When did Mary become quite so contrary? **Mary among the Reformers**

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Introduction

In his *Church Dogmatics*, the preeminent Swiss Reformed theologian of the twentieth century Karl Barth wrote,

> In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest. [1]

Meanwhile, 'To consider Protestantism today,' writes Kathryn Greene-McCreight, 'one would think that Mary is non-existent both liturgically and theologically.'[2] The American evangelical scholar Scot McKnight in his 2012 book, *The Real Mary*, quipped that Mary ought to have sung at the Visitation, 'From now on, all generations – except Protestants – will call me blessed.'[3]

There is most certainly now a huge gulf between the Roman Church and the Protestant churches on the place of Mary in dogma and liturgy. When we consider the sixteenth-century Reformation, we might expect therefore to find Mary a major flash point, a key controversy of clear confessional divides. But we don't. On the Protestant side, there is not a single published treatise devoted to the subject of Mary during the first several decades of the Reformation. On the Roman Catholic side, even the Council of Trent showed considerable reserve. Mary was not the lightning rod nor litmus test we might have assumed.

Considering the question of Mary in the middle half of the sixteenth century from the perspective of the twenty-first, we must beware a twofold anachronism. We must avoid the anachronism of reading the *current* extent and explicitness of Marian dogma and devotion in Roman Catholicism into the Roman Church at the outset of the Reformation; and we must avoid the anachronism of reading contemporary Protestant relative neglect of Mary into the Reformers themselves.

Having warned against anachronism, I'm now going to employ one, but only as a structural tool. In contemporary Roman Catholicism, there are four Marian dogmas:[4]

i. Mary is the *theotokos*, the Mother of God
ii. The Virgin birth and perpetual virginity
iii. The Immaculate Conception
iv. The bodily Assumption.

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[1] Karl Barth, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (eds.), *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 2*, vol. 1 (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 143.

[2] Kathryn Greene-McCreight. 'Mary goes to reform school: a reformer, a reformed, and reforming meet Mary.' Ex Auditu 16 (2000): 154.

[3] Scot McKnight, *The Real Mary : Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2007), 143.

[4] Mother of God, dogma since the Council of Ephesus (431), cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994) [hereafter CCC] §495, 509; Ever-Virgin, dogma since the Lateran Council (649), cf. CCC §396, 496-507, 510; Immaculate conception, dogma since the papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), cf. CCC §490-492, 508; Assumption, dogma since the papal bull *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), cf. CCC §966, 974.

To these four dogmas are added five Marian theses, which are *not* binding on the faithful, though acknowledged as 'pious beliefs' by the Magisterium: Mary as Co-Redemptrix, Mary as Mediatrix, Mary as Dispensatrix of All Graces, Mary as Queen of Heaven, and Mary as Prototype of the Church.

We shall consider the state of play in the early Reformation concerning each of the four dogmas in turn, then consider some of what would later be described as the Marian Theses, in order to discern the place of Mary among the Reformers. We will discover that the Reformers almost to a man endorsed the dogmas that were dogmatic at the time (the first two) and had a range of views on the two that would three and four centuries later become dogmas. They were opposed to certain aspects of what would later be classified the Marian Theses on soteriological and doxological grounds; but their praise and appreciation for Mary would yet make many of their contemporary heirs blush.

Mother of God

First, then, Mary as the Mother of God.

As we will also see regarding the other three now-dogmas, if you were to step into a time machine in around 500AD and travel forwards a thousand years to just around the time of Martin Luther's first protest, while much would have changed 'on the ground' regarding Christian worship and popular piety, not much would have changed regarding matters of doctrine related to the Blessed Virgin. What was clearly established by 500 remained the confessional boundaries of 1500; while what was uncertain and debated in 500 was still being contended a millennium later.

Mary as the *Theotokos* (the Greek term that might perhaps be more precisely translated God-bearer but for centuries and without much controversy rendered *Mater Dei*, Mother of God, in the Latin West) had been dogma since the Council of Ephesus in 431. It was (and still is) primarily a *Christological* dogma with Marian implications, rather than the other way around. *Theotokos* became the test of orthodoxy to rule offside Nestorianism, which held that Mary could only be described as *Christotokos*, Christ-bearer, on the grounds that she did not beget the divine person of the *Logos* but the human person of Jesus. The Fathers discerned that Nestorius made Christ two persons subsisting in two natures, joined only behind a single appearance (*prosopon*). To rescue the Lord from a split personality, the Fathers insisted that Mary bore the single *person* of the divine Son of God, albeit according to his human nature. Mary in her womb gave her substance to and gave birth to a created human body; but that was *what* she bore. *Who* she bore was God; God the Son, the only-begotten, the *Logos*, become incarnate in and through her by the Holy Spirit. Mary *must* therefore be able to be termed God-bearer, Mother of God; and the failure to do so was a failure to confess faith in the one Person, two-natures of Christ that became the settled yardstick of Christological confession at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Mary as the Mother of God was therefore the guarantor of both Christ's true and complete humanity, which depended upon his taking human substance and being humanly born from a true and complete human mother, and the guarantor of the unity of his divine person in his divine and human natures.

