

1-24-1964

The Theology of Mary and the Critical Spirit

Edward D. O'Connor

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Connor, Edward D. (1964) "The Theology of Mary and the Critical Spirit," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 15, Article 5, Pages 19-26.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol15/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

THE THEOLOGY OF MARY AND THE CRITICAL SPIRIT

Presidential Address

by

THE REV. EDWARD D. O'CONNOR, C.S.C.

One of the characteristic features of contemporary theology is its critical reflection on its own traditional heritage. This criticism has implications of special significance for the theological vision of the Virgin Mary, and for the theologian who devotes himself to this subject. I would like to discuss some of these implications here.

The critical spirit is, of course, affecting nearly all branches of human thought today. In theology, it concerns itself with the doctrines, practices and institutions that are now established in the Church as the outcome of twenty centuries of history. They are compared with, and judged by, those of the primitive Church, as manifested chiefly in Scripture.

For Christianity has been a growing thing from the beginning. In its ritual and forms of piety, in its organizational structure and even in its doctrine, the mustard seed planted by Christ has developed into a great tree. Such growth was natural and necessary, a sign of the Church's vitality. But our age is aware that, besides the germane and healthy growths, there have also developed luxuriant excrescences that sap the strength of Christianity and distract from its true orientation. The Baroque richness of modern Catholicism sometimes obscures its basic structure.

And so there has arisen in the modern soul a yearning for the simplicity of primitive Christianity, a passion to strip away the overgrowth and the decorations, and recover the substantial

realities hidden beneath them. A twofold impulse motivates this inclination: the impulse of intelligent faith, desirous of seeing the sense and unity of that which it believes; and the impulse of sound piety to take its inspiration and nourishment from the substantial mysteries of the Christian religion, rather than from the secondary and accidental.

This revisionary movement tends to single out the Marian traditions of the Church as targets of predilection, because they, more than any other major element of Catholic life, are the fruit of developments which occurred after the Apostolic age. Most of the Marian dogmas are the result of a long and complex growth in Christian thought; and the Marian piety which is now a familiar element of Catholicism was generated only through many centuries of gradually intensifying veneration. To many people, these developments appear as unfortunate deviations from which Christianity could profitably be purged.

There is a second phase to the critical movement, which concerns itself, not with traditions that have developed since Scriptural times, but with Scripture itself. We are more cognizant than previous generations of Christians of the influence of natural human factors on the Biblical writings. Instead of the naïve reverence with which the believer of old received Scripture in its entirety as the Word of God, today's scholar distinguishes between the proper message of Scripture—its 'religious message'—and the human ideas which served as vehicles for its delivery. Out of this distinction has sprung the demythologizing movement,¹ which endeavors to free the 'reli-

¹ I am deliberately picking the most radical school of thought in modern exegesis because it provides a more pointed illustration than moderate examples, in which the conflict between traditional faith and critical thought is to some extent resolved—often very happily. By the same token, the paragraphs which follow are not intended to disregard the distinction between myth, legend, and midrash, etc., or to imply that those who recognize the use of midrash in the Infancy narratives are in the same class as those who speak of pious legends or myths. But there is no call to enter into this distinction here, and there need be no misunderstanding so long

gious message' from the myths which supposedly expressed it for a primitive culture, and to reformulate it in the idiom of our own culture. Such an enterprise, in its more radical forms, is perhaps incompatible with earnest faith in Scripture as the Word of God; in more moderate forms, however, it is winning favorable attention from competent Catholic exegetes.

But in either form, this phase of the critical movement, like the preceding, has tended to adopt a predominantly negative orientation toward Marian piety and belief. For precisely those texts of Scripture which have most decisively determined the Catholic attitude toward Our Lady are the ones which many exegetes, with the greatest assurance, classify as mythical or legendary. These are, in the New Testament, the Infancy narratives,² and in the Old Testament, the story of Adam, Eve and the Serpent.

