary's inner world because this makes them appear less objectionable to the
rational mind. However, in such a conceptualization the powerful radicalness of what
Catholics claim an apparition to be is lost. A better definition is given by Sandra Zimdars-
Swartz (1991: 4): "An apparition is best understood as a specific kind of vision in which
a person or being not normally within the visionary's perceptual range appears to that
person, not in a world apart as in a dream, and not as a modification of a concrete object
as in the case of a weeping icon or moving statue, but as a part of the environment,
without apparent connection to verifiable visual stimuli."
Zimdars-Swartz's definition is more specific about what appears at the apparition,
namely always an animate being, and also about what it is not: in an apparition the seer
claims to see the being like a real person but without there being any stimuli verifiable
through natural science. To the believer an apparition is to be distinguished not only
from dreams and hallucinations but also from the inner visions most religions know.
The lack of externally verifiably stimuli means that a seer's report about an apparition
could be accepted by the community of believers even if he or she is the only person out
of a thousand looking at a tree who sees Mary standing on a branch. In fact, this is almost
the standard situation when onlookers gather to witness an announced or expected
apparition.
This paper will consider only apparitions of the Virgin Mary, which are in Christianity by
far the most frequent ones. In these apparitions Mary, the mother of Jesus, appears to
deliver God's message to the world. There are several reasons why Mary is particularly
suitable for this task: for Catholics Mary is the only human being after the fall born

1http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_d
oc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html
without original sin and especially the only person crowned in heaven after death, which brings her as close to God as possible. As the mother of God she brought Jesus, often called the *logos* or word of God, into this world and its historical situatedness. She is thus particularly suitable for bringing God’s word also to the people of other times and places. In many of the apparitions Mary warns of the suffering and calamities to come if people continue disobeying God’s will. This fits well with the Catholic interpretation of Mary as the woman of the apocalypse in the revelation of John. At the same time Mary as the mother of God is also the mother of all people, who takes care of her children and guides them on their way, be it in each believer’s personal life or, as is the topic of paper, with a political message.

Traditionally the first apparition of Mary is said to have occurred while Mary was still alive. In the year 40 the apostle James the Greater was proclaiming the Gospel by the river Ebro in Spain when he saw Mary appear on a pillar, calling him to return to Jerusalem. James followed this call and was martyred in Jerusalem a few years later. (Varghese, 2000: 70).

There have been reports of Marian apparitions since the first centuries of Christianity. Over 300 apparitions have been popularly attributed to saints and blessed, including the apostle Thomas (in India after Mary’s assumption), Gregory the wonder worker (together with an apostle who taught him on Mary’s command about the trinity), and Emperor Leo I (Mary predicted that he would become emperor and healed a blind man. The shrine is Our Lady of the Fountain in Constantinople).

Only a small number of reported apparitions have officially been accepted by the Catholic Church. The Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17) reserved the approval of new prophecies and revelations to the Holy See; however, the Council of Trent (1545-63) authorized bishops to investigate and approve such phenomena before public worship could take place. This means that there are four categories of apparitions: 1) not accepted by the church, 2) endorsed by tradition as is the case for very early apparitions, 3) approved by the Vatican, and 4) approved by the local bishop. By "approved" is meant that they have been awarded the status of a "private revelation", meaning that they contain nothing contrary to Catholic faith or morals and that Catholics according to the Vatican may, but need not, accept the truth of the authorized apparitions. It is of course a strong claim that God is sending Mary to deliver her

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2 A good resource for general information on Marian apparitions and particularly the authentication process is Michael O’Neill’s website www.miraclehunter.com.
message in the concrete circumstances of the here and now. The status of the Marian apparitions is controversial not only among atheists but also among Catholics. So why should political scientists care?

Since 9/11 strong religion has found its way into political science (Almond et al. 2003). Marian apparitions are a neglected but highly political form of strong religion. They differ from the typical Islamist or Protestant fundamentalism in that Mary does not call for a returning to a bygone age of perfect purity. Marian apparitions also differ from the usual forms of fundamentalism in that they are not calling for a literal reading of a holy text. What happens at the apparitions is that Mary, a central figure from the earliest days of Christianity, who was as close to Christ as any human being can be, is assigned the role of an interpreter of God’s will for the present and future. These apparitions are genuinely modern in the sense that they present new material designated for the contemporary audience and their specific religious, cultural and political situation. They should be of particular interest to the political scientist because they are a global phenomenon. This is reflected in the selection of apparitions that will be discussed in the next section: The Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico, La Salette and Lourdes in France, Fatima in Portugal, Medjugorje in Bosnia and Kibeho in Rwanda. In all these places the reported apparitions had the power to attract and mobilize vast crowds, change the face of the area and spread their message and images not only in the region but across the globe.

