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The English Reformers and the Blessed Virgin MaryMichael Nazir-Ali and Nicholas Sagovsky¹

Abstract

The writing of the sixteenth century Reformers is characterised by strong reactions against contemporary Catholic Marian piety. The positive Marian teaching of Anglican Reformers concentrates on the Incarnation and is summed up in the acceptance of Mary as the Theotokos because this is seen to be profoundly Scriptural. The Immaculate Conception was rejected by some Reformers who wrote strongly against the sinlessness of Mary, though some accepted that her sinlessness was now a part of the consensus fidelium and, therefore, to be believed. All stress Mary's need for a Saviour (cf Luke 1:47) - for some Reformers this can also mean preservation from sin - the agency of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus, and Mary's real motherhood of her son. In the writers consulted, there is an absolute consensus about the perpetual virginity of Mary. Where the Assumption is discussed, it is either rejected or held to be of the adiaphora. From 1561, the Anglican calendar contained five Marian feasts (Conception, Nativity, Annunciation, Visitation and Purification, with no feast on 15 August for the Assumption) but the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer (1559) is almost devoid of specific Marian texts, and what

¹ This paper could not have been written without the invaluable preliminary research work undertaken by the Rev'd Paul Williams, to whom the authors wish to express their gratitude. As a study in the theological writings of the English Reformers, it is heavily indebted to the meticulous editing of classic Anglican sixteenth century texts for the Parker Society. This doughty series gives to the authors and texts it includes a kind of 'canonicity' which has influenced not only the content of this paper but the self-understanding of Anglicanism. *Caveat lector*: one has in addition to look elsewhere to capture the flavour of popular devotion, as has been so convincingly demonstrated by Eamon Duffy in *The Stripping of the Altars, Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), and by others.

there are stress only that her purity and the Son took human nature 'of her substance'. The basic shape of sixteenth century Anglican teaching about Mary was avowedly that of the Scriptures and the first four General Councils. Only in the seventeenth century was there a richer recovery of Anglican reflection on Mary's place in the tradition of the Church.

Introduction

In our paper 'The Virgin Mary in Anglican Tradition' (which should be read alongside this present paper), we sought, amongst other things, to give an overview of the development of Anglican tradition about Mary in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What we offered was a sketch, spanning the period of late medieval Marian devotion, through the sixteenth century period of criticism and reform, to the renewal of Marian devotion in the works of the Caroline Divines and the Non-Jurors. We suggested that because of the Reformation controversy, as far as the Church of England was concerned, this area of Christian piety and practice was 'cauterised ... for more than a generation'. The Commission asked us for further work, particularly on the sixteenth century. It is this which forms the substance of this paper.

The Sixteenth Century drive for Reform

In the early sixteenth century, criticism of exaggerated Marian devotion² did not lead Catholics like Erasmus (1466/9-1536) and More (1478-1535) to consider breaking with Rome. Erasmus visited Walsingham twice in 1512 and 1514. He criticised the Christians of his time because they never seemed to address themselves to God, but only to Our Lady and the Saints. Thus in *The Shipwreck*, from his *Familiar Colloquies*, the sailors called on Mary, chanting the *Salve Regina*:

² For a brief account of late medieval Marian devotion, see Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 256-65.

They implored the Virgin Mary, calling her Star of the Sea, Queen of Heaven, Mistress of the World, Port of Salvation and many other flattering titles which Holy Scripture nowhere applies to her.³

Thomas More wrote in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*:

The people in speaking of our lady: Of al our Ladies, saith one, I love best our Lady of Walsingham, And I, saith the other, our Lady of Ipswich. In whiche woordes what meanth she but her love and her affeccion to the stocke that standeth in the chapel of Walsingham or Ippiswiche?...Doth it not plainly appeare that either thei trust in the images of Christes stede and our Ladies, letting Christ and our Lady go, or take at lest wise those ymages that thei wene thei were verily the one Christ, the other our Lady her self.³

There were, however, other, more radical reformers, influenced from the 1520s by Lutheranism, for whom such criticism was integral to a much wider theological and practical drive for reform. Hugh Latimer (c1485-1555), known for his powerful preaching, is typical of such critics, when he comments in a sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany on the wise men's worship of Jesus:

Here is confounded and overthrown the foolish opinion and doctrine of the papists, which would have us to worship a creature before the Creator; Mary before her Son. ... Mary was a blessed woman, above all women, and yet not such a one as should be called upon and worshipped.⁴

Of the sixteenth century Anglican writers, John Jewel (1522-71), Bishop of Salisbury, is one who returns frequently to this issue:

That blessed mother of our Saviour Christ hath been openly blasphemed in the church: she was called *spes, vita, dulcedo*, "our hope, our life, and our sweetness". And further: *Salva omnes sperantes in te*: "Save all them that