The ancient Christological heresies of Docetism (the denial that Christ truly took upon himself an authentic human nature) and Nestorianism (that Mary gave birth to a human *person* that was united only in will to the pre-existing divine person) largely disappeared in the Latin West after Chalcedon. The Reformers happily confessed Mary as *Theotokos* or Mother of God for the same orthodox Christological reasons as any Roman Catholic. In fact, they insisted upon its propriety all the more in order to counteract the new or renewed Christological heresies associated with aspects of the radical Reformation. Michael Servetus (1511-1553) was among those who dared to doubt that Jesus was a divine person, preferring instead to regard him as a preeminent human prophet. Meanwhile certain anabaptist leaders such as Menno Simons (1496-1561) and Melchior Hoffman (1495-1543) postulated the celestial flesh heresy in order to exempt Christ from original sin. The celestial flesh heresy – the idea that God had stored up in heaven a human nature unconnected to Adam's fallen line and then had given it to his Son in the womb of Mary – was really but an ingenious variation of

Docetism, whereby Jesus did not partake of the same flesh and blood as those whom he came to redeem.

Against Servetus and the Unitarians, the Reformers needed to insist on Mary as the Mother *of God*; while against Simons and the anabaptists, they needed to insist on Mary as the *Mother* of God. We find, therefore, not only certain Reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Martin Luther (1483-1546) explicitly and commonly call Mary the Mother of God, but we also find the specific insistence in certain of the confessions such as the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* (1577) that Mary 'is rightly called and truly is the Mother of God.'[5] Among the Reformers, John Calvin (1509-1564) was the most reserved about the term 'Mother of God,' preferring to use the transliterated Greek *Theotokos* rather than *Mater Dei* because the latter encouraged what he regarded as idolatrous worship, but he was in no doubt that it was an appropriate and accurate title in the abstract. Calvin also insisted pointedly that 'Christ himself is not said to have been made *by* woman, but *from* woman (Galatians 4:4),' to underline the natural, fleshly union between the human mother and her divine Son. [6] The Reformers were also near univocal in employing an allegorical hermeneutic of Jeremiah 31:22 ('the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth: a woman shall compass a man' [KJV]) to understand it as a prophecy of Mary's actively providing the entire human substance of the Saviour (no human father, nor extra-Marian substance of any kind was supplied in the miracle of Christ's conception).[7] Her supplying the entire human nature of the Messiah made her the deserved object of praise. Mary's motherhood of the Lord, even for Calvin, made her uniquely privileged above all other creatures:

> To this day we cannot enjoy the blessing brought to us in Christ without thinking at the same time of that which God gave as adornment and honour to Mary, in willing her to be the mother of His only-begotten Son.[8]

If the Reformers had any qualms about the formulation 'Mother of God' (and few did), it was not to do with the historical and natural relationship between Mary and Jesus – not only in Mary's pregnancy and giving birth but in her raising her Son and remaining close to him throughout his earthly ministry – but to do with the nature of their relationship as mother and son *after* Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The notion that as the risen and ascended Lord he still owed his mother the debt of filial obedience had become cause in some corners of popular piety for petitioning Mary to bend her Son to her will; which seemed to the Reformers both to compromise the supreme authority of Christ and his unique mediatorial office. Mary's *historical* motherhood of God was uncontroversial; the extent and implications of her *continuing* motherhood was the locus of some debate.

Virgin birth and perpetual Virgin

The dogma of the Virgin birth was, as we all know, creedal from the first, and closely linked to the Christological imperatives mentioned above: for Jesus to be the Son of God, he needed to *not be* the natural son of Joseph. But the belief that Mary was not only virginal *ante partum* but also *in partu* and even *post partum* was also ancient. It seems first to have been claimed explicitly in the second-century *Protovangel of James*, also being found in the works of Irenaeus and various Syrian writings

[5] *Formula of Concord* (1577), Epitome, Article VIII.7; in Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 510.

[6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill (ed.), trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. I, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 480.

[7] This reading is endorsed by Zwingli, Johannes Bugenhagen, Konrad Pellikan, John Trapp, and Juan de Maldonado. In the *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, John Calvin's comment is the only one to demur. See J. Jeffery Tyler (ed.), *Jeremiah, Lamentations (Old Testament XI)* Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018), 295-98.

[8] John Calvin, *A Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Edinburgh: St Andrew's Press, 1972), vol. I. 32.

from the third century. It was not controversial when the belief in Mary's perpetual virginity was dogmatised at the Lateran Council of 649.

What would surprise many a contemporary Protestant is that, as David Wright in *Mary in Evangelical Perspective* found, the perpetual virginity of Mary (that is, not only the virginal conception, but the virgin birth and abstinence from all sexual contact afterwards) was 'endorsed by all the Reformers virtually without qualification.'[9] Certainly all of the Reformers to have directly tackled the question towed the traditional line: Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Balthasar Hubmaier (1480-1528), Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), Andreas Osiander (1498-1552), Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531), Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563); the English Reformers Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), Miles Coverdale (1488-1553), Hugh Latimer (1487-1555), Robert Barnes (1495-1540) – all these implicitly or explicitly endorsed the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity. Luther and Zwingli were the most emphatic: Luther in a sermon on the Presentation of Christ in the Temple said Mary was 'in childbirth and after childbirth, as she was a Virgin before childbirth, so she remained,'[10] and the Latin version of his *Smalcald Articles* (1537) titled her *Semper Virgine* (ever-Virgin). Even as late as 1577, the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* held that the Son of God 'demonstrated his divine majesty even in his mother's womb in that he was born of a virgin without violating her virginity. Therefore she is truly the mother of God and yet remained a virgin.'[11] Luther himself even went so far as that strand of medieval piety that regarded part of Mary's blessedness above all other women lay in her giving birth without pain.[12]

