Trinitarian Moments in
Politics, Religion, & Poetry
The Immaculate Conception and Time: A Critical Epistemology of Faith

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This article is the third of a series, the first and second of which were published respectively in the Spring and Fall 2011 issues of The Anglican. All of them ask how faith can endure the world’s absurdities. The search for insights into aesthetic redemption and time in the Fall 2011 issue continues in this article about the Blessed Virgin Mary. I thank Clair W. McPherson and Katherine Weber, who contributed to this article.

On August 14, 2011, I heard a sermon that gave an overview of various Marian doctrines. The preacher said that if some of those doctrines were proven false, it would not disturb his basic faith. That made me decide to write this essay, an Anglican interpretation of the Immaculate Conception from the perspective of a critical theory of knowledge that also tries to retrieve meaning from conventional distortions.

As a philosopher, I would ask what theory of knowledge might account for believing in Mary. In Fall 2011, I wrote, “The light of reason that guides faith uses analogical, as opposed to scientifically literal, thinking. All our knowledge of God is symbolic (as Kant shows), and (following Ricoeur) so are myths that narrate symbols, rituals that enact them, and theological theories that explain them.” I come back to this shortly as the key argument of this article. Meanwhile, I mean that Marian doctrines are aesthetic creations and therefore beyond either falsification or verification in the scientific sense.

That aesthetic dimension of faith as such is vital, the unspoken grassroots feeling of many Anglicans.

As believer, I would show that Mary is vital because the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, even though not manifestly scriptural, can be inferred directly from the Incarnation of Christ. I argue that she, as immaculately conceived, contributes to the redemption of both sin and also suffering in time. Her acts are an aesthetic spectacle.

Mary is worthy of what Louis Bouyer characterizes as “total voluntary self-abandonment in faith, constant prayer, and more precisely, the exultant thanksgiving of a soul seized by the spirit.” Devotion to her exults in all that is best and noblest.

Johann Sebastian Bach’s Magnificat is an aesthetic archetype of the spirit exulting in her.

The aesthetic dimension of faith as such is vital, the unspoken grassroots feeling of many Anglicans. Redemption is aesthetic justification, a view

1 C. Don Keyes, “New Julian Casserley Research and Incarnational Social Thought,” The Anglican (2011), 10-18. I ask the “burning question of how to do what the Incarnation requires in our seemingly hopeless age,” and answer with Casserley’s assertion possibly from 1950, “Nothing remains except to endure the absurdities with heroic defiance to the end.”

2 C. Don Keyes, “Julian Casserley’s Hope for 2050: A New Interpretation,” The Anglican (2011), 8-13. I recast my earlier question by asking what kind of heroic defiance might have produced Casserley’s strange hope for 2050, and answer that “hope triumphs aesthetically...by feeding upon the beauty and sublimity that heal the wounds of life.”


5 Julian Langed Casserley, Christian Community (New York: Longmans, Green, 1959), 95, 154. “It is the function of the liturgy to repeat and perpetuate the patterns of the divine redemption which we proclaim in the gospel and expound in our theology. In this sense the liturgy is obviously the most authoritative element in Christian practice and provides us with the touchstone of authority...The Book of Common Prayer is an essentially conservative institution.”
that looks toward Nietzsche and, beyond him to Orpheus, the beauty of whose music suspended the torments of the damned momentarily.

Truth
My arguments are an unconventional combination of critical epistemology and culturally conservative expressions of theological positions. The same theory of knowledge that accounts for believing in Mary exemplifies what applies to all religious ideas. Faith claims are not scientific, but aesthetic, judgments.

Respect for truth, whether religious or otherwise, begins by first recognizing the integrity of scientific knowledge. Fundamentalism and other kinds of Christian anti-intellectualism do the opposite and begin by denying it. Respect for the truth of science goes against the relativism of postmodern philosophies that reduce science to societal constructions. The rigorous critical epistemology of Kant, on the other hand, is not relativistic since (in the First Critique) it regards transcendentally deduced scientific experience as empirically real. To hold that our knowledge of God is symbolic is not a move out of critical philosophy but (in the Third Critique) a reflective aesthetic move within it. That changed position is rationally sound to the extent that faith events and theological statements elaborating them are held to be aesthetically, not factually, true.

To say that in somewhat different language, religion cannot settle its epistemological distress by saying, "Science does not presently know enough about reality, but it will legitimate faith when it does." There are actually two irremovably different ways of speaking: factual and reflective, or symbolic. Language is scientific if its truth (or falsehood) can be tested factually, or empirically. The truth (or falsehood) of religious language in general does not depend upon any specifically testable facts. Language about faith events is like music; it bestows significance upon life and facts. Bach’s Magnificat is a holy event. It generates meaning. It is not merely an expression of emotion, since it is also cognitive. High music like it can be even prior to the split ordinary experience makes between feeling and reason. Language about religious phenomena — whether they point to events or theological reflection on them — does not aim at proving anything, but at disclosing meanings in a descriptive circle.