³ See, H Graef, *Mary, A history of Dictrine and Devotion*, 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965), vol.2 pp.3-4

³ Quoted in *The Two Books of Homilies*, (Oxford: University Press, 1859), p. 224n

⁴ Hugh Latimer, *Works*, Parker Society edition, 2 vols, vol. 2 (Cambridge: 1845), p. 153.

trust in thee." Thus have men openly prayed unto her, to the great blaspheming of her holy name.⁵

Or, in similar vein:

I beseech you, mark the form and fashion of their prayers. To the blessed virgin they said: *Ave Maria, salus et consolatrix vivorum et mortuorum*: "Hail Mary, the saviour and comforter both of quick and dead." And again: *O gloriosa virgo Maria, libera nos ab omni malo, et a poenis inferni*: "O glorious virgin Mary, deliver us from all evil, and from the pains of hell." Again: *Monstra te esse matrem*: "Show that thou art a mother." They call her *regina coeli, domina mundi, unica spes miserorum*; "queen of heaven,⁶ lady of the world, the only hope of them that be in misery". It were tedious and unpleasant to recite the like their blasphemies. ... How foul a kind of idolatry was it to worship the image with the self-same honour wherewith they worship the thing itself that is represented by the image!⁷

Jewel is thought to have been the author of the homily⁸ 'Against Peril of Idolatry':

When you hear of our Lady of Walsingham, our Lady of Ipswich, our Lady of Wilsdon, and such other, what is it but an imitation of the Gentiles idolaters'

⁵ J. Jewel, 'Sermon on Luke 10:23-4', from *Works*, Parker Society edition, 4 vols, vol. 2 (Cambridge: 1847), p. 1083.

⁶ William Fulke (1538-89) points out that the pejorative use of 'queen of heaven' in the English translations of the Bible in Jeremiah 44 (he refers to verse 7, but the reference should be to verses 18-19), which gave offence to Catholics, follows the Septuagint, Jerome, and the Vulgate. He comments: 'We only do it in despite of the virgin Mary, because the papists blasphemously call her the Queen of heaven' (*A Defence of the Sincere and True Translations of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue, against the Cavils of Greg. Martin*, Parker Society edition, Cambridge: 1843, p. 534).

⁷ J. Jewel, 'Sermon on Romans 13:12', from *Works*, vol. 2, p. 1044. Jewel repeats similar attacks in his 'Upon the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians', *Works*, vol. 2, pp. 899-900; 'The Defence of the Apology of the Church of England', *Works*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: 1848), pp. 571, 577-8; 'The Defence of the Apology of the Church of England' (contd), *Works*, vol. 4, (Cambridge: 1850), p. 949.

⁸ The first *Book of Homilies* was produced in 1543, but not published until 1547. The second *Book of Homilies* (largely the work of Jewel) was probably completed by 1563, but not published in its final form until 1571.

Diana Agrotera, Diana Coryphea, Diana Ephesia, &c. ... Whereby is evidently meant, that the Saint for the image sake should in those places, yea, in the images themselves, have a dwelling: which is the ground of their idolatry; for where no images be they have no such means.⁹

This whole lengthy homily bears witness to the continuing fear amongst those of a reforming disposition of the idolatrous use of religious images:

Wherefore the images of God, our Saviour Christ, the blessed Virgin Mary, the Apostles, Martyrs, and other of notable holiness, are of all other images most dangerous for the peril of idolatry; and therefore greatest heed to be taken that none of them be suffered to stand publicly in churches and temples. For there is no great dread lest any should fall to the worshipping of the images of Annas, Cayphas, Pilate, or Judas the traitor, if they were set up. But to the other, it is already at full proved, that idolatry hath been, is, and is most like continually to be committed.¹⁰

Though they firmly reject the invocation of Saints, the *Homilies* say nothing specifically about the invocation of Mary,¹¹ but the Reformers' continuing concern about 'idolatry' and the 'invocation of Saints' is evident in the miscellaneous rejection of 'Romish Doctrine' in Article XXII:

The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a

⁹ *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches* (London: SPCK, 1938), Second Book of Homilies, 'The Third Part of the Homily against Peril of Idolatry', p. 236. This passage is apparently derived from Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (quoted, *The Two Books of Homilies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859, p. 224n.). Article XXXV 'Of the Homilies' (composed 1563; slightly altered 1571) specifically commends both the first and the second *Book of Homilies* for their 'godly and wholesome doctrine, and necessary for these times'.

¹⁰ *Certain Sermons or Homilies*, 'The Third Part of the Homily Against Peril of Idolatry', p. 259.