The reason that the datum of the Reformers near univocal endorsement of the perpetual virginity would surprise contemporary Protestants is because of the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*: while Mary's conception of Christ without the involvement of a human father was demanded by reading the Scriptures (both the Isaiah prophecy and the content of the Annunciation), her virginal birth-giving and abstinence thereafter could not be straightforwardly biblically established, relying mostly on the authority of admittedly very early traditions. But the Reformers used the exegetical arguments first articulated in the fourth century by Jerome in *Against Helvidius* (c.383) to support their belief: 'until they came together' refers only to Mary and Joseph sharing a home and in any case the word 'until' speaks nothing of what happened after, Jesus' brothers and sisters were either cousins or half-siblings from Joseph's first marriage, and Mary's 'firstborn' describes Jesus' privileged status and does not demand that she had a later son. All these points were made not only in their commentaries and sermons, but even made it into the marginalia of the rigorously Reformed *Geneva Bible* of 1560.[13] Perhaps more surprisingly, given the Reformers' characteristic distaste for allegorical interpretation, Zwingli, Coverdale, Barnes, Cranmer, and Bullinger were among those who made appeal to Ezekiel 44:2, 'This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it; because the Lord, the God of Israel, hath entered in by it, therefore it shall be shut' [KJV] to buttress their belief in Mary's perpetual virginity.[14] That allegorical or typological reading of the Ezekiel Scripture even endured beyond the first throes of the Reformation, being articulated by

[9] David F. Wright, 'Mary in the Reformers,' in D. F. Wright (ed.), *Chosen by God: Mary in Evangelical Perspective* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1989), 169.

[10] Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Presentation of Christ in the Temple," *Luthers Werke* vol. LII, 688- 99, qu. in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 158.

[11] *Formula of Concord* (1577), part II, chapter VIII, qu. in Henry Eyster Jacobs, ed., *The Book of Concord; Or, The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1916), 628.

[12] Qu. in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works,* Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.) (St Louis: Concordia, 1955-) vol. XXII., 23-24.

[13] Marginalia, note 't' on Matthew 1:24, in *The Geneva Bible (1560)* facsimile edition (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007), fol. AA.ii.v.

[14] See Wright, 'Mary in the Reformers,' 171-72 and Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants,' Studies in Church History 39 (2004), 212.

German Lutheran scholastic theologian Johann Gerhard (1582-1637), and English Puritan John Mayer (1583-1664) in the first half of the seventeenth century.[15]

Sinlessness and the Immaculate conception

The question of Mary's purported sinfulness and the related question of the immaculate conception was much more contended. But again, our time machine hopping from 500 to 1500 would not have witnessed much change in the state of the debate. The debate was held among the Fathers themselves. On the matter of Mary's *actual* sin (whether she committed anything that could fairly be called sin), Saints Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, and Cyril of Alexandria were among those who charged Mary with sin when preaching on certain passages in the Gospels. Saint Augustine seems to have been the first specifically and emphatically to have exempted Mary from all sin,[16] and by the early sixteenth century, it was his view that had become the Catholic mainstream.

Again, while we might have expected the Reformers to have at least reopened the debate, if not to have been explicit about Mary's failings, we find considerable reserve on the subject; and if anything, an inclination toward Mary's sinlessness. Zwingli, for instance, called Mary, 'the highest of creatures next to her Son,' who was 'pure, holy, spotless.'[17] Luther was similarly explicit. In his commentary on the Magnificat, he confessed his belief that 'Mary was without sin,' though characteristically insisting that this was because of God's grace rather than her inherent merit.[18] Even John Calvin does not shrink from calling her 'the *holy* Virgin,' and in commenting on one of those passages where certain of the Fathers found Mary failing in faith (the question, 'How can this be?' in response to Gabriel's news), wrote, 'We ought not to give ourselves very much trouble to acquit her of all blame.'[19] Rather like Luther's insistence that Mary's sinlessness was not ontologically necessary but a gift of grace, Hugh Latimer wrote, 'though she never sinned, yet she was not so impeccable, but she might have sinned, if she had not been preserved.'[20]

So much for Mary's *actual* sin. But what about *original* sin? This is, of course, where the belief later dogmatised as the Immaculate Conception comes in; the belief that Mary was preserved free from contagion of original sin at the moment of *her* conception in the womb of her mother St Anne. Our time machine travellers emerging blinking into the sunlight in circa 1500 would once again have found that not much had changed in a millennium, despite – on this dogma in particular – a long and occasionally bitter debate in the intervening centuries. The Immaculate Conception had never gained much ground in the Eastern Church, whose underdeveloped doctrine of original sin made it considerably less necessary or relevant; and was expressly denied by Anselm of Canterbury (1033/34-1109), the otherwise impeccably Marian devotee Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and Bonaventure (1217-1274) among others. Chief among their arguments against the theory were that if Mary were not saved from the guilt and corruption of original sin, Christ was not universal Saviour. The tide of opinion had only begun to shift with Duns Scotus' (1265-1308) argument at the turn of the fourteenth century that relied on logical rather than biblical reasoning: *potuit*, *decuit*, *ergo fecit* – God *could* preserve Mary free from original sin (*potuit*), it was fitting for him to do so (*decuit*), therefore he in fact did so (*ergo fecit*). The Franciscans carried Scotus' baton through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; culminating in a decree in its favour at the Council of Basle in 1439, only for that session to fail to receive papal recognition. Pope Sixtus IV in 1483 only went so far as to outlaw any criticism of the belief without making it dogma. At the outset of the Reformation, it was then an open question. As Diarmaid MacCulloch writes in 'Mary and Sixteenth Century Protestants,'

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[15] Both qu. in Carl L. Beckwith (ed.), *Ezekiel, Daniel (Old Testament XII)* (Reformation Commentary on Scripture) (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 215.