Although apparitions have always been part of Christianity, reports are not only much more frequent in modern times in that there are several thousand unaccepted ones, but the famous modern apparitions are also special in that they tend to be "public" and "serial":

"The peculiar importance that has become attached to some of the Marian apparitions of the past two centuries can be explained, in part, by the fact that many of these have been both "serial" and "public". A serial apparition is one in which the seers have been led in an initial experience to expect that this experience will be repeated, and when they speak about it to relatives and friends and suggest that it will happen again, word spreads and people gather around the seers at the announced or expected time. The subsequent experiences of the seers, then, occur in the presence of anywhere from a few to several thousand people, giving rise to public events of sometimes immense proportions.” (Zimdars-Swarz, 1991: 5).
The older apparitions tended to be one-off events, witnessed privately, often in a monastic environment and by religious "professionals". Apparitions of the modern era have turned from a private to a public event, and reports of an expected apparition are able to mobilize thousands of people to gather round the visionary. Even after the apparitions have stopped, apparition sites like Lourdes and Fatima lose none of their appeal and continue to attract masses of pilgrims. In fact most of the big, modern Catholic pilgrimage centres are based on Marian apparition sites. They are thus confirming and shaping not only the pilgrims’ religious sense of belonging but also their wider identity.

Part of that is the result of being on the way as a community that is willing to be transformed by what is experienced on the inner and outer journey. This is a general feature of pilgrimages at home in many religions and applicable to many communities. In his book Pilgrimage, politics and International Relations (2013) Mariano Barbato has discussed how the religious semantic of pilgrimage can help rethink self, community and agency even for non-religious people: in a nutshell by being part of a bigger project that cannot be realized in the here and now but builds bridges and hospitals on the way. In that sense pilgrimage can help to foster a sense of community that is much needed in our globalizing world.

But besides the general message of creating human bonds, each Marian apparition site also has its own focus of how mankind can get "back on track" on the way to God. Mary in all these apparitions comes to earth with a mission, not necessarily with new information for the believer, but to remind people to improve where they are failing. Mary's message is tailored to the specific circumstances of the respective place and time, often places undergoing drastic, even violent transformation. But there is also a strong common feature. In all these apparitions Mary comes back to earth to deliver a key message- a political message: against racism, against liberalism, against socialism and other dominant ideologies of modernity. During the nineteenth century this was interpreted mainly as a call back to the old order before the French revolution. For example, the organizers of the big Lourdes pilgrimages sought to re-christianize not only the ailing individual but also the state system. Yet Mary did not intervene on the side of monarchy. Today we can view the key message of the apparitions more generally as an alternative model to a modernity dominated by secularism and the market. Mary’s apparitions promote a vision of modernity as peace and solidarity grounded in a common orientation towards God. This alternative model draws its resources from
prayer, pilgrimage, the rhythms of the liturgical year, the repose of Sunday, confession after wrongdoing and other Catholic forms of individual and social practices. Mary demands the presence of faith in the public space, for example through processions (in Lourdes every day) and the building of new churches. In a time of moral relativism where faith is often seen as a personal choice with no place in politics and the public in general, Mary asks for religious devotion to be in the centre of public and social life. She promises that she, and with her God, will be on the side of those who follow her. Yet her intercession is not in the form of actual battle as was said to have been the case at Vienna and Lepanto against the Turks. In the tradition of the apparitions, her warriors are facing the world only with prayer and the rosary as weapons. A typical example may be the Austrian Rosenkranz-Sühnekreuzzug which in the legacy of Fatima sought to bring about the end of Communism and free Austria from Soviet Occupation through praying the rosary.³

John XXIII interpreted the emancipation of women as of the "signs of the time" of the 20th century, and the strengthening of Mary’s role in the Church since the 19th century (for example the new dogmata of Mary’s immaculate conception and assumption) can be seen in this light. In her modern apparitions we meet Mary not only as a holy woman totally devoted to God in heaven but also as a woman who takes on political leadership for the biggest faith community on earth.

