

THE CULT OF MARY AS DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

By RICHARD HANSON

THE SUBJECT OF the Blessed Virgin Mary is one that sits uneasily in the mind of an Anglican. On the one hand he does not want to align himself with the blatant anti-catholic viewpoint which regards all consideration of her status and significance as blasphemy and idolatry. His own liturgy and its calendar warn him against this error, and if he says Evening Prayer every day (as I do) he is reminded continually of her prayer of acceptance of her destiny recorded in Luke's gospel. On the other hand, he does not want to accept what seem to him enormous extensions of dogma in connection with her merely to please his roman catholic friends, and can find — search as he will — no compelling reason to agree to these extensions. That is why I have chosen to approach what is to me a thorny and difficult subject from the point of view of the development of doctrine. This last subject is one which ought to occupy much of the thought of a competent theologian today. It is in fact one of the burning issues which faces theologians of all complexions today — not birth control nor liberation theology nor any of the subjects popular with students choosing themes for post-graduate research nowadays. And the theological assessment of the Blessed Virgin Mary is certainly connected closely with the development of doctrine.

The first point to be made is that the development of doctrine is inevitable. The idea, dear to the hearts of many Protestants since the sixteenth century and still voiced by the more mindless among them today, that there is such a thing as a 'bible without notes', a 'bible without interpretation', a purely scriptural doctrine completely independent of human elaboration, is not only bad theology, it is pure illusion. Countless sects have established themselves on the basis of a pure, creedless, traditionless, biblical doctrine, attempting to distinguish themselves from past tradition and interpretation; all they have succeeded in doing is to start a

series of diverse christian bodies who have a lively tradition of not having a tradition, or of imagining that they do not have a tradition. They have not been able to emancipate themselves from the necessity of interpreting the bible and thereby creating tradition. Such an emancipation is a flat impossibility. The bible does not interpret itself; it is not a self-expounding cassette. Not only does it need copying and circulating, but it needs actually turning into doctrine. All the bible provides is raw material for doctrine, not ready-made prefabricated theology ripe for incorporating wholesale, unaltered, into theological treatises or stirring sermons.

I am not of course arguing that the bible is a mere wax nose, unresisting prey of any crafty manipulator or stern guardian of the Church's tradition: any and every interpretation will not do. We cannot ignore or by-pass or distort the witness of the bible without damage to the doctrine of the Church. Indeed, in spite of the undoubted fact that the Church has from the beginning been giving its own teaching in uninterrupted continuity and that there is no point at which we can precisely pin-point the switch from reliance on oral tradition to acceptance of the written tradition as normative; without the bible the Church would have no doctrine, or at least no doctrine which we could trust as authentic. In fact both Catholics and Protestants ought now, after nearly five centuries of dispute and debate, to recognize that the bible is as essential to the Church as the Church is to the bible. On the one hand, the very concept of a New Testament includes and assumes the concept of an interpreting and expounding Church. On the other hand, the Church's gospel is an empty monologue, or a rudderless and chartless journey, without the bible.

But I believe that we must go further in acknowledging necessity of development. The word 'development' can mean no more than a tradition of doctrine which works the diverse, miscellaneous witness of the bible into a consistent system or ordered series of beliefs. Everybody who is not a fool can see this to be an inescapable ingredient of historical Christianity. But 'development' can mean something more than this. It can mean an actual accretion or growth in the content of the christian faith, a deeper understanding of its implications and basic drive and genius which unfolds as Christianity meets through history new situations, new demands and new necessities. It means, for instance, the difference between the first four verses of the Epistle to the Romans and the text of the Nicene Creed of 381. Some people may of course say that there is no

real difference between these two statements, the second being no more than a restatement in different categories of the first, and that to state that Jesus Christ is 'declared to be the Son of God with power' is in fact identical with the statement that he is 'God of God, very God of very God, of one substance with the Father'. But it seems to me that this is to strain credulity altogether too far. In short, I believe that we must agree that there are christian dogmas or doctrines which represent an authentic discovery of that which is of the very nature of Christianity and which are not mere repetitions of words or even of ideas already to be found in scripture, even though such dogmas or doctrines are firmly based on and arise out of the witness of scripture. Such, for instance, are the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation. John Henry Newman's famous *Essay on the development of christian doctrine* (1845), though it never unambiguously allows such a conclusion, examined this subject with such insight that no self-respecting theologian can afford to ignore it any longer. If I am therefore to answer the question implicitly or explicitly posed in this work, I am bound to answer that there has been development in christian doctrine such as I have described, and that this development has been right, proper and guided by the Holy Spirit.