[16] Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, xxxvi.42.

[17] Cited in Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 158.

[18] *Luther's Works*, vol. XXI, 327.

[19] John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 40.

[20] Cited in Wright, 'Mary in the Reformers,' 174.

> As to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, Protestants could simply stand back and enjoy the continuing row within the Roman Church on this topic.[21]

In fact, some of the Reformers engaged rather than avoided the row, and not all were opposed – some were in favour (such as Zwingli, Bullinger, Kapsar von Schwenckfeld (1489/90-1561), and the early Luther);[22] others preserved a reverent silence. It is easy to see why the Reformers might be attracted to the immaculate conception on Christological grounds. The federal theory for the transmission of Adam's guilt and corruption to every human being (because he represented his posterity covenantally) was not developed until the turn of the seventeenth century, and so more or less ingenious versions of the Fathers' *realism* theory (that we were *really in* Adam when he sinned) was 'the only show in town.' Once one is committed to a realistic theory of the transmission of original sin, however, you have a Christological problem: how is Jesus free from the stain of original sin while having a true and complete human nature descended from Adam and received entirely from his mother? When one requires Christ, by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, to have a human body free from the guilt and corruption of original sin; and when one grants that he received that body entirely *from Mary*; and when one admits that the body of the mother is intimately connected to the body of the baby in the womb; one can see the need for *Mary's body* to be 'preserved' from original sin by a preparatory miracle of grace prior to the incarnation itself. It is easy to see how the requirements for Christ's human body would necessarily become requirements for his mother's: God had in Mary, wrote Scwenckfeld, 'the green wood and choice material, that is, a *pure, holy flesh born from God*, founded for the building [of the temple – human body and soul – of Jesus Christ]…that the whole Christ might be born from her.'[23]

For much the same reasons as rehearsed by those Fathers and Scholastics against the idea, other Reformers (and increasingly so as the Reformation century progressed) argued against excepting Mary from the scope of original sin. Calvin argued that she must have been encompassed by original sin in order to require ritual purification in the temple;[24] and the later Luther argued that 'though Mary has been conceived in sin, yet the Holy Spirit takes her flesh and blood and purifies them'[25] – though this ends up in some respects being a distinction without a difference; since even the mature Roman dogma holds that Mary was cleansed and preserved from original sin at the very moment of her conception.

What must be granted overall, therefore, is that the Reformers were not clear outliers on the question of Mary's actual or original sin but were within the range of opinions found inside the Roman Church. The immaculate conception was even debated at the Council of Trent: while the Seventh Session in 1547 spoke of original sin being transmitted to the *entire* human race (making no exception for the Blessed Virgin), this sentence was then deleted and, at the Fourteenth Session in 1551, Mary was at last specifically excepted. The internecine Roman debate about the doctrine was only in fact finally settled by Pope Pius IX's papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus* in 1854.

Assumption

Of the four now-dogmas, without a doubt the bodily assumption of Mary – the belief that when she died, she received an immediate bodily resurrection and was taken up (assumed) body and soul into heaven – was the most tenuously held on *both* sides of the Reformation divide.

The dogma of the Assumption came from traditions much later than that of Mary's perpetual virginity. In 355, Epiphanius in his work *Panarion* simply commented that no-one knew anything about

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[21] MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants,' 211.

[22] See Wright, 'Mary in the Reformers,' 179.

[23] Kaspar von Schwenckfeld, *On the Flesh of Christ* (1584), qu. in Beth Kreitzer, *Luke (New Testament III)*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 19. My emphasis.

[24] John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 139.

[25] *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung Werke* 45:51, qu. in Plass, Ewald M. (ed.), *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, (St Louis: Concordia, 1959), vol. I, 152.

Mary's death. That lacuna was filled by embellished legend and tradition over the course of the next century. A pseudonymous late fourth century tract, *Discourse of St John the Divine* first mentioned the idea of Mary's assumption; and a fifth century rumour that Emperor Marcian had asked Juvenal to send the mortal remains of Mary for reinterment in Constantinople only to be sent an empty coffin and a winding sheet – for there was no body, helped embed the idea in the popular imagination. Still, however, the belief did not gain official sanction: Pope Gelasius I decreed that another anonymous source in its favour, *Transitus Maria*, ought *not* be read by the faithful. But the tide turned from the late sixth century, with Gregory of Tours (538-594) bringing the belief into the mainstream; and Pope Sergius I (r.687-701) in the late seventh century importing the Feast of the Dormition (15th August) from the Eastern Church as the Feast of the Assumption. By the time of Thomas Aquinas, it was still regarded only as a 'pious hypothesis,' argued once again on the basis of *potuit, decuit, fecit*; though the popularity of its associated feast vastly outpaced the Magisterium.