Given the eminent role of Marian apparitions for Catholic political activities, it is surprising that this topic has not found wider attention. Laurentin (1994: 85) said about the state of research on apparitions during the 1990s: "Apparitions are among the most poorly studied of phenomena. There is not an exhaustive historic survey, or even one that is at least somewhat serious; there is no evaluation of the whole problem worthy of the name." While the body of literature has significantly increased since then, the difficulty of where to obtain academically reliable material remains. Most of the material on Marian apparitions is written with a devotional readership in mind. While this means that some translation might be necessary for a more varied audience, the real problem lies with the often very poor standard of research and referencing of this type of material. Academic work on the apparitions is on the other hand wrought with methodological difficulties because it cannot be based on religious truth claims like the devotional literature. Zimdars-Swartz (1991: 67f) chooses for her study of apparition

³ For information on this movement see for example Graber (1977).
messages a phenomenological approach that focuses "on the human processes and interactions that have led up to the seers' communication of those messages and that have affected how those messages have been understood." Focusing on human processes for her means psychologizing the seers' experiences, by explaining the apparitions through the suffering the seers experienced before they reported the apparitions. (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991: 23). Carol Zeleski in her cover blurb describes Zimdars-Swartz's book as the "most comprehensive, objective study to date of the major Marian apparitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." However, the phenomenological bracketing out of truth claims with its focus on human consciousness could be accused of being objectivist rather than objective. (Flood, 1999)

As Timothy Fitzgerald and others have shown, the concepts of religion and politics can be seen as intertwined, with criticisms of one category directly affecting the other. In any case those studying Marian apparitions in the context of political science can benefit from the insights gained in Religious Studies- and from the mistakes committed there.

While it is true that Religious Studies for too long defined "religion" in purely Western terms of transcendental, ideally monotheistic and book-based spirituality, the fashionable reductionism of the social sciences does not do the subject more justice. For example, Buddhism is not reducibly to a social reform movement even if the “invention of religion” camp would prefer it that way, and even if there may be legitimate reasons for emphasizing this particular aspect. Explaining apparitions as an experience born out of the suffering a person had to undergo in his or her life reduces the apparition to something the believer can by definition not agree to. The academic constructing his or her methodology has to be at least aware that this is a choice he or she is making- not on rational grounds but, I would say, as a matter of personal taste or, using a stronger term, ideology. Indeed, in Zimdars-Swartz’s book there are quotation marks around many religious experience related terms associated with the apparitions, but not around the religious-secular dichotomy as such. Such a perspective can make the research more difficult, because it means studying religion with a fundamental attitude of suspicion but without applying the same suspicious attitude to other areas in a reflexive manner. This does not mean that a researcher has to agree with the truth claims a religious communities is making. Rather it means that the plurality of transcendental truth claims has to be acknowledged and accepted. If we want to take religion in politics seriously we cannot hush up supernatural phenomena. Claims of supernatural phenomena of the strongest type- apparitions- are at the heart of Marian politics.
Guadalupe-Patroness of the Americas and Protectress of Unborn Children

On 9th December 1531, then the feast of Immaculate Conception, Mary appeared on the hill of Tepeyac (Mexico) to the peasant Juan Diego. The background for that apparition was the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish and with that the introduction of Christianity. Juan Diego, a convert to Christianity, recognized the girl of fifteen or sixteen years in the apparition as Mary. Mary addressed him in his local Nahuatl, asking for a church to be built at the spot in her honour. San Diego delivered this request to the Spanish bishop, who demanded a miraculous proof. The peasant returned to the hill and asked for that sign, and Mary instructed San Diego to pick some flowers from the hilltop and carry them to the bishop. Although out of season, San Diego found roses on the hilltop. He took them in his cloak (tilma) to the bishop, and on opening the cloak, the image of our lady of Guadalupe appeared on the fabric.

San Diego was beatified in 1990 and declared “protector and advocate of the indigenous peoples”. In 2002 he was made the first indigenous American saint. The icon is still on display in the basilica, which is at least astonishing given that the fabric of which the tilma is made usually does not survive all these centuries.

The Virgen de Guadalupe speaks to the people through the symbolism of the image: her features and complexion is neither clearly European nor clearly Mexican. Mary's apparition on Mexican soil to an indigenous peasant takes a stance against the racism of the Spanish:

"For the Indians, the Virgin, by placing her image on Juan Diego's tilma, gives a new and elevated dignity to the common person and especially the Indian. Moreover, this dignity is recognized by the bishop when, as the head of the Church in Mexico, he publicly and personally accept the tilma into his own private chapel and welcomes Juan Diego into his home. At this moment, all of Juan Diego's roles that had previously impeded his total participation in the Church after the conquest -as an Indian, a convert, a layman, and a man of limited social significance-are welcomed as having an important and decisive place in the Church and its mission of evangelization." (Anderson and Chávez, 2009: 19f)

At the same time Mary’s apparition marks a claim to power. Mary has arrived in person to claim her territory and directly demands worship and building of a church from an indigenous man. This claim to power is also expressed in the image: traditionally only the Aztec emperor wore a blue mantle as the Virgin on the tilma does. (Anderson and
Chávez, 2009: 37) Mary thus replaces the Aztec emperor and the old gods. Her friendly encounter with Juan Diego in which he seems superior to the Spanish makes this much more attractive to his fellow countrymen. By healing Juan Diego’s uncle Mary shows that she is a reliable partner who favours those who like Juan Diego convert to Christianity and place their trust in her, no matter what their status under the old system has been or how the Spanish treat them.