As another point in considering the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the light of the development of doctrine, we must notice that in the first five centuries of the christian Church, a period which has always been in some sense canonical or paradigmatic for Anglican and Orthodox, and, I believe, should be so for all Christians, some development on this subject can be observed. The invocation of Mary, as of other saints, in prayer can be observed as a practice among Christians in the later part of the period. But much more significant is the fact that the third Ecumenical Council, that of Ephesus, in the year 431 not only declared that it was orthodox to describe Mary as *theotokos* (Latin *deipara*), 'She who after the manner of the flesh brought forth the Word made flesh' (Cyril), but also pronounced that she had always remained a virgin. Perhaps the first statement is more concerned with the status of Jesus Christ than with the status of Mary; it is a kind of christological statement and is not in itself concerned with virginity at all. But the second statement, the assertion of Mary's perpetual virginity, should appear, at any rate at first sight, binding to Anglicans; and Newman's question, whether we can evade later developments if we accept earlier ones (in this case those of the fourth century) becomes

particularly relevant. Even in the early period some development has clearly taken place in doctrine concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Anglicans must also note that development of doctrine concerning Mary did not stand still in 431. Indeed her cult has grown greatly. There are now liturgical festivals concerning Mary, such as the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Dormition and the Assumption. Devotion to Mary has become part and parcel of the spirituality and the art of the greater number of Christians, that is the Catholics and the Orthodox together. Cities in South America are called after the liturgical festivals held in her honour; she has figured prominently in eastern and western iconography. Not many years ago a prominent Communist, then as far as I can remember editor of the *Daily Worker*, namely Douglas Hyde, was converted to Christianity while praying to Mary. And finally, as we are all aware, the Roman Catholic Church has within the last one hundred and fifty years added two new dogmas concerning Mary, declaring them to be *de fide* and binding on all catholic Christians: that of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, and that of the corporeal Assumption in 1950. Here is development indeed.

A final point may be added which I personally think a weak one and which may not appeal to many catholic theologians, but it is one which is sometimes advanced, and should not be completely ignored. This is the argument that Christianity needs a female element in the object of its devotion, and that it is this need which the cult of Mary fills. I find this an unconvincing point, except to connoisseurs of comparative religion who sometimes judge faiths not by the criterion of whether they are true, but by the test of whether they are psychologically satisfying. Neither Jeremiah nor Kierkegaard found God psychologically satisfying; on the contrary. But they both believed that he is true. I hope that Catholics can dispense with this dangerous and equivocal argument.

So far the argument of this paper has tended almost wholly in the direction of allowing the growth of doctrine concerning Mary as a legitimate and inescapable development of authentic Christianity, comparable to the appearance of the dogmas of the Trinity and of the Incarnation. But at this stage the subject is by no means exhausted. There are strong arguments to be placed against this point of view, and they must now be considered.

In the history of thought in the West one of the most significant events has been the rise of historical criticism, that is of a new and

remarkably fruitful method of investigating historical documents and exploring historical events. This, along with several other developments in European thought since the Renaissance, has produced a veritable revolution in our consideration of all past history, and not least in our estimate of Christianity considered as an historical phenomenon, and the Bible considered as a collection of historical records. I hope that I do not need to elaborate this point, because, though clergy in parishes of all denominations seem quite ready to ignore this important intellectual achievement and to leave their flocks in ignorance of it, theologians both Catholic and Protestant, who are intellectuals *ex professo*, dare not and cannot do so, whatever may be the attitude of theologians of the Orthodox Church. This revolution has not indeed entailed the abandonment of the Bible as an indispensable original authority for the Christian faith, nor necessarily the dismantling of traditional Christian doctrine. But it has compelled all honest thinkers to undertake a drastic re-assessment and re-examination of both, a process in which there can be no exceptions, no sanctuary uninvaded by investigators, not even the doctrine of the existence of God itself. Indeed, it is clear that long before our time and certainly during our time the history of Christian doctrine must be largely motivated by the need to deal with this revolution, just as the history of doctrine in the third and fourth centuries was at least partly motivated by the necessity of coming to terms with Greek philosophy, and the history of doctrine in the thirteenth century deeply affected by the need to absorb and assimilate the new incursion of Aristotelian thought.

