

# PREDESTINATION AND MARY

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**T**HIS SUBJECT raises a host of problems, which is no doubt why it has been chosen. If we were to classify various christian bodies and traditions according to their enthusiasm for ascribing a certain kind of importance to Mary, and also according to their interest in a certain understanding of predestination, we should soon notice that the one generally intensifies in inverse proportion to the other. There is thus at least the possibility of ecumenical contradiction built into the very combination 'Predestination and Mary'.

It is, however, in the light of this possibility of contradiction that something at least of the real nature of the connection between Mary and predestination may be discerned. In a nutshell, predestination, with all its associations and connotations points, to the initiative of God in human affairs and indeed in the affairs of all creation. Mary, with all her associations and connotations, stands for the free response to God of human and indeed all created being. The relation between these two, the divine initiative and the freedom of creatures, is somewhat paradoxical — hence the tension and possibility of contradiction. The only conceivable solution must lie in a place where divine initiative and creaturely freedom are united in one; and this place is to be found neither in a doctrine of predestination, nor yet in a theology of Mary, but in the person of Christ. Only from that centre can the whole, involving God and creation, and in particular God and Mary, be held together; and only from it can the special place of Mary, and of Mary in relation to predestination, be discerned.

This paper accordingly has to do with *Christ*, predestination and Mary. We shall first consider some aspects of the doctrine of predestination; then we shall try to fix the position of Mary in relation to it. The necessary christological orientation will, I hope, emerge clearly in the course of both sections.

## *The reformed theology of predestination*

It was of course in the calvinist, or reformed tradition that predestination came to be a dominating theme. Here, we can attempt only in a general way to see what the scope and potential of the

concept are, beginning with two quotations, each from a classic statement of the subject — Calvin's *Institutes*, and *The Westminster Confession*:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man.<sup>1</sup>

God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.<sup>2</sup>

Predestination, in these rather stark statements, is God's pre-determining — by reference only to his own will, and in complete and sovereign authority — what is going to happen through the whole history of his creation. It plays in regard to history the same kind of role as the doctrines of *creatio ex nihilo* in regard to creation, and of *sola gratia* in regard to the bringing of men to salvation. Indeed, the same impulse underlies all three: it is because we are created out of nothing and saved by grace alone that our whole history must depend on divine predestination. At each of these moments — the grounding of our existence, the unfolding of our history, the securing of our restoration — the initiative lies with God: taken together, they point, in the way especially characteristic of the reformed tradition, to God alone, to God's initiative and God's choice as that on which we depend absolutely and unconditionally.

Once this understanding of predestination is brought into the centre of the theological stage, two distinct sets of problems emerge particularly clearly, though neither is actually created by the doctrine. The first set gathers around the existence of evil and the possibility of judgment; the second around the question of human freedom and responsibility. For our present purpose, it is this second area which is central, but it may be worth while to digress briefly on the first, not only because the form of the calvinist answer to it has done so much to make the very thought of predestination anathema to many, but also because our critique of it will cast at least an indirect light on the second set of issues.

The problem of the existence of evil — however we choose to define it — and the reconciliation of evil with God's goodness, have from the time of the Fathers raised problems for theology. This can be seen in the uneasy combination of the doctrines of creation — which allows

<sup>1</sup> Calvin: *Institutes*, III, 21, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Westminster Confession*, III, 1.