There is another aspect of the image that has been interpreted as an important symbolism: the girdle is said to mark Mary on the cloak as pregnant, and in fact the Spanish word for pregnant may etymologically be linked to the word belt. The Virgen de Guadalupe has hence become an icon of the Christian pro-life movement.

The website of the "priests for life" network makes the parallel even more explicit: "Some nine million Aztecs were converted to Christ by the power of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. At that time, the Aztec peoples were practicing human sacrifice. As a result of the image’s presence among the people, their hearts were converted to the true God and the practice of human sacrifice was abolished. A key theological dynamic operating here is that Our Lady turned the Aztecs from a worldview of despair to one of hope, from a conviction that the gods were against them to a conviction that God was so much for them that He became one of them.

We can listen to stories of Aztecs cutting out their victims' hearts or placing their heads on poles and say, ‘Oh, how terrible that was!’ But America is not doing any better, as the hearts and heads of innocent babies are destroyed by abortion! The image is therefore being used again to change the hearts of our people." 4

This quote shows how the specific historical message of one time can be interpreted symbolically to inspire political activism in new circumstances. Here it works on three levels: Mary’s motherhood 2000 years ago, the historical setting of the Guadalupe apparition 500 years ago and the fight against abortion in the America of today.

Our Lady of Guadalupe has thus the mission of establishing community and joint action, especially for the disadvantaged: poor peasants, indigenous people, unborn children.

La Salette- call for simple piety and penance

La Salette is a small village in the French Alps near Grenoble. Mary appeared here on 19th September 1846 to fifteen-year-old Mélanie Calvat and eleven year old Maximin

4 http://www.priestsforlife.org/articles/guadalupeandabortion.htm
Giraud, who were looking after cattle. At La Salette Mary appeared as a beautiful lady crying bitterly, with a crucifix on her chest. Her message urged the people to return to a pious life, like attending mass and keeping Lent, but especially keeping the repose of Sunday and abstaining from misusing the name of Jesus by swearing. Mary said: "I have given you six days for work; I have reserved the seventh day for myself and no one will grant it to me. It is this which weighs down the hand of my son. Those who drive the car the carts cannot swear without introducing the name of my son. It is these two things which weigh down the hand of my son." (Zimadars-Swartz, 1991: 26f)

These complaints may already in the mid-19th century have appeared old-fashioned in the climate of rationalism after the French revolution. The message of La Salette goes thus against the tendency of modern times to reduce Christianity to a form of humanism and equate being a good Christian with being a nice person. Mary’s message is that the first three of the ten commandments are made for keeping as much as the remaining ones. Mary reminds the people of the covenant God has made with Israel on Mount Sinai. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" and "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" form part of the basis on which the contract between God and his people are built. Mary at La Salette is thus calling the people back to the basics.

The image of Mary as supporting the arms of Jesus on the cross also echoes the Old Testament scene of Moses praying on the hill with arms raised while Joshua is fighting below (Exodus 17: 12). When Moses’ companions stop supporting his arms, the enemies gain the upper hand in battle. This illustrates that prayer is no idle waste of time. Mary at La Salette demands people to rest on Sunday, which could be considered inefficient during the industrial and increasingly capitalist 19th century in which the apparition occurred.

The fundamental message is that people cannot achieve anything on their own and that their labour is futile if they reject or mock God’s ways. Mary warned against a great famine that would come as a punishment: "If the harvest is spoiled, it is your fault. I warned you last year about the potatoes, but you have not heeded it." This can be understood in the context of the European famines of these years, like the Irish potato famine 1845-1852.

Mary reminded the children to say at least an Our Father and Hail Mary daily, and told them twice: "Now my children make this known to my people." She then turned, crossed the brook and walk up a mound from which she rose into the air and disappeared. Five
years later the apparition was accepted as authentic by the church. The basilica at the apparition site was completed in 1865.