Now this method of historical criticism is peculiarly relevant to doctrine concerning Mary, because that doctrine has traditionally rested wholly on the story of her virginal conception of Jesus, which is usually called the Virgin Birth. Indeed for virtually all theologians of the Christian Church from the second century to the fifth (not to trace the matter further) the doctrine of the Incarnation was assumed to rest upon and to take its origin from the story of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. This story is indeed found in two books of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, but in such circumstances as to render it uncertain and doubtful. The birth narratives, of which these stories form a part, though they have their value, are, historically considered, not first-class material, consisting rather of legends and folk-tales than of factual records. The very Gospels which relate the Virgin Birth also each contain a genealogy of Jesus each of which seems to be composed upon the

supposition that Jesus was descended through Joseph. It is difficult to reconcile these genealogies, unhistorical though they too probably are, with a belief in the Virgin Birth. The rest of the New Testament completely ignores this fact, if it is a fact. No reliable reference to it can be found among all the profoundest writers of the New Testament. It is alluded to neither by Paul nor by the author of the fourth gospel nor by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. If they knew of it (and they give no sign of doing so) they regarded it as so unimportant that it did not require to be mentioned. It apparently did not affect their theology, though all of them are in some way interested in the descent and birth of Jesus.

In short the biblical basis for traditional doctrine about Mary is very frail indeed. It was, I believe, an unavoidable but sad restriction of the thought of the early Church about the Incarnation that it was based so uncritically on the story of the Virgin Birth. I need hardly remind you that it is perfectly possible, and, in my view, highly desirable, to hold a doctrine of the Incarnation without calling in the Virgin Birth to support it. This was the method of Karl Barth, who nevertheless believed in the Virgin Birth.

As for the pronouncement of the Third Ecumenical Council of 431, we have to ask ourselves a question: is an ecumenical council's decision binding when it pronounces on a question of pure historical fact? If, to take an absurd example, an ecumenical council were to declare that King Richard III of England had not murdered the princes in the Tower or that the casket letters were a forgery designed unjustly to stain the name of Mary Queen of Scots, or that the Hitler diaries were genuine and not forged, or even that Paul was the author of the Pastoral Epistles, would all faithful Catholics be obliged to believe this? I do not think that we need spend much time in answering this question in the negative. A council's judgment about historical facts can only have as much force as the historical evidence available to it. In the matter of the perpetual virginity of Mary the Council of Ephesus had, as far as we can discover, no other evidence than is available to us, that is, the witness of the New Testament. But the New Testament does not in the least support the view that Mary remained for ever a virgin. In fact both Mark and Matthew speak unselfconsciously of the brothers and sisters of Jesus, and there is no strong reason except our whim or sense of appropriateness to think that they were other than full brothers and sisters, children of Joseph and Mary. Of course the theologians of the early Church liked to think that Mary has

remained perpetually a virgin. But if they said that she had, this was only because they liked to think so, not because they had any solid historical grounds for saying so. The historical probability is strongly against this piece of wishful thinking. I conclude therefore that, even if we leave on one side the subject of the Virgin Birth, the chief evidence upon which the doctrines concerning Mary have traditionally relied for their authentication is gravely vulnerable. It cannot by any stretch of the imagination be said to be firmly and satisfactorily based on scripture, and its survival in tradition seems to be owing to a piece of historical conjecture which can only be called wishful thinking. It is only by a whimsical and subjective process of allegorical interpretation — anxiously defended by Newman, one may notice in his *Essay*, as he realized how much this doctrine depended on such interpretation — that the traditional doctrines concerning Mary can be found in the bible. They cannot stand the test of critical examination. They rest on *a priori* arguments amounting to saying that these things must have been so because it is nice to think that they were so. In the uncritical and romantic theological atmosphere of the last century such arguments may have appealed to scholars. In the austere and critical intellectual climate of the twentieth century they appear pitifully vulnerable.