the existence of nothing that God has not made — and the fall, which attempts nevertheless to come to terms with the existence of that which is against God. It can be seen equally in our traditional commitment to the affirmation of God's victory over evil, and so to the offer of salvation, combined with the near-universal unwillingness to affirm simple universalism: the possibility of final judgment and condemnation is still kept open. Thus both the doctrine of creation and that of redemption carry appended, as it were, a mysterious quasi-negating clause reflecting the ambiguity of our existence. Once predestination came into the centre of the stage, however, this ancient problem became even sharper. To say that everything which happens is pre-determined by God seems (though calvinism denied it) to make God ultimately responsible for evil as well as good; it certainly ascribes to his inscrutable decree both the election of the saved and the reprobation of the damned. Hence the notorious concept of 'double predestination' which came to be formulated in the most rigorous and systematic way in calvinism:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear enough here that something has gone wrong, and badly wrong. In place of the — doubtless paradoxical and inconsistent — combination of the doctrines of creation and fall, of salvation and of judgment, which at least recognize, even if they cannot resolve, the mystery of the existence of evil, we now have a kind of divine schizophrenia, substituting the inscrutability of the eternal decree for that mystery. But what has brought this about? I would suggest two reasons. First, the ontological asymmetry between good and evil, being and non-being, mercy and judgment, has been distorted into a systematic symmetry in the interests of apparent consistency. This is to overlook the paradoxical nature of the doctrine of predestination, like those of creation and redemption, which points fundamentally to the *positive* movement of God towards man *in spite* of all that appears to deny and negate it. Second, the problem of the conflict between good and evil has been located, in an abstract and speculative way, in the doctrine of God instead of being placed where it really belongs — in christology, and in particular in the cross and resurrection. For it is there and not elsewhere that the only basis for a specifically christian answer to the problem of evil and of judgment can be found. These two points — of

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession*, III, 3.

the paradoxical and positive nature of the affirmation of predestination, and of the need for such affirmation to be christologically integrated — will meet us again.

Now to our second question: how can the affirmation of predestination in its positive sense be reconciled with creaturely freedom and responsibility? If we are to say that the divine initiative underlies and determines the historical process in and through which men are brought to salvation, how far, and in what sense, can we say that men themselves are agents in shaping their own history? This is in effect merely another form of the old problem of grace and nature, and the way in which the reformers dealt with that problem is relevant.

There are broadly three ways in which we may attempt to resolve the grace-nature antithesis. Two are indicated in the slogan: *Gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam*. This visualizes and rejects the possibility that grace abolishes and replaces nature (*tollit*), and offers as an alternative grace's completion of nature (*perficit*): nature can as it were reach so far, then grace comes in to supply the rest. There is however, yet a third option: that grace neither abolishes nature, nor simply supplements it, but actually changes and restores it: to coin a phrase, *Gratia neque tollit neque solum perficit naturam, sed naturam restaurat*. It was along this third line that men like Luther and Calvin thought: nature as radically fallen is incapable of co-operating with grace and cannot but conflict with it; nature as restored rests on grace and is in harmony with it. There is accordingly no contradiction between grace and nature, but only between grace and fallen nature. Hence the insistence of the reformers (in Luther's 'bondage of the will' and Calvin's 'total depravity'), on the absolute incapacity of fallen nature to contribute to its own salvation, and the formula, 'by grace alone, through faith alone', which rules out both 'justification by works' and 'justification by faith', if faith is understood as a human achievement apart from grace. Faith, for them, is fundamentally a response to what is offered, and is itself preceded, activated and enabled by that offer: it is an empty hand stretched out to receive, a cup held out to be filled, not something given to God but rather something received from him, the acceptance of acceptance, not the earning of acceptance, and as such the beginning and the means of renewal and restoration.

Against this background, predestination points to God's working in and through the contingencies of history, including those of human choice and decision, with the aim of restoring man to his authentic nature and, so, not of limiting his freedom and responsibility, but of making him properly free and responsible. There is no antinomy

between election or predestination on the one hand and human freedom on the other; rather, predestination is the ground of freedom, and freedom is the reflection of divine election. By the same token, nature, apart from grace, may imagine itself to be free and may experience grace as contradiction and opposition to its own freedom, thus understood, but its imagined freedom is in fact its own prison, from which grace struggles to release it.

All this of course has a thread of paradox running through it. It does appear paradoxical to assert that predestination and created freedom, so far from conflicting, actually coincide. But it is also paradoxical to affirm that through all the ambiguities and conflicts of our existence, God is working out his purposes for us in a positive way. These are merely further facets of the paradox already mentioned when we were speaking of double predestination, indeed of the paradox implicit in faith in God as Creator and Redeemer of a world which is yet fallen.