Given the way in which the assumption of Mary was deployed in ways that might be said to qualify the uniqueness and significance of Jesus' humanity (for instance, Bernard's argument that the assumption of the Virgin meant that now human nature had been raised higher than the angels, which a classic Protestant reading of Hebrews chapter 2 would say is the sole office of *Christ*), we might expect immediate and universal condemnation of the belief. While by the close of the century, that pretty much is the case (William Perkins for instance calling it 'the idolatrie of our times'[26]), in the first decades of the Reformation there was apparently some wiggle room among the Reformers. Luther's new Church Order of 1523 retained the feast of the Assumption and he preached upon it several times. Zwingli said that he 'firmly trust that [Mary] is exalted by God above all creatures of blessed men or angels in eternal bliss,' which combined with Zurich's retention of the Feast of the Assumption, is likely to signal belief in her bodily rapture.[27] Bullinger, (Zwingli's successor at Zurich) happily and unambiguously confessed that Mary's 'sacrosanct body was borne by angels into heaven,' and in a 1539 book affirmed, 'For this reason indeed we believe the sacred body of Mary, the bearer of God, the most pure home and temple of the Holy Spirit, to have been carried by angels up to heaven,' justifying his view (as had and still do many Roman Catholics) with reference to the precedents of Enoch and Elijah.[28] Bucer was similarly adamant that 'no Christian doubts that the most worthy Mother of the Lord lives with her beloved Son in heavenly joy,'[29] and though Luther abolished the feast of the Assumption by the 1540s, even then and thereafter he continued to affirm that Mary is now in heaven as Queen; and reserved his judgment on whether she is in or out of the body.[30]

The Assumption was of course only dogmatised *ex cathedra* by Pius XII in *Munificentissimus Deus* in the year 1950. Once again, the Reformers' ambivalence on the matter four centuries' earlier was neither univocal nor egregious.

Praise and honour

So much for the four dogmas: the two that were dogmatic in the Reformation, the Reformers endorsed; the two that were debated in the Roman Church at the outset of the Reformation, the Reformers likewise debated. But what about the Reformers' attitude towards Mary as an object of praise and adoration?

Contemporary Protestants often seem to be rather equivocal about whether Mary ought to have a special place in our devotion. For instance, consider the Church of Scotland report *The Motherhood of God* (1984), which says that Christians ought to, 'remember [Mary] with particular honour and respect' as one who was 'as good and as fallen and as ordinary as any.'[31] It's characteristically

[26] William Perkins, *A Warning Against the Idolatrie of the Last Times* (Cambridge: John Legate, 1601), 174.
[27] Qu. in Gottfried Wilhelm Locher, *Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 88.
[28] H. Bullinger, *De origine erroris libri duo* (Zurich, 1539), fol. 69v; translated and cited in MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants,' 203.
[29] M. Bucer, qu. in R. Bäumer and L. Scheffczyk (eds.), *Marienlexikon*, vol III (St Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1991), 200.
[30] See Greene-McCreight. 'Mary goes to reform school,' 153.
[31] A. E. Lewis (ed.), *The Motherhood of God* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1984), 59-60.

ambivalent: for if Mary is 'as fallen and as ordinary as any,' why *should* she be remembered 'with particular honour and respect'? Surely only if she is *extraordinary* should she receive *extraordinary* honour.

The Reformers were far more willing to grant and laud Mary's exceptional qualities than their modern-day heirs. Her crucial role in the plan of redemption was often remarked upon and celebrated. Calvin, for instance, wrote how 'she kept the teaching which today opens to us the kingdom of heaven and which leads us to our Lord Jesus Christ; she kept this as a deposit and *through her* we received this and today we are edified therefrom.'[32] Mary's moral qualities were constantly praised and held up as an example to the faithful. She was, said Latimer, 'endued with singular gifts and graces from above.'[33] Luther lauded her 'holiness of spirit' and her humility, writing, 'Mary cannot be sufficiently praised as a creature,' and 'Mary can never be lauded and extolled enough.'[34] In view of her singular graces, she was for some the very epitome of the faithful Church. Lutheran theologian Johann Wigand (1523-1587) sounds positively Tridentine in claiming 'the Virgin Mary is an image of the Christian church' in her obedient, faithful, and hopeful pilgrimage through the world – with fellow Lutheran Caspar Cruciger (1504-1548) similarly reading the wedding at Cana pericope as having allegorical significance, with Mary 'represent[ing] the sincere part of the church.'[35]

Especially, however, the Reformers saw Mary as the preeminent example of *saving faith*; and as such the first and greatest Christian saved by grace. Two retranslations first suggested by Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) in his annotations on the New Testament and then adopted by the Reformers changed the nature of that for which Mary was remarkable. Κεχαριτωμένη in Luke 1:28 ought not to be rendered *gratia plena* (full of grace), but more accurately *gratiosa*, 'highly favoured.' This was the difference between her possessing the fulness of grace as a personal inherent quality (and therefore, in the context of the Roman concept of the treasury of grace, able to dispense her supererogatory merit); and her being the special object or recipient of *God's* grace. The former made her approach the status of co-redemptrix; the latter made her the pattern and paragon of how all the elect are saved by God in Christ. Similarly, ταπείνωσιν in Luke 1:48 was not her *humilitas* (humility) as her own inner moral quality, but rather her 'lowly estate.' It was this, in fact, that qualified her to be 'the foremost example of the grace of God' as Luther called her;[36] because God had raised her up from lowliness, inferiority, obscurity, poverty to play the greatest role of any human person in sacred history. Her elevation to the highest of creaturely status was principally because she exercised perfect faith in the word of God she had received. She was the believer *par excellence*, despite the cost and suffering that the result of her faithful obedience would bring. Her faith brought about both her justification (her saved status, hence rejoicing in God her *Saviour* in the Magnificat) and sanctification (her growth in personal holiness and conformity to the image of her Son). Luther wrote that Mary's *faith* was what made her 'pious…and peaceable.' It was by her *faith* that she was 'blessed and endowed with every kind of grace.'[37] She had, Luther wrote, 'a faith of which there is no equal in the entire Bible.'[38] In other words, for the Reformers Mary becomes more a praiseworthy example rather than an exception.