Thus, the critical movement assails our Marian traditions, not only by pointing out how far they have developed beyond their Biblical foundations, but also by sapping the strength of these foundations themselves. As a consequence, there is perhaps no other sphere of theology so sensitive to the confrontation of the Catholic with the critical spirit, as the Mariological. Hence the decisions of the Church in this sphere have, over and above their intrinsic meaning, a further significance as privileged indices of the Church's judgment on the critical movement.

For example, the definitions of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption amount, in effect, to a declaration that the evolution of a doctrine does not annul its authenticity. For it is clear beyond all question that these two beliefs emerged quite late in the conscious thought of the Church. They had not been heard of in the early centuries, and, when they made their first appearance, were even contested by grave theologians. Never-

as it is kept in mind that the demythologizing school stands as the extreme case of a tendency which is realized in many lesser degrees.

² Also to be noted here are the accounts, in St. John's Gospel, of the Wedding Feast at Cana and of Christ's words to Mary and John on Calvary.

theless, the Church, after mature deliberations, has defined them as belonging to the Apostolic faith: not necessarily explicitly, but at least implicitly. This position excludes the view that developments which have occurred since the Apostolic age are *ipso facto* alienations from the Apostolic spirit. It condemns the unconscious assumption made by some critics, that the ideas and practices of the primitive Church can be taken univocally and uncritically as standards by which to appraise those of the modern Church.

Similarly, the fact that the Virgin Birth of Christ has been made a dogma fixes a significant limit on any eventual Catholic program of demythologizing Scripture. It is true that this dogmatic decision was made long before the notion of demythologizing was even conceived; nevertheless, the Church's decision is still valid as her irrevocable guarantee that there is a truth of Faith here, not a merely religious symbol. And in a more general fashion, the Marian piety and beliefs of the Church show that she takes seriously the figure of the Mother of Jesus in the New Testament, and looks upon her as a real person about whom we have genuine knowledge.

This does not imply that the ambition to 'demythologize' Scripture is condemned in all its forms and degrees. It would even be a mistake, I believe, to suppose that the question of the literary type of the Infancy narratives has been implicitly decided by the *Magisterium*. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the Catholic view has been decidedly oriented in the direction of historical realism.

Thus, on the Mariological terrain, the Church has taken a position of resistance to both phases of the modern critical movement. She refuses to allow a belief to be judged inauthentic solely on the grounds that it was not formulated and acknowledged until long after the days of the primitive Church; and she maintains as solid doctrine one of the elements of Scripture which some critics are most prone to classify as mythical.

For the theologian still searching for his personal orientation towards the critical movement, these decisions of the Church furnish guidance of the highest value. For one so impressed by the critical achievements that he is tempted to doubt all traditional theology, these decisions provide a firm mooring. But they do not give anyone grounds for an attitude of smug disdain toward the painful enquires of the modern mind. Neither do they justify a lapse into simple indignation toward everyone who scrutinizes our religious traditions somewhat harshly. The attitude of a genuine theologian is always one of openness and receptivity, that tries to discern all the good in new currents of thought, and where possible to profit by them. And as a matter of fact, it has already been demonstrated what unexpected clarity the critical approach in both history of doctrine and exegesis can confer on our understanding of Mary's place in the Church.

The theologian must also keep his own ideas open to correction by the new criticism. Marian doctrine and devotion have undoubtedly been subject to exaggerated, obscurantist and extraneous tendencies that are offensive to both faith and intelligence. With the help of critical scholarship they can more effectively be eliminated. Dogma will not change, but I believe that we must be prepared for a good deal of change in the way some theological treatises on the Blessed Virgin appeal to unfounded meanings of Scripture, invoke an unverified Tradition, and orient their theological constructions independently of the great doctrinal themes of the Faith.