The first step in respecting truth is to recognize the sovereignty of scientific knowledge and mark off aesthetics as the domain of religious phenomena. The second step is to respect the integrity of the phenomenon. Some phenomena are hidden and cannot be disclosed because conventional distortions, especially authoritarianism, hide them. These distortions have to be broken down and destroyed. I distinguish the primordial authority of what might be hidden from an alien, hostile kind of authority. Authoritarian authority requires submission to external power. In the process, it turns doctrines into dry bones, a set of alien laws imposed upon individuals from the outside. As opposed to this, primordial authority is persuasive. “It chooses freely because it aesthetically appropriates the symbols of the spiritual heritage and events that gave rise to them. Instead of acquiescing, it rejoices in the symbols of faith as one does in a loved work of art,” as I wrote in Fall 2011. Primordial authority dwells on the edge of revelation, repeats the event of the inception of the truth of doctrines, and displays what Heidegger terms the “birth certificate” of the inception. Heidegger also characterizes the recovery of the inception of truth as “wrestling” out into the open and “robbery” out of concealment. I will use these terms as appropriate figures for “destroying” distortions, authoritarian and

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In theory at all events it surrenders no part of the liturgical heritage in Western Christendom, except in order to remove unworthy innovations and manifest corruptions.”

6 Keyes, “Julian Casserley’s Hope,” 12.
other, which conceal primordial religious phenomena.

Attestations and Arguments
In Luke, the Archangel Gabriel salutes Mary and announces that she is filled with grace. I quote excerpts below to reveal the primordial event as aesthetic spectacle and show that Mary’s actions and her own words destroy conventional distortions. Some commentators argue that the special status Gabriel attributes to Mary points toward what will later be called her Immaculate Conception.

The virgin birth of Jesus is different. It means that Mary was “found with child by the Holy Ghost” before she and Joseph had intercourse (Matthew 1:18, 25). The much later post-Biblical doctrine of Mary’s own conception means that God prevented her from original sin when she was conceived, namely at the time her soul was created. Anne and Joachim had intercourse that generated her body.

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I confine the following comments about the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to three sources whose primordial, ontological core can be retrieved even though belief in the doctrine might have been promulgated in an authoritarian way. They are significant because, taken together, they move toward a circle of meanings. The first is from the early Ecumenical Councils of the undivided Christian Church, the second is the explicit definition of the Immaculate Conception by Pius IX (1854), and the third is the Seattle Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (2004).

Definition of Chalcedon
The Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) hold that Mary is the mother of God (Theotokos). Her life is the source of the “complete” humanity which “true” divinity took into itself in Christ when the word became flesh. A mother, already immaculate, brought unfallen humanity, life as it ought to be, to the hypostatic union. As I also said in Fall 2011,

The Definition of Chalcedon does not have primordial authority because the institutional church decreed that it is true, but mainly because it theoretically repeats the origin of the mighty events of God’s action in Christ and also because of the elegance of the dialectical perfection of the concept that Christ is truly divine and perfectly human, and these two natures are inseparable, yet not confused.7

I argue that the Incarnation of the Word is the a priori condition for thinking about the Immaculate Conception, which makes belief in that doctrine accountable to the dignity of material reality and the essential goodness of flesh. Piety about Mary and interpretations of doctrines about her cannot escape that ontology.

Ineffabilis Deus
Pope Pius IX’s definition (1854) of the Immaculate Conception appropriately circumscribes what the doctrine means and does not mean:

We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.8

The Catholic Encyclopedia lays out four elements of the definition, excerpts of which I quote:

The subject of this immunity from original sin

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7 Keyes, "Julian Caserley’s Hope" 12.
is the person of Mary at the moment of the creation of her soul and its infusion into her body.

The term conception does not mean the active or generative conception by her parents. Her body was formed in the womb of the mother, and the father had the usual share in its formation. The question does not concern the immaculateness of the generative activity of her parents . . . . The person is truly conceived when the soul is created and infused into the body. Mary was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin at the first moment of her animation, and sanctifying grace was given to her before sin could have taken effect in her soul.

The formal active essence of original sin . . . never was in her soul . . . . But she was not made exempt from the temporal penalties of Adam—from sorrow, bodily infirmities, and death.

The immunity from original sin was given to Mary by a singular exemption . . . . Mary . . . being the new Eve who was to be the mother of the new Adam, she was, by the eternal counsel of God and by the merits of Christ, withdrawn from the general law of original sin. Her redemption was the very masterpiece of Christ’s redeeming wisdom.

I argue that Pius IX’s definition (as explained above) remains consistent with the ontology of the hypostatic union in two ways. The first is that the definition does not go against the essential goodness of the flesh. Since Mary’s immaculateness pertains to the way her soul was created and infused into her body, the natural process

of reproduction is not an essential element of the definition. Consequently we might infer that immaculateness or the lack of it is not a sexual consideration, even though familiar views of the doctrine have nurtured flesh-denigrating interpretations, which the basic ontology of the doctrine neither requires nor warrants. Furthermore, since the definition of the Immaculate Conception of Mary need not be tied to any specific theory of original sin, Augustinian or other, its meaning is reducible purely to the mythology of Adam, who fell because he violated the bond of trust with the Lord God.