Soon controversies erupted surrounding the seers: unrefined manners, unsettled adult lives- Maximin selling his name for the marketing of a brand of alcohol, Melanie publishing apocalyptic prophecies that were not accepted by the church. These controversies are part of the reason why La Salette, though one of the most important apparition sites, has never reached the popular mass appeal of other pilgrimage sites like Guadalupe or Lourdes. Other contributing factors are its relatively gloomy message and the remote location of the village. However, La Salette appealed to many intellectuals, like the novelist Leon Bloy, who disliked the commercialism and "sweetness" of the Lourdes cult.

Robert d'Harcourt (1881-1965), a scholar of German literature and leading figure of the French Resistance against the Nazis said about La Salette: "Everything today is in motion and flux. Everything is at the same time under construction and in solution. One world collapses, another one rises from the ruins. Never has the human, left to rely on itself, encapsulated in itself, better expressed its helplessness than is the case in the triumph of technology, which in the end holds the potential to destroy the world. It is in this hour that the apparition of La Salette reminds us of its message. (...) As the only way out remains for humanity to turn to repentance and prayer." (Höcht, 1977: 27)

Most notably, the German-French politician, French prime minister and "Father of Europe" Robert Schuman hid in La Salette from the Nazis. Schuman was characterized by a deep Marianist devotion, also to the rosary. He frequently spoke of Mary as "our much-loved mother". Since his youth he was strongly attracted to the pilgrimage to Lourdes, which was besides La Salette and the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal in Paris his favourite Marian pilgrimage site from which he drew inner strength and orientation.

Lourdes

Lourdes is probably the best known Marian pilgrimage site. It goes back to the apparitions received by Bernadette Soubirous, the 14 year old daughter of an impoverished miller. Between February and July 1858 the Virgin as a young girl showed
herself 18 times to Bernadette, and revealing herself as “the Immaculate Conception,”
called for penance and prayer.
Lourdes soon became known for the spontaneous, sometimes dramatic healings
experienced for example after bathing in the miraculous spring. It also has, almost from
the beginning, been a place of controversy. For example, the local authorities tried to
fence off the site off the grotto and met the fierce resistance of those believing in the
apparitions. Also, the fame attracted by the apparitions changed the face of the small
town dramatically within only a few decades. The sacred buildings and religious
souvenir stalls that sprung up in the town were by many perceived as tasteless and too
commercial.
However, they have to be seen in the context that Lourdes was very quickly able to
adapt to the needs of the pilgrims who came to the small town on an unprecedented
scale. The pilgrimage stream of hitherto unknown dimensions marks Lourdes as a
Marian apparition site as a very modern phenomenon: for example, the national
pilgrimages involving thousands of people would not have been possible without
transportation by train. Tourist guides and printed pamphlets advertising the site and
its cures were only possible with the mass distribution of the printed media.
Souvenirs like post cards and rosaries relied on the opportunity to manufacture them
cheaply for the masses.
That Lourdes made use of all these technological means shows that the contrast
between backward religiosity and modernity is a gross misrepresentation. Marian
apparitions fit in fact very well with modernity and particularly globalization. The
Lourdes Madonna, for example, with her white robe and blue belt, is recognized all over
the world. Replica grottos can be found in Chennai as well as in Munich or New Orleans.
The most famous and widely discussed Lourdes miracle (the healing of a complicated leg
fracture in 1875) occurred not in Lourdes itself but at a replica grotto in Oostakker/
Belgium. The imagery of Lourdes has thus become a kind of global brand that can re-
affirm a common Catholic identity both for the individual and in public space through
statues and replica grottoes, providing an alternative to the national and political
symbols of belonging like the tricolour or hammer and sickle. (Blackbourn, 1993: 27)

Fatima - bulwark against Communism

7 “Protestants went on trains to the seaside, Catholics to light a candle in a holy place.”
The Marian apparition in Fatima, Portugal, occurred in May 1917, that is the same year as but still before the October revolution that brought atheist communism to power in Russia. Since "the overthrow of the monarchy in 1908, Portugal was ruled by anti-Christian groups who killed nearly seventeen hundred priests, nuns, and monks between 1911 and 1916. Public religious ceremonies were forbidden, as in Mexico. It was into this unpromising environment that the Lady of the Rosary made her world-changing entrance." (Varghese, 2000: 108)

On Sunday, May 13 1917, ten year old Lucia Santos and her cousins Jacinta (seven) and Francisco Marto (nine) were herding sheep at the Cova da Iria when Mary appeared to them. A total of six apparitions occurred until October 2013, with the "miracle of the sun" witnessed by thousands on 13th October 2013. These apparitions had been prepared by the "angel of peace" visiting the children. During the apparitions of Mary the children received three secrets, known as the Fatima secrets. The first two were revealed by Lucia in 1941, the third by John Paul II in 2000.