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[32] John Calvin, *Calvini Opera* (Braunschweid-Berlin, 1863-1900), XLVI, 310; XXXXV, 36.

[33] Hugh Latimer and G. E. Corris (ed.), *Sermons and Remains* (Cambridge: CUP, 1845), 227; qu. in David Siegenthaler, 'Popular Devotion and the English Reformation: The Case of *Ave Maria*,' Anglican and Episcopal History 61 (1992), 6.

[34] *Luther's Works* XXI, 304; LIV, 85; Plass, *What Luther Says*, vol. III, 1256.

[35] Johann Wigand, 'Gospel on the Day of Mary's Visitation,' qu. in Kreitzer, *Luke*, 23; Caspar Cruciger, *Commentary on John*, qu. in Craig S. Farmer, *John 1-12 (New Testament IV)*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downer Grove: IVP, 2014), 65.

[36] *Luther's Works*, vol. XXI, 323.

[37] Martin Luther, 'Sermon on Luke 2:41-52,' in *Luthers Werke*, vol. XII, 409-19; qu. in Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 161.

[38] Martin Luther, Sermon on the Annunciation to Mary (1522), qu. in Kreitzer, *Luke*, 19.

And praise her they did. Scot McKnight in his book, *The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus*, ends his survey of Mary's significance and qualities by suggesting that every church hold an 'Honor Mary Day' each year.[39] But if contemporary American Protestant churches have no time set aside for honouring Mary, that is not due to the direct legacy of the Reformers. Only Geneva suppressed all festivals of Mary (and, for that matter, of all the apostles also); Zwingli's Zurich and Luther's church order retained four (the Annunciation, Purification, Visitation, and for a while at least the Assumption); Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer retained the Annunciation and Purification, though curiously dropped the Visitation (which in the Kalendar in use at the time, fell on Cranmer's birthday, July 2nd), even though Martin Bucer (the continental Reformer most consulted on the English Church liturgy) lobbied for its restoration.[40]

Quite apart from retaining between two and four Marian feasts, even the *Ave Maria* survived the first decades of the Reformation as a hymn of praise to the Blessed Virgin. It's important to mention that the *Ave Maria* we know today was only authorised by Pius V in the Roman Breviary of 1568. At the outset of the Reformation, it only consisted of the two *biblical* salutations; with Gabriel's greeting, 'Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee,' joined by Urban IV in 1261 to Elizabeth's 'Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.' The third and fourth parts of the present prayer were added, therefore, in the course of the Catholic (Counter-) Reformation.[41] Several of the Reformers, then, had little problem with the use of what was then a devotion entirely composed from Scripture. Latimer allowed its use but only if understood as a salutation to Mary, and not a prayer *per se*. He particularly objected to the medieval belief that no *Pater noster* could be recited without the *Ave Maria*, and insisted that 'one *Ave Maria* well said, and devoutly, with affection, sense, and understanding, is better than twenty-five said superstitiously.'[42] Zwingli likewise retained its use as praise of Mary, not prayer to her; and it remained a liturgical staple in Zurich until 1563.[43] The *Ave Maria* appeared in Protestant English official primers in 1535, 1537, and 1543; only dropping out in the second Prayer Book of 1552.[44] In the 1537 primer, *The Institution of a Christian Man* (popularly known as the Bishops' Book), it was prefaced with the following:

> The church has used to unjoin it to the end of the *Pater noster*, as an hymn, laud, and praise partly of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ for our redemption, and partly of the Blessed Virgin, for her humble consent given and expressed to the angel at this salutation…the Virgin lacks not her lauds, praise, and thanks for her excellent and singular virtues.[45]

While the later decades of the Reformation would see the Protestant churches move decisively away from hailing Mary in chant and song, in the early decades it was not considered wholly improper.

Mediatrix and Co-Redemptrix

But the *Ave Maria* did start to drop out of Protestant praise and worship because it proved impossible to separate its function in praise of Mary from its petitioning her; and to this the Reformers were decidedly and univocally opposed.

Prayers directed to (or more precisely – in official dogma at least – *through*) Mary had been part of Christian worship since the fourth century; though it appears to have been a controversial innovation – the Council of Carthage in 397 saw fit to forbid directing prayers to the saints at the

[39] McKnight, *The Real Mary*, 144.
[40] See MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants,' 202.
[41] See Siegenthaler, 'The Case of *Ave Maria*', 2.
[42] Hugh Latimer and G. E. Corris (ed.), *Sermons and Remains* (Cambridge: CUP, 1845), 230; qu. in Siegenthaler, 'The Case of *Ave Maria*,' 7.
[43] MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants,' 202.
[44] Siegenthaler, 'The Case of *Ave Maria*,' 7.
[45] *The Institution of a Christian Man* (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1976), *sig.* Aa.iii; qu. in Siegenthaler, 'The Case of *Ave Maria*,' 8.

altar. In Mary's case, she came increasingly to be regarded as Mediatrix; a mediator not only as the one through whom the Saviour descends to humanity (which as we've seen was readily accepted by the Reformers), but also the one through whom humanity ascends to the Saviour. It was this second aspect of her mediation to which the Reformers strongly objected. Most were willing to grant that Mary prays for the church; but to seek Mary as intermediary for our prayers to the Father via his (and her) Son was to most intolerable: Jesus is the only mediator, and there is no deficiency in the mediation with the Father that he makes on behalf of sinners that come to him in faith. Those medieval prayers that spoke of Christ the stern judge only being disposed to grant mercy because of the petitions of his mother grossly offended the Reformers' view of the unique and complete office of Christ. By way of example, take Richard of Saint-Laurent's (d. 1250) reflections on the mercy of Mary *in contrast to* the judgment of her Son:

> God the Father gave us his Son as our Father and King of Justice, and to moderate his justice he gave us the Mother of Pity and the Queen of Mercy. For often the mercy of this mother graciously liberates what the justice of this Father [Christ] would rightly condemn.[46]

As a result of this sort of excess (always more at the level of popular piety than pronouncements of the magisterium), the Protestant confessions such as the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Thirty-Nine Articles* soon outlawed the invocation of saints as 'repugnant to the word of God.' Article XXI of the Augsburg Confession (1530) for instance insisted that Christ is 'the *only* high priest, advocate, and intercessor before God. He alone has promised to hear our prayers.' It was vital to the Reformers' *solus Christus* soteriology that grace and mercy are *Christ's* gifts, not Mary's. Again, on this matter the Roman Church was not formally decided; and there were currents of reform within the Roman Church that also viewed sceptically Mary's burgeoning mediatorial role. Erasmus, for instance, representing the reforming humanist strain in the Roman Church, in his *Colloquies* of 1526 ridiculed the practice, and depicted Mary a being delighted that Luther had dried up the stream of prayers to her because she was so wearied with being asked.[47] Thomas More (1478-1535) was similarly aggrieved by the way in which Mary often displaced her Son in popular prayer and devotion.[48]

If Mary as Mediatrix was controversial, any notion of her being *co-redemptrix* was utterly beyond the pale. Again, however, the propriety of calling Mary Redemptrix was debated within the Western Church prior to and apart from Luther's protest. The Franciscans were characteristically in favour; the humanists were against. To quote Erasmus again: 'Christ is the anchor of our salvation, Mary is not.'[49] On this debate, the Reformers were indeed univocal. The work of redemption is Christ's and Christ's alone. Mary may have been the special object of God's grace, but she was not Dispensatrix thereof. The whole system of the treasury of grace, supererogatory merit, purgatory, and indulgences was overturned by Luther and the other Reformers' forensic account of justification by Christ's imputed righteousness through faith-union. Without a treasury of grace, Mary had nothing to dispense and the believer united to Christ had no remaining need for her to supply: all was found in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone. Rather than being on the dispensing side of grace, Mary was the first among those in the New Testament dispensation on its *receiving* side: Luther said of Mary, 'We should not overestimate her personal gifts, for her grace and her relation to justification is the same as ours.'[50]

Conclusions

In sum, then, on the dogmas in place at the time (Mother of God and ever-Virgin), the Reformers were unimpeachably orthodox. On those pious beliefs that would *later* become dogma (her sinlessness and Immaculate Conception and her bodily Assumption), some of the early Reformers at least were well-disposed or maintained respectful reserve. The Reformers' discomfort concerning

[46] Qu. in H. Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* vol. I (London/New York, 1963), 268.
[47] Desiderius Erasmus, *Colloquies*, trans. N. Bailey (1526; London: Reeves & Turner, 1878), vol. II, 5.
[48] See *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (ARCIC Agreed Statement (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005), 41.
[49] Qu. in L. E. Halkin, *Erasmus: a Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1993), 230.
[50] *Luthers Werke*, XV, 478.

Mary's mediatorial and redemptive roles was reflective of a debate *within* the whole Western church at the time; and some of those Catholic reformists that never separated from the Roman Church shared much of the Reformers' soteriological and doxological disquiet.

What happened then? How did the position on Mary go from being the locus of dogmatic unity and the subject of legitimate debate to being the clear blue water (and not a little antagonism) we see today? When and why did Mary become quite so contrary?

Without a doubt, there was in the course of the Reformation century a process of mutual hardening of the respective positions – a 'reaction formation' (to use Scot McKnight's phrase)[51] that drove the sides further and further apart. A similar phenomenon can be observed regarding other loci of doctrinal debate. For instance, the status of the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament (Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Ecclesiasticus, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, and Greek additions to Esther and Daniel) had been debated within the Church since the fourth century (Ss Jerome and Augustine taking up opposite views), and still at the outset of the sixteenth century was contestable without serious ecclesiastical censure. Only when Protestant Reformers and churches declared decisively that the deuterocanonical books should *not* be accounted for inspired Scripture (e.g. Luther in 1534) did the Roman Church make explicit that anyone who 'receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts…as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition' must be anathematised.[52] It seems Mary endured a similar fate: a move toward more reserve concerning Mary on the part of the Protestants was met with a corresponding move toward more expansive Mariology on the part of the Roman Church (and/or vice-versa). There would also be the effect of a decisive shift in balance. Again, a comparison to another area of debate is instructive. On the eve of the Reformation, it was far from clear that conciliarism (the supremacy of ecumenical Councils over the papacy in matters of faith) would permanently succumb to ultramontanism (papal supremacy over ecumenical Councils); but as the Fifth Lateran Council closed with a condemnation of conciliarism in 1517 (the very year Luther lodged his protest against the sale of indulgences), those with the most scruples about unrestricted papal prerogatives were naturally attracted towards the breakaway churches. This undoubtedly resulted in the consolidation of the ultramontanist position among those who remained and eventually paved the way for the dogma of papal infallibility in 1870. Similarly, when a bloc of those within the Church who might have been the more restrained regarding Mary on soteriological grounds declared for the Reformation, the balance of those remaining in the Roman Church shifted decisively towards further Marian development. While a fifteenth century Pope could not have dogmatised the Immaculate Conception nor the Assumption without risking serious consternation or worse, later Popes could do so (in 1854 and 1950 respectively) with relatively little (though not zero) internal controversy.