The truth of that myth, in turn, belongs individually and socially to all of us. The narration which it unfolds in the light of the Immaculate Conception means that even though God’s gift exempted Mary from original sin, she suffers from the adversities of existence in time, such as “sorrow, bodily infirmities, and death.” Her time differs from ours. In order for her to be the “new Eve,” the merits of Christ were given to her retroactively. As George Tavard argues, “The Son’s merits flowed back upon the mother, not in the irreversible temporality of history but in the sovereign mind of God the Creator who makes all creatures what they are.”

Tavard’s statement suggests a more significant way in which the definition complements the ontology of the hypostatic union. It has to do with Mary’s temporality, and points to the completion of the circle of meaning which the Definition of Chalcedon initiates. Mary’s temporality is our time, both the bitter tragedy of its passage and the instability of what is now. Time disintegrates. It disconnects experience. Mary suffers with us in time and, with Christ, co-redeems our innocent suffering. She suffers even though she is innocent and reveals that the redemptive power of Christ

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the King must be beyond penal substitution for sins, aesthetically justifying our existence. Her retroactive temporality disrupts ordinary time. Her time redeems ours, fulfilling the circle of meanings by disclosing insight into the dynamics by which the Mother of God brings "complete" humanity to the hypostatic union. In other words, Chalcedonian ontology can be viewed as a shorthand summary of redemptive events.

The Seattle Statement
A major contribution toward theological understandings of Mary is Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ\(^1\) (the Seattle Statement), the Agreed Statement regarding Mary from the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission of 2004. Scriptural and other attestations to belief in Mary in that document are especially instructive, covering a much wider scope than I do. It carefully shows why Marian doctrines have theological authority for Christians as such. I recommend it highly, because it is the complementary other side to the contrasting perspective from which I write. My philosophical theology is more epistemological and ontological. Furthermore, my epistemology starts with Kant's Critiques and remains largely within the Continental orbit, and one of my major purposes is to justify the ontological validity of the Immaculate Conception and the event itself in spite of the authoritarian way some popes tried to enforce belief. Nevertheless, I believe my view concurs with basic concepts of the 2004 statement, especially that there is already more similarity between Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism concerning Mary than many might suppose . . .

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Archaism Is Ambivalent
On the one hand, archaic roots can retain life-affirming symbols over against modern reductionism. On the other hand, they can also strangle life. Biblical religions are fraught with both. In their rational versions, the former overcomes the latter. Their recessive versions cause the opposite to happen.

The excellence of Roman Catholicism in this regard is manifold. Relatively free of the fundamentalist corruption and the eliminative emptiness in other traditions, it preserves its primordial archaic roots, allowing, even encouraging the (arguably genetically encoded) female symbolism of mankind to develop fully in and through faith in Mary. The fact that devotion to her sometimes hovers on the verge of deification — needless to say without crossing over that line — does not discredit the Church of Rome since it apprehends the life-affirming power that reveals the nobility of womankind. However, the authoritarian way Pius enforces belief in the definition is regrettable:

Hence, if anyone shall dare — which God forbid! — to think otherwise than as has been defined by us, let him know and understand that he is condemned by his own judgment; that he has suffered shipwreck in the faith; that he has separated from the unity of the Church; and that, furthermore, by his own action he incurs the penalties established by law if he should dare to express in words or writing or by any other outward means the errors he thinks in his heart.\(^1\)

The "penalties established by law" might be but a sliver of something far worse from a wider historical perspective. Heretics ought to be invited to dialogue, not eliminated. Enforcing submission to doctrines not only turns them into dry bones of conventionality, but also makes the church a club that acquiesces to them instead of really believing them.

Yet the darkest and most regressive archaisms is

\(^{11}\) Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ, Accessed in June, 2018.

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The cruelty, indifference to social justice, scorn of science, bad music, sticky sentimentality, and prideful stupidity of increasing numbers who claim to be Christian spoil Christianity as a whole. The true leap of faith would not be away from reason, but toward respect for it, not submission to belief, but affirmation of it through heroic defiance of conventional distortions. It would mean doing what seems impossible, wresting healing truth out of what has been poisoned in order to say yes to the love of Christ and the Mother of God.

**Conclusion**

The birth of Jesus happened in the midst of spoiled politics. The brutality of Herod, forced travel to register for taxation, and various kinds of misery surround the birth of Jesus. The first chapter of Luke reports actions of the historical mother of Jesus that broke the darkness down and words that went against the conventions of repressive society and, so to speak, "wrested" beauty and grace out of a time of despair. Gabriel had appeared to her and said: "Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women," (Luke 1:28), for "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). "And Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word'" (Luke 1:38).

The words Bach put into music include social protest, as John Orens rightly notes, in a feminist mode: "for he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). God "hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree" (Luke 1:52).}

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