Fatima is particularly known for the prophetic character of the messages which warn against the evils of Communism, a possible world war, and - as John Paul II himself interpreted it- the assassination attempt on the pope on 13th May 1981. The central message of Fatima is that catastrophes can only be averted if people stop sinning and take refuge in the immaculate heart of Mary, pray the rosary and particularly calling for the consecration of Russia to the heart of Mary. If this message was not to be followed, according to Lucia's writing of the third part of the secret to the pope, "(Russia) will spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the Church. The good will be martyred; the Holy Father will have much to suffer; various nations will be annihilated."

While Jacinta and Francisco both fell victim to the Great Flu Epidemic, Lucia lived as a nun until the age of 97 and has published six memoires and other writings on the apparitions at Fatima. In 1930 the authenticity of the apparitions was accepted. The Salazar regime (1932-1968) tried to use Fatima for its own purpose: those "who backed this controversial regime and that of Franco exalted the two dictatorships as fruits of the message of Fatima, which, by that fact, made the sanctuary hateful to the political adversaries of the two regimes and of their ideologies. Those in charge of Fatima wisely and deliberately sought to depoliticize the devotion and to promote fine, non-controversial, pastoral effort. The fundamental fact is that it was, from its beginnings,
the focus of an authentic popular pilgrimage. Crowds came there in masses on foot, often barefoot, for the anniversary days of the apparition. The crowds reached one million. It was a leaven of fervour, of hope, a place of true prayer where the poor heard the Good News. This fundamental reality is today in the foreground.”

In 1951 the basilica of our Lady of the rosary in Fatima was completed after more than 30 years in construction. A tradition of great symbolic significance was established on October 13 1947 when the International Pilgrim Virgin Statue was blessed by the bishop at Fatima in the presence of 150,000 pilgrims and sent to travel the world spreading the message of Fatima. On her pilgrimage the statue has since travelled over a hundred countries, including Russia and China. The veneration of the pilgrim virgin statue is particularly popular in the United States, with the Pilgrim Virgin Committee based in Munster, Indiana.

At Fatima the general call for penance and prayer is connected with the call against communism and more generally war and other catastrophes brought about by human fault: "Continue to pray the Rosary in order to obtain the end of the war". At Fatima in particular the apparitions are also connected with the papacy: "The apparitions of the Virgin at Fatima in 1917 were in some respects a direct response to a plea from Pope Benedict XV, who implored the intercession of the Blessed Mother in bringing the Great War to a halt. On May 5, 1917, the Pope sent out a pastoral letter to the world, in which he asked the faithful to petition Mary as the Mother of Mercy in 'this awful hour' (...). In the third of the Fatima apparitions, the Virgin said that the present war would come to an end (something that most people found unbelievable at the time), but a new and greater war would begin during the papacy of Pius XI." (Varghese, 2000: 108) The next war, inconceivable in its horrors, was indeed already in the offing. World War II started the same year that Pius XI died.

John Paul II came after the failed assassination attempt to believe that he was the pope shot in the Fatima vision and read all available material on Fatima. The pope believed that he had been protected by the Virgin Mary and played an active role in the fall of communism. As Pavol Hnilica, a secretly ordained Slovak bishop who had spent years in Communist concentration camps remembered: "When John Paul II left the hospital, I

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8 http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/buby/mfl1.htm
9 www.pilgrimvirginstatue.com/
10 Apparition September 13, 1917
brought a statue of Our Lady of Fatima to him at Castel Gandolfo. He had a small church constructed in Poland, in a forest on the border with the Soviet Union, to house that statue. It is there now, in the exact position John Paul II wanted it in: with its gaze directed toward Russia.” (Tindal-Robertson, 1998: 8)

Related to Fatima are other (not officially endorsed) apparitions also in what is now the former Soviet Republic that show how the presence of Mary could inspire people with hope, and how her apparitions were interpreted as inherently political even if no spoken message was conveyed at all. "Chornij Zrnovia, a woman who spent years at a Soviet Concentration camp in Siberia and was a witness to Mary's apparitions in the Ukraine (...) describes her encounter with the Virgin Mary: "One day on my way to cut wheat, I stopped to see why there was a crowd around the well. The people said they were seeing the Holy Mother. I knelt and started praying very hard and suddenly instead of the well I saw a big glow, like a mountain, and in it I saw a lady holding a baby in her arms. (...) The Holy Mother warned us to return to the Church and love one another. Personally I took it as a sign that communists would soon disappear from the face of the earth." (Petrisko, 2002: 151).