¹¹ Invocation of the Saints (without specific mention of Mary) is strongly rejected in 'The Second Part of the Homily concerning Prayer', *Certain Sermons or Homilies*, p. 348.

fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.¹²

Latimer defended his critical attitude to the *Ave Maria* in the following terms:

As for the *Ave Maria*, who can think that I would deny it? I said it was a heavenly greeting or saluting of our blessed lady, wherein the angel Gabriel, sent from the Father of heaven, did annunciate and shew unto her the goodwill of God towards her, what he would with her, and to what he had chosen her. But I said, it was not properly a prayer, as the *Pater noster*, which our Saviour Christ himself made for a proper prayer ... So that I did not speak against well saying of it, but against superstitious saying of it, and of the *Pater noster* too.¹³

Much of the invocation of Mary to which Jewel and others referred came from the commonplaces of popular piety (for example, *spes, vita, dulcedo*) in primers and other prayer books, some of which gave particular offence. Thomas Rogers (d. 1616) refuted 'the Romish doctrine concerning pardons' by quoting 'a further manifestation of the vanity and impieties of the Romish pardons' from the *Horae beatissimae Virginis Mariae secundum usum Sarum*:¹⁴

Whosoever devoutly will say the prayer following shall merit (thereby) eleven thousand years of pardons; "Hail, Lady, saint Mary, mother of God, queen of heaven, the gate of paradise, the lady of the world, the light eternal, the empress of hell, &c. Pray unto thy beloved Son Jesus Christ for me, and deliver me from all evils, pray for my sins. Amen."

¹² Article XXII, 'Of Purgatory', composed in 1553. 'Romish doctrine' was substituted for 'The Doctrine of the school authors' in 1563.

¹³ Latimer to Morice, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 360. Latimer's remarks were probably occasioned by the Rosary which consists of fifteen decades of *Ave Marias*, each decade being followed by a *Pater Noster*.

¹⁴ T. Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England, an Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1854), pp. 220-1.

A number of the Reformers specifically criticised Bonaventura's composition of 'Our Lady's Psalter' in which the word 'Lady' is substituted for Jahweh, as in '*Domina mea, in te speravi: de inimicis libera me, Domina*: O my Lady, in thee have I put my trust; deliver me from mine enemies, O Lady.'¹⁵ Amongst those who cite Bonaventura are William Tyndale (1494?-1536), William Fulke¹⁶ and John Jewel.¹⁷ Another of Jewel's targets was Cardinal Bembo, 'sometime the pope's secretary', who called 'the same blessed virgin *dominam et deam nostram*, "our lady and goddess"'.¹⁸ This was the kind of overblown language which generated the hostility of the Reformers to the Rosary, also known as the 'Lady-Psalter'. Grindal's Visitation Articles (1576) for the Province of Canterbury enquire of the parishes:

Whether any your parsons, vicars, curates, or ministers be favourers of the Romish or foreign power, letters [i.e. hinderers] of true religion, preachers of corrupt and popish doctrine, or maintainers of sectaries, or do set forth and extol vain and superstitious religion, or be maintainers of the unlearned people in ignorance and error, encouraging or moving them rather to pray in an unknown tongue, than in English, or to put their trust in a certain number of prayers, as in saying over a number of beads, Lady-Psalters, or other like?¹⁹

In the fervid atmosphere of the mid-1570s, Anglican divines were quick to see an

¹⁵ W. Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scripture*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1848), p. 150, note.

¹⁶ William Fulke, *Defence*, p. 528: 'I have seen that horrible blasphemous Psalter of Bonaventure, perverting all the psalms unto the honour of the virgin Mary, with intolerable blasphemy against God and the holy mother of Christ, whose greatest honour is the kingdom of her Son, and in his infinite glory.'

¹⁷ Jewel, 'Upon the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians', *Works*, vol.2, p.900: 'They turn all that is spoken of in the whole book of the psalms of the prophet David either of God or of Christ, and apply it to the virgin Mary, and call that psalter *psalterium beatae Mariae*, "the psalter of blessed Mary". Who will take the pains to peruse it shall find that comfortable speech of our Saviour, "Come unto me, all ye that are weary and laden, and I will ease you," thus blasphemously abused in the second psalm: *Venite ad eam, omnes qui laboratis et tribulati estis; et refrigerium et solatium dabit animabus vestris*: "Come unto her, all ye that travail and be heavily laden; and she will give rest and comfort to your souls."' See also 'On Luke 10:23-4', p. 1083.

¹⁸ Jewel, 'Defence', *Works*, vol. 3, p. 577.

¹⁹ E. Grindal, 'Articles to be Enquired of within the Province of Canterbury', from *Remains*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1843), p. 163.

integral connection between treason, impiety, Roman Catholic doctrine, superstition, ignorance, the liturgical use of Latin, and Marian devotion, especially the Rosary.