So far, this paradoxical affirmation of divine predestination in and through the contingencies of history could be regarded simply as an abstract and theoretical answer to the question of the interaction between God and the world. But it intends to be more than that. Just as the reformers did not content themselves with insisting on 'grace alone', but gave that insistence concrete definition by equating with it 'Christ alone', so too predestination and all it points to and suggests about God's action in and through history, must be centred on the place of that action *par excellence*, which is Christ himself. So Calvin<sup>4</sup> quotes with approval Augustine's remark<sup>5</sup> that Christ himself as man is the mirror of free election, for he did not earn his status as Son of God, but was freely given it. In Christ, and in his history, the interaction of grace and nature, of predestination and creaturely freedom is worked out and established in such a way that he then becomes the basis and focus for the entire understanding of God's interaction with the world. This is so in at least two vitally important respects. First, in the union of God and man 'without confusion, without change, without division, without separation', to quote the *Symbol of Chalcedon*, we have the place where, uniquely, divine initiative and creaturely response coincide without domination of the one by the other, or divergence of the one from the other. Second, in the whole history of Christ and especially in the cross and resurrection, the tensions, contradictions and conflicts, stemming from God's claim on a world which rejects him, are exposed, accepted by God himself and overcome. The mystery of acceptance

<sup>4</sup> *Institutes*, III, 22, 1.    <sup>5</sup> *De Corrept. et Gratia ad Valent.* xv; *De Dono Perseverantiae* viii.

and rejection, of mercy and of judgment, of election and reprobation, is the mystery of the cross and resurrection of Christ. To speak now of divine predestination is to speak of God's choice, made in Christ, to lay hold of the world and of his victory, won in Christ, over that world's 'free' rejection of him, and so of the restoring of the creation to the harmony with God for which it was and is destined in spite of the discord which, in the history of the world and the crucifixion of Christ, attempts to negate that harmony. This is not merely to speak of Christ apart from the whole history of the world, but rather to see that whole history in relation to him. It is to interpret past, present and future history as the arena of God's decision for the world and for mankind which is taken and made concrete in Christ himself.

Thus, the doctrine of predestination points to the divine initiative and decision as underlying the history of the world. It affirms, paradoxically, that the decision is positive, in spite of all that appears to indicate conflict and rejection. It asserts, equally paradoxically, that God's initiative and choice do not contradict the freedom and responsiveness of his creatures, but rather constitute their ground. It says all this because it takes Christ as the basis for understanding the interaction between God and the world, God and history, God and men. On this basis it indicates, together with the doctrines of creation and redemption, the sovereignty and the victory of God as the ultimate determinant of all that is. If we take predestination in this sense as a christologically-founded paradigm for the understanding of God's operation in and through creation and history, we may now properly look for other instances of its applicability. We may look, for example, for signs of an essential responsiveness of created reality to the Creator as a reflection of the divine choice built into creation itself. (This need not contradict a conception of radical fallenness so long as the signs of responsiveness are essential rather than existential, or, even asexual, are fragmentary rather than integral.) We may look for signs of an existential responsiveness of redeemed reality to the Creator and Redeemer. We may look for signs of that responsiveness in the history surrounding Christ himself. Each of these three dimensions of the search is relevant to the figure of Mary.

#### *Predestination and Mary*

It is not difficult to recognize in Mary a particular, indeed a very special, instance of predestination of the creature who is open to, and borne along, by the divine initiative, in such a way that her own creaturely freedom is not negated but affirmed. Three aspects of the Lucan birth narrative illustrate this:

1. *The contrast between Mary and Zechariah.* After two rather similar announcements by Gabriel,<sup>6</sup> Zechariah and Mary ask what on the face of it are rather similar questions.<sup>7</sup> However, while Zechariah receives an angry retort from the archangel, and is struck dumb for his unbelief,<sup>8</sup> nothing of the sort happens to Mary. In fact, their answers had been somewhat different in tone. While Zechariah had asked for proof that what Gabriel said was true, hinting strongly the while that he had his own grave reservations on the subject, Mary had merely enquired how what she had been told would come about: she may have been puzzled, but unlike Zechariah, did not presume to contradict!