Another factor that further (and quickly) widened the rift on the place of Mary in doctrine and piety was the way she became 'weaponised' by the Catholic (Counter-) Reformation. Consider for instance the first executions of the Reformation – the two Augustinian friars (Voes and van den Esschen) who were executed in Antwerp on July 1st 1523.[53] Their alleged heresies had nothing to do with Mary (rather their trial concerned their beliefs about the authority of the pope); but in a sermon preached in the city the next day, the claim was made that the pair had recanted their soul-destroying error thanks to an apparition of and the intercession of the Virgin Mary just before their execution. Mary had, it was claimed, interceded for them at the hour of their death. Within the first few years, therefore, Mary was being deployed for polemical purposes to vindicate the traditions and beliefs of the old religion and as approving witness (if also merciful mediator) to the Church's censure of the new heretics.

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[51] McKnight, *The Real Mary*, 5.

[52] Fourth Session of the Council of Trent, 1546; quoted in J. Waterworth, *The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent* (London: Dolman, 1848), 19. The Council of Florence had listed the deuterocanonical books in the canon, but without such an explicit and pointed reference to receiving the books 'entire with all their parts.'

[53] For this paragraph I am indebted to Robert Christman, 'The Marian Dimension to the First Executions of the Reformation,' Church History and Religious Culture 95 (2015), 408-34.

The deployment of Mary in popular Catholic polemic quite unsurprisingly led, as Diarmaid MacCulloch avers, to Protestant reticence in response:

> It is not surprising that the tangles gradually led to a general Protestant silence falling over Mary. The aggressive promotion of Our Lady by Rome as a symbol of its mid-century recovery did not help matters.[54]

The Protestant silence was literally visible: while images of Mary were still being commissioned and placed in Lutheran Germany in the first decades of the Reformation, no new such images of Mary were placed in Lutheran churches after mid-century.[55]

Mention of images leads us to mention one other factor in consolidating the increasingly acrimonious divide over Mary that characterised the turn of the seventeenth century and beyond. While the iconoclasm of the Protestants was directed against *all* religious images (Marian statuary was not specifically targeted), when an image of Mary was defaced or destroyed it was especially resented. Again, this had the effect of *reinforcing* Catholic devotion to Mary through her physical representations, even and especially those that had been damaged. There arose 'cults of battered Marys' – images rescued after Protestant vandalism became exemplars of Mary's *Mater dolorosa* sufferings: the most famous of which was an image damaged by the English in a raid on Cadiz in 1596, which was renamed 'Santa Maria Vulnerata.'[56] By the close of the sixteenth century, however much the notion might have upset the early Reformers, Mary had been successfully recruited as the symbol of and team mascot for the Roman Church. Mary had become, as Bridget Heal writes, 'an emblem of Catholic allegiance, a rallying point for the Catholic cause.'[57]

From the late sixteenth to the late twentieth century, then, Mary became the clear delineator – the litmus test – that she was not in the first decades of the Reformation. Though it is hard to imagine Mary not being a focus of polemic given that subsequent history, Diarmaid MacCulloch is surely right to point out that things might not have turned out the way they did. There were reformist currents within the Roman Church concerning Marian doctrine and devotion that, had they succeeded, might have kept Mary from becoming quite contrary. Of Erasmus' Mariology, MacCulloch writes,

> Here was a possible direction in which reformed Catholicism might travel…There might have been a future for a Mariology drawing on the Christocentric theology of the Passion in a Catholicism which had not been traumatized by the Reformation.[58]

That reformist current did not immediately recede after the Reformation began in earnest. MacCulloch gives the example of the *Spirituali* movement in Italy in the 1530s-40s which developed a Christocentric Mariology; including a rosary dwelling on thirty-three mysteries of the life of Christ. 'The *Spirituali* became a might-have-been of Catholic history.'[59]

Through the proceedings generated by the ecumenical movement, Vatican II's Marian restraint and clarification,[60] and the Protestant *ressourcement* of the riches of the piety and theology of the medieval Church, Mary is arguably now less a controversial figure than she has been for some four

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[54] MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants', 214.
[55] *Ibid.*, 215.
[56] *Ibid.,* 199.
[57] Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500-1648* (Cambridge, 2007), 149.
[58] MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants', 195.
[59] *Ibid.*, 196.
[60] Witness how insistent *Lumen Gentium* is on the sole mediation of Jesus Christ and his exclusive provision of saving grace: 'The maternal duty of Mary toward men in no wise obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power. For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men originates, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it. In no way does it impede, but rather does it foster the immediate union of the faithful with Christ.' *Lumen Gentium* in *Vatican II Documents* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011).

hundred years. Could it be the particular charism of English Catholics in the 'Catholic and reformed' Church of England to embody the might-have-been of the early sixteenth century? A moderate Mariology resembling that of Luther or Bullinger, Erasmus or the *Spirituali*: regarding only *Mater Dei* and *Semper Virgine* as dogma, the Immaculate Conception and Assumption as pious *adiaphora* to be commended to (but not, as an article of faith, *required of*) the faithful, and developing a decidedly Christocentric Mariolatry that lauds and venerates the Blessed Virgin – not just as a sleeping saint but as a present and active member of the Church – in such a way that doesn't impinge upon but magnifies her Son's sole mediation and redemption. Such would be a great contribution to making Mary less contrary for the generations ahead.

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