It may not sit well with liberal ideas about personal freedom and autonomy that Mary at Fatima demands the consecration to her immaculate heart. But this demand does not have to be understood as a self-centred order, rather, Mary's immaculate heart could be interpreted as a shelter for believers in dark times. Religion in this can be seen as a positive force for change. According to Michael Bourdeaux, it was in 1987, or more probably early in 1988, that Mr. Gorbachev realized that "it was time to abandon the old dogma that religion was a retrogressive force, a relic of the past which could have no place in the future ideal Communist society...and began to act as though he really did need believers to be in partnership with him in the massive task of rebuilding the moral basis of Soviet society" (Quoted in Tindal-Robertson, 1998: 47).

Kibeho- warning against racism (1981-1989)

In the small town of Kibeho, the Virgin warned against a horrific bloodshed shortly before the onset of the genocide in the region. The apparitions began in November 1981, when sixteen year old Alphonsine Mumureke was called out of the dining room by a beautiful lady in white introducing herself in Kinyarwanda, the language of the Rwandans: "I am the mother of the world". She asked Alphonsine to join the Legion of
Mary, one of the largest lay Christian organizations in the world, and said that she wanted to be loved and trusted as a mother.

While some friends believed Alphonsine, most people around were sceptical or ridiculed her. In January 1982, another sixteen year old girl who was already a member of the Legion of Mary also witnessed an apparition in which Mary called for prayer, humility and self-sacrifice. By September 1982 there were seven principal visionaries. Among them were a fourteen year old pagan boy who was taught Christian prayers by Jesus, a twenty two year old Muslim woman who was asked to play the role of a shepherd leading people to God and twenty two year old Agnes Kamagaju who received from Jesus the message to the youth to keep their bodies holy.

Immaculée Ilibagiza, a Rwandan genocide survivor and public speaker, has reflected on this message in the light of the African HIV epidemic: "Jesus's messages to Agnes for the youth of the world may have seemed prudish and old-fashioned to some. But as I reflected upon her words over years, I can’t help but marvel that they were spoken 25 years ago, just as HIV was silently brewing in dark places and laying waste to thousands of young lives through the epidemic that devastated my country and claimed so many lives around the world." (Ilibagiza, 2010: 119)

Huge crowds gathered to watch the visionaries experience their ecstasies. Public devotions were permitted by the bishop in 1988. In 1991 civil war broke out in Rwanda and reached a death toll of over one million, including several of the seers and members of their families. In 1995 Kibeho became the site of one of the most gruesome events of the civil war, when Tutsis opened fire on Hutus when closing down a refugee camp where people who had been involved in genocide were hiding. In 2001 the apparitions of the three first visionaries Alphonsine, Nathalie, and Marie Claire were declared authentic by the bishop. Kibeho has thus become the first and only accepted apparition site on the African continent.

On the sanctuary's website it is stated: "Kibeho is becoming a rallying point for "those who were dispersed", as well as for those who live the values of compassion and brotherhood without limits. Even better, Kibeho becomes more and more to the world of today, which has a tendency to 'consider the suffering as something to be avoided at all costs,' a place to remind us of the Gospel of the Cross."11

Kibeho calls against racism and racial hatred: ""Her skin shines like polished ivory, but it wasn’t white like we see in pictures. She wasn’t black either...she wasn’t black or white. All I can say about her appearance is that she is more beautiful than anyone or anything on the planes; I don’t have words to describe such beauty." Mary’s message is universal: "I am concerned not only for Rwanda or for the whole of Africa. I am concerned with, and turning to, the whole world. The world is on the edge of catastrophe." (Varghese, 2000: 136)

Mary at Kibeho also calls for speaking up despite pressure and danger and the behaviour of the seers bears witness to this form of lived faith: "The girls were moved by Alphonsine and believed her story, but they were a tiny minority, and a silent one. They prayed for their friend to be believed by others, but they didn't come to her defense when she was attacked - that was too dangerous in such a hostile atmosphere. What Alphonsine didn’t share is that the Blessed Virgin was giving her important messages to deliver to government officials, even the Hutu president of the country, about their policies of discrimination against Tutsis and about letting Tutsis who’d been forced into exile return home. The teenager was told to deliver the messages with love - as well as to encourage the leaders to pray the rosary every day, to love their fellow humans, turn their hearts toward God's love, and follow the Lord's commandments." (Ilibagiza, 2010: 42).