2. *Mary's response.* Once it has been explained that the birth of Jesus will be miraculous, brought about by the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High,<sup>9</sup> Mary answers with the words which, more than any other, reveal her attitude and her role: 'I am the Lord's servant; as you have spoken, so be it'.<sup>10</sup> It would be quite wrong to take this as the expression of a servile, 'womanly' attitude, to be recommended for imitation or criticized according to one's views on Women's Lib. It has nothing to do with servility or its indignities, though it has everything to do with both submission and dignity. These are words of acceptance, freely offered, even though the acceptance is of something already decided.

3. *The Magnificat.* The main emphasis in the *Magnificat*, especially in the opening lines, is on 'the greatness of the Lord',<sup>11</sup> on his looking 'tenderly upon his servant, humble as she is',<sup>12</sup> and on how 'wonderfully he has dealt with me'.<sup>13</sup> It is no accident that this is immediately associated with God's over-turning of power, wealth and authority:<sup>14</sup> the action of God cuts across all normal expectations and reveals itself as a more fundamental determinant of history than the forces which on the surface seem to control it.

These three examples, taken together with the whole account of what actually happens to and through Mary in the conception and birth of Jesus, show her as one who is caught up in the action of God. She is used in that action, and gladly and freely chooses to be chosen and used, her choice being itself grounded on God's choice of her.

All this, however, does not mean that Mary stands simply by herself as a type of creaturely response to divine choice. The activity in which she is caught up is not directed towards her in herself, but towards the one who is to be born of her. It was a valid theological perception,

<sup>6</sup> Lk 1, 13-17; 28-33.

<sup>7</sup> Lk 1, 18 and 1, 34.

<sup>8</sup> Lk 1, 19-21.

<sup>9</sup> Lk 1, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Lk 1, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Lk 1, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Lk 1, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Lk 1, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Lk 1, 51-53.

though doubtless inaccurate exegesis, that led Justin Martyr to identify the 'Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High', in Luke 1, 35, with the Word who was to be incarnate.<sup>15</sup> What occurs to Mary is integral to the incarnation, and she illustrates election and response so clearly and so well, precisely because she stands so close to, and is so intimately bound up with, *the exemplar of predestination*, who is Christ himself.

If, however, proper recognition of the connection between Mary and Christ makes it impossible to treat Mary entirely on her own, it makes it equally impossible to relegate her to the level of being 'just another instance'. The Word-made-flesh does not appear as a meteor, flashing across the sky and disappearing again without visible connection with the things and affairs of the world. Rather, God anchors himself in history, takes history into himself, and so transforms history. And this means taking hold of it in this particular person, who may rightly, if cautiously, be called the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. If we are not willing to admit this, we lay ourselves open to the charge of having a docetic view of Christ himself. He is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh because he was born of this woman; Mary therefore holds a unique place, for she alone of all creatures was once one flesh with the Son of God, and it is because of his taking humanity from her that we are linked with him as the second Adam, the new man.

Two extremes, then, are to be avoided: that of allowing Mary so to fill the picture that her dependence on Christ is obscured, and the opposite of so relegating her to the edge that Christ's connection with her disappears from view. Against both, we must recognize Mary as the chosen one, uniquely chosen because of the unique choice of him who was born to her. In her own response she reflects and anticipates his predestined response to God, and therefore constitutes the innermost of those concentric circles of which Christ himself is the centre. She is the point of initial contact between the history of mankind and the history of the humanity of God. She is no mere incidental appendage, but an integral part of that whole history of God's activity which focuses in Christ.

With these thoughts I have tried to fix the place of Mary as part of the history surrounding Christ himself: that is, and must remain, her primary *locus*. But it seems in order to ask whether she may not also be seen in some wider horizons. At the conclusion of the previous section on predestination, I suggested that signs of responsiveness might be sought both in the essential being of created reality itself and in

<sup>15</sup> 1 *Apol.*, xxxiii.



redeemed reality. In looking in these directions, we cannot of course depart from our christological centre; for Christ himself is both the archetype of creation and the source of restoration. But we may nevertheless hazard some mariological reflections as well, though only in a sketchy and tentative way.