But besides profiting thus positively and negatively from the work of the critics, the theologian has the still more important obligation to respond to their challenge by manifesting the worth of the Catholic Marian tradition. The acid of criticism needs to be counterbalanced with the oil of positive appreciation. This embraces two tasks, the first of which is to show that the veneration of Our Lady is an integral part of the Christian religion, not extraneous or peripheral. It springs directly

from the central motifs of Christianity. In Mary's motherhood, the Church celebrates the Son of God's genuine incarnation, in flesh from Adam's stock. Mary's virginity represents the inviolate separateness of God's Holy People on the one hand, and the bridal dedication of the Church to her Heavenly Spouse, on the other. Mary's holiness is the redemptive work of Christ in its most perfect realization. It is totally the effect of grace, and yet it issues in a faith that is free, personal and responsible, especially at that crucial moment of Salvation History when, to the benefit of all mankind, she believed in the Gospel of the Son of God, as announced by its first messenger, the angel Gabriel. Her Immaculate Conception is Christ's most perfect victory over sin; her Assumption, His most perfect victory over death. The deeper we enter into the Marian doctrines, the clearer it becomes that their essential dynamics derive from the the most authentic resources of the Gospel teaching. Devotion to the Mother of Jesus is simply an exquisite flower springing from the seed of the Word of God planted in a heart that receives it with earnest sincerity.

But we theologians have failed to demonstrate this to our contemporaries. Our age has produced excellent works on the development of the Marian doctrines; but there has not been a corresponding production of studies designed to reveal their nature and meaning. It is not too difficult today to get a reasonably adequate idea of the history of these doctrines, but it is very difficult to find an enlightening statement of their profound meaning and significance: their integration into the Christian mystery, and their implication for the Christian life. And yet it is here that their real value lies.

It is here also that the crucial problems are encountered; for the basic antagonism to the veneration of Mary is not due primarily to the exegetical or historical problems associated with it, but to the difficulty of the very idea itself. Hence the urgent need at the present hour is for a theological vision

that will make the sense of the Marian mystery so luminous that no one of good will can fail to see it.

Besides demonstrating the authentically Christian inspiration of the veneration of Our Lady, the theologian has a second task, that of maintaining its full dimensions. Mary's grandeur as Mother of God is so immense, and her influence in the Christian life so profound, they can easily be underestimated, even by those who accept the basic Marian dogmas. One whose spiritual perception is dull can overlook them; one who is too anxious about appearing excessive or unreasonable, can diminish them; one whose faith clings to the barest possible minimum can reject them. Consequently, it is an important function of the theologian simply to enunciate clearly and firmly these more delicate refinements of Marian doctrine which, though not defined dogmas, are nevertheless priceless sources of spiritual sustenance, which many of the faithful will neglect if no one points them out.

In order to defend these values, the theologian must appreciate them himself. And in no other domain of theology is it so true as here, that full apprehension of the truth depends on personal response to it. This is a law inscribed profoundly in the nature of Marian doctrine. Scripture speaks so discreetly of the Mother of Jesus that its message can be overlooked or brushed aside by a heavy-handed exegesis which, in the name of objectivity, leaves out of consideration all but the grosser affirmations of the text. A purely objective process of analysis and deduction does not suffice for the derivation of the Church's dogmas. It is from the Scripture texts indeed that the Church has acquired its knowledge of Mary, but only by listening to their delicate resonances on the sounding board of the Church's own inner life.

In the development of Marian doctrine, it has most often been the devout faithful whose piety led the way; the theologians have not infrequently been hard put to it to catch up from behind. From this, every theologian should learn that he

dare not remain on a purely academic plane when treating of Our Lady. His study must be also a devotion, and his teaching the communication of a spirit.

The very function of explaining and defending the mystery puts the theologian in special danger of diminishing it. In trying to show its reasonableness, he is under pressure to accommodate it to the inadequate limits of a too-human reason. There is a way of fitting Mary into the Christian economy which really amounts to suppressing the distinctive note which she adds to it. One can avoid such betrayals only if the constructive efforts of the theological reason are matched by the heart's docility to the mystery which lives in it. This does not exempt the theologian from the necessity to be objective in his thinking, accurate in his information, and coherent in his argument; but it does mean that he cannot respond effectively to the 'cold realism' of modern criticism except by the *warm conviction* of earnest belief. This, too, is a realism, but of another sort: that of one who knows the reality of the values to which he bears witness, from his personal experience of living by them.