I have no time here, unfortunately, to enter at any length into the subject of those conditions which are right for declaring or producing or registering dogmas. I do not necessarily adopt the view held by some Anglicans that after the year 451 no development of doctrine was necessary nor has taken place; nor the view of some Orthodox which merely postpones this date to 787. But I believe that an authentic dogma must have a firm and substantial basis in scripture; must be formed in response to the demand and pressure of the whole Church in order to meet a crisis of faith; must at least not contradict the deeply rooted traditions of worship and spirituality of Christians; and must relate to the conditions of the age in which it is produced or formed or registered and be capable of facing a critical dialogue with the intellectual pressures and currents of that age. Except in the matter of reflecting the prayer and worship of many Christians, perhaps of the majority of Christians, the traditional doctrines concerning Mary meet none of these requirements. They are not adequately based on scripture, the latest can hardly claim any scriptural basis at all, they were not formulated at the demand of a crisis of doctrine in the Church at large. Those of 1854 and of 1950 were formulated by the Pope alone without his taking the trouble

even to call a Council. They can be defended in the face of contemporary criticism only, I believe, by the flimsiest of arguments. Indeed the very small amount of space allotted to them in the works of such eminent contemporary Catholic theologians as Rahner and Schillebeeckx seems to be an admission of this. Spirituality alone unsupported by scripture or by right reason is an insubstantial basis upon which to teach dogmas which are alleged to be binding and *de fide* for all catholic Christians. To the theologian who is not a member of the Roman Catholic Church these dogmas, and with them much of the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, seem acts of gratuitous doctrinal self-indulgence.

What is most difficult to understand is that the mariological dogmas should have been declared to be *de fide*. It would not be difficult to point to doctrines held by many Protestants which are equally self-indulgent, which are silly, sentimental and devoid of a proper basis in scripture. Corresponding to the act of dedicating the Church to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, might be listed the practice of observing Mothering Sunday with much sentimental ceremony not particularly related to Christianity. The idea that Christians are obliged to observe Sunday in the same way as Jews are obliged to observe Saturday is as empty of support in scripture and tradition as is the doctrine of the corporeal Assumption of Mary into heaven. But we do not exalt these eccentric and extravagant ideas and practices into dogmas, nor maintain that they are an essential part of the christian faith. And as we tolerate Protestants holding these views without impugning their orthodoxy or catholicity, so we should tolerate our roman catholic brethren holding those doctrines about Mary which we regard as extravagant, as long as we were not required to believe them to be an essential part of the christian faith. The Orthodox Church, indeed, is quite content to allow its faithful to believe doctrines very like these, and to celebrate them in its liturgy, but resolutely refuses to regard them as necessary dogmas.

I will end this controversial paper with a suggestion designed to provide new ground upon which Catholics and Protestants might meet in their veneration for Mary without finding themselves at loggerheads. I think that respect for virginity — I do not mean chastity, but virginity — has been altogether exaggerated in the history of christian doctrine. With almost unanimous consent the early Fathers of the Church wrote and spoke as if our sexual life was in itself sinful, or at least highly suspicious and of doubtful moral

value. A style of life which involved a deliberate refraining from sexual activity was regarded as, not just a different, but a higher calling than married life. Augustine found it very difficult indeed to explain why marriage was not sinful. On his own premises arising out of his doctrine of original sin, he ought to have regarded sexual intercourse in any circumstances as sinful, though in fact he never taught this. I do not, of course, admire or condone the enormous extension of open sexual promiscuity which our society in the West is at the moment witnessing. It has long gone well beyond a legitimate reaction against victorian prudery, and will bring its own retribution. But I recognize the irony, even the absurdity, of regarding one of the prime motive powers and conditioners of our personalities, our sexual drive, as something to be regarded with suspicion and branded as of only second-class morality. This is not the attitude towards sex of either the Old or the New Testaments, both of which refer to our sexual life in a natural, balanced and unselfconscious way.

To apply what I have been saying to Mary; she may have been a virgin when she bore Jesus; I am not presumptuous enough to say categorically that she was not. But she certainly was a wife and a mother and I believe that she was the perfectly natural mother of other children besides Jesus. Why can we not reverence her as a mother leaving the question of her virginity in abeyance as something which is ultimately irrelevant to her status and significance? She was the mother of a most extraordinary son; because Joseph disappears early in the record of the life of Jesus, we must assume that she had more influence on her son than anybody else. She must have been a most extraordinary mother; as theological interest has in the last century and more concentrated inevitably on Jesus as a human being, so we should spare some concern for the maternity of Mary. She may perhaps stand as the symbolic figure representing the response of the Church to the grace of God in Christ; she may be the new Israel, conceivably even, for what that is worth, the new Eve. But let her fulfil these roles as a wife and as a mother in the fullest sense of the words.