To each of these areas of reality, to being-as-created and being-as-redeemed, there corresponds a biblical and theological figure or symbol which may be seen as standing for the creaturely, responsive counterpart to the initiative of God. To his act of creation there corresponds the *sophia creata* of Proverbs 8 and the Wisdom literature, the power of created being, the *archē* and beginning, the created source of all other created things. In the earliest development of patristic theology, this *sophia* was interpreted christologically and identified with the *Logos*. During the arian controversy, however, it became clear that a more differentiated exegesis was necessary: the consistent exponents of this *sophia* christology in the fourth century turned out to be the arians and their associates, not the orthodox. As a consequence, such texts as Proverbs 8, 22 ('The Lord created me the beginning of his ways for his works'), had to be reinterpreted and applied no longer to the *Logos*, but rather to the humanity of Christ, or to the Church; the only alternative (which was also widely followed) was to take the word 'created' in a non-literal sense, and thereby to undercut the idea of a created ground of being. If, however, one were to retain the conception of such a created ground of being, the essence of being-as-created, expressed in the figure of the *sophia creata* and seen in relation to the humanity of Christ as the perfect creation, we would not only be able to fill in what appears to me to be a disastrous blank in our theological maps, but would also be able to relate it to Mary. Her word, 'I am the Lord's servant', could then be seen as the authentic word of creation itself, true to its nature as created, and responding to its Creator. This is not to turn Mary herself into a cosmic figure, but it is to see in her an *expression* of being-as-created. And provided her own connection with Christ as *the* archetype of created being in response to God is kept in mind, such an interpretation of her seems to me both appropriate and valuable.

In relation to redemption, to being-as-redeemed, which carries with it the implications of fallenness, judgment and restoration, the figures which offer themselves are those of Israel and the Church. These both stand for the gathering of the people of God, for the mystery of salvation through the calling and action of God. They point, as does the *sophia creata*, to a hidden reality, not to one which can simply be read off from

the surface of things. To believe in *unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam* is to make an act of faith, not a phenomenological observation. But it is to affirm the reality of being-as-redeemed, of creation restored to its proper relationship with God. And here again, while the foundation of that restoration is given in Christ, a connection with Mary can also be traced: the word, 'I am the Lord's servant' is not only the word of being-as-created, but also the word of being once fallen and now restored. In this word the Church itself, the new Israel, lives; in this word it speaks out its own being and names its own name. This again is not to fuse Mary and the Church in such a way that she comes to replace the Church, but it is to see her as a type and representative anticipation of what the Church itself is. Further, indeed, she may be seen, because of her historical location, as being *in a sense* the beginning of the Church, of humanity restored through Christ, and thus *in a sense*, *Mater Ecclesiae* as well as *Theotokos*. Just as in her, the nature of being-as-created finds expression, so too does that of being-as-redeemed. In each respect, what is expressed in her is both the initiative, the decision and choice of God, and the response of his own to him. Thus in each respect, it is with predestination in all its paradoxical implications and with its full christological basis that we are dealing.

It will by now be clear that even in making these suggestions, I am hedging the path around with defences. Mary is not to be made a cosmic figure; she is not to be identified *simpliciter* with the Church; her historical location as the mother of Jesus Christ remains her primary theological location as well; Christ and not she is the archetype of being-as-created, the foundation of being-as-redeemed, and the original mirror of predestination. I have left no room for the *Co-redemptrix* or the Queen of Heaven, much less for the mediterranean goddess. On the other hand, I have made space, I believe, both for the *Theotokos* and for the *Mater Ecclesiae*, at least in certain senses. No doubt all this will be too little for some and too much for others! But I hope I may have succeeded in establishing the possibility, even from a reformed starting-point and in the horizon of the doctrine of predestination, of developing a more adequate appreciation of Mary than calvinism is generally known for.