Medjugorje

The apparitions in Medjugorje in Bosnia differ from all those discussed so far in two respects: they are reportedly still going on and they have not been officially authorised by the church. Medjugorje can thus serve as a good example about how apparition claims are contested and interpreted by the community of believers in an on-going process. The messages at Medjugorje started spreading the message of global peace a decade before the Balkan war. On 24 June 1981 Mary was first seen by a fifteen year old girl, Ivanka Ivankovic, who was walking with a friend of hers when she saw a female figure above Mount Crnica. At evening Ivanka returned to the site and this time also the other young people present saw the beautiful female figure holding a child in her arms. A group of six young seers formed which witnessed serial apparitions of the "queen of peace", as Mary called herself. The fifth apparition, on 28 June 1981, was already witnessed by 15,000 people (Graf et al., 1999: 182ff).
These events were observed with suspicion by the Communist officials. The priest supporting the young seers was imprisoned and the seers themselves subjected to interrogation and psychiatric testing. Even more obstructive were however the inner-Church politics between the bishop and the Franciscans in the area. The bishop sought to expand the number of diocesan priests, much against the resistance of the established Franciscans. Parishers tended to perceive the Franciscans as locals while the diocesan priests were seen as outsiders, if not as intruders sent by the state. As part of their power struggle, the local bishop of Mostar tried to suppress the Franciscan backed apparition movement. He prohibited private pilgrimages to Medjugorje and barred offenders from receiving the sacraments. (Bax, 1995: 18). While it was usually within the powers of the local bishop to authorize apparition sites, in the case of Medjugorje “the Vatican stepped in and removed all affairs relating to the apparition from the jurisdiction of the bishop.” (Varghese, 2000: 187). As Bax (1995: 18) interprets it, the apparitions can thus in political terms be understood as an effective defense strategy of the local Franciscan against “diocesan expansionism” that succeeded “through a constant two-way flow of people and information, (in establishing) a Franciscan-run religious regime (…) in the diocese of Mostar.”

Criticism of the all-too-human aspects of Medjugorje does not end here. More than other pilgrimage shrines commercialization at Medjugorje has led to unsightly consequences in form of a vendetta between local families fighting for their share in the tourist business. And last but not least Medjugorje has been criticized for not having made any difference to the enemy parties during the Balkan war. Religion, it has been argued, was in the area a factor for violence, not reconciliation. (Bax 1995)

However, this perspective neglects other central factors about the Medjugorje apparitions. While Mary’s call for peace did not succeed in bringing peace to the region, Medjugorje has an unequaled track record for conversions (Varghese, 2000: 184). The monthly messages are available in print, audio and on the internet and reach a global audience of devotees. This shows that Mary’s message does make a difference to the lives of a vast number of people.

Also, the fact that the apparition messages can be used politically and even as part of a propaganda instigating violence does not set them apart in a negative way. The sacred may be ambivalent but no more so than most other things. (Mariano Barbato et al. 2011). In fact, the messages of Mary at Medjugorje tend to be very simple, calling again and again for prayer, penance and peace.
While the status of the apparitions is still contested, the message of Mary at Medjugorje fits neatly into the general political message of the authorized apparitions: to turn around one’s individual life through prayer, fasting, confession, consecration to Mary and Jesus and other orthodox forms of Catholic devotion, and thereby to participate in bringing about God’s plan for the world. As the message from 25 May 1996 states: “Pray in order to understand that you all, through your life and your example, ought to collaborate in the work of salvation.” (Varghese, 2000: 212)

Conclusion

Marian apparitions typically occur in places undergoing drastic, often violent change. This paper presented six of the most important modern Marian apparitions from different centuries and diverse geographic locations: Guadalupe, La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima, Kibeho and Medjugorje. In each of these apparitions Mary speaks to her people about how to live a life on earth that pleases God in heaven, tailored to the specific needs of their concrete situation. Mary’s message is a political message. She urges not only the individual but society as a whole to change and repent. While the truth claims of Marian apparitions are highly contested even among Catholics, it is a fact that they have an impact on the lives of millions of believers, including such high-ranking global actors like Pope John Paul II.

Marian apparitions open a new field of religion and politics in modern world politics. Religion is a diverse praxis with many features deeply intertwined with politics. Taking Marian Apparitions and its big but neglected impact on politics into account can help to correct the reductionist pictures on religion as a private belief or fundamentalist return to scriptures or a pure community. In fact, Marian apparitions are a very strong religious claim to interfere with the public domain and with politics in modern times. The messages are not a nostalgic call to return to an innocent past but specify the Christian message of the constant need of individuals and communities to return to God in modern times and public affairs.

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12 Our Lady of All Nations in Amsterdam is a recent case of a controversial apparition gaining official recognition.
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