Against this background, it is entirely understandable (however shocking it might be to contemporary Liberation Theologians) to find Mary twice extolled in the *Book of Homilies* for her obedience to the political authorities. The 'Sermon on Obedience' tells how:

We read that the holy Virgin Mary, mother to our Saviour Christ, and Joseph, who was taken for his father, at the Emperor's commandment went to the city of David, named Bethlehem, to be taxed among other, and to declare their obedience to the magistrates for God's ordinances' sake. And here let us not forget the blessed Virgin Mary's obedience ...²⁰

In the 'Sermon against Wilful Rebellion', the point is made even more forcefully:

In the New Testament the excellent example of the blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of our Saviour Christ, doth at the first offer itself. ... This obedience of this most noble and most virtuous lady to a foreign and pagan prince doth well teach us, who in comparison to her are most base and vile, what ready obedience we do owe to our natural and gracious Sovereign.²¹

However politically tendentious, this way of putting things serves to illustrate a fundamental polemical stance that characterises the drive for reform: all the Reformers were concerned for the proper reading and use of Scripture as a critical principle against teaching which they found offensive because it obscured or distorted the Gospel. It is typical that this passage should begin: 'In the New Testament, the excellent example of the blessed Virgin Mary ... doth at the first offer itself.' Miles Coverdale (1487/8-1569) is representative of the radical, reforming movement of the early sixteenth century when he expresses against Roman Catholicism his concern

²⁰ 'The Third Part of the Sermon on Obedience', p. 120.

²¹ 'The Second Part of the Sermon against Wilful Rebellion', p. 607.

that teaching about Mary should be based not on the authority of the Church alone but on the witness of Scripture:

Doth not the scripture affirm this doctrine, that the mother of our Saviour is the purest virgin that ever God created? If she had any need of you, ye show her but a faint friendship in reporting that her most pure virginity hath none other ground but the authority of your church.²²

The Marian Teaching of the Anglican Reformers

The central affirmation of Anglican teaching about the Blessed Virgin Mary is expressed in the Cranmer's (1549) Collect for Christmas Day:

Almighty God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin: Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. *Amen.*

The focus is Christological: Mary's significance as a 'pure Virgin' is determined by the significance of the Incarnation. This, like the collects for the Annunciation and the Purification, is a prayer about fruitful participation in the Christian life, not about Mary.

In his 'Lesson of the Incarnation of Christ', John Hooper (c1495-1555) argues closely from Scripture that the humanity of Jesus Christ was formed from the humanity of the Virgin:

And this way, wrought God Almighty the humanity of his only Son, our Saviour, Jesus of Nazareth, without the knowledge of man, using the blessed Virgin by the operation of the Holy Ghost to conceive and bring forth this

²² M. Coverdale, *Remains*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1846), p. 415.

blessed seed, which was made of her, *and took the original of his humanity of and in her*, by the operation of the Holy Ghost; and neither nourished in her womb, neither brought forth she the humanity of Christ, as a thing that God had given Christ from heaven, or else from some other where; but nourished in her, and brought forth the blessed seed that God had made by his holy power of her own substance.²³

He then deals with a number of objections, perhaps the most significant being , 'If Christ took his flesh of a woman, then were he a sinner, and partaker of the sin that naturally dwelleth in every of Adam's posterity.' What Hooper does not say in his answer is that Mary was preserved from sin at or after her conception: on this he remains silent. Nor does he associate the sinlessness of Jesus with the virginity of Mary. His line is strictly Scriptural ('This testimony of the will of God in the scripture should suffice the people of God'):

The scripture declareth not only Christ to be the seed and fruit of the Virgin, but also a seed and fruit without sin, saying, "The thing that shall be born of thee is holy, and shall be called the Son of God."²⁴

Not all early Anglican writers stick as closely to the text of Scripture as Hooper. Jewel's *Apology of the Church of England* and his *Defence of the Apology* are central texts for the establishment amongst Anglicans of the authority of the tradition affirmed by the first four General Councils. He rejects the appeal of heretics like Arius, Nestorius and Eutyches to the Scriptures, because they were not reading the Scriptures as 'the holy fathers' had done :

In the third council kept at Ephesus ... the heretic Nestorius boasted, as ye do, of the scriptures, saying they were of his side, and would neither speak nor hear ought but scriptures, scriptures; and alleging a place or two out of the

²³ J. Hooper, 'A Lesson of the Incarnation of Christ', *Later Writings*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1852), p. 5 (our emphasis).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

gospel, where Mary is called the mother of Jesus, stoutly: "Find me in all scripture," quoth he, "where Mary is called the mother of God." Hereto what said that holy and learned bishop Cyrillus chief in that council? ... "This faith, saith he, "the disciples of God have by tradition left unto us. And although they made no express mention of this word *deipara* yet so to think we have been taught by the holy fathers."²⁵

Jewel's controversy with the Roman Catholic Harding turns on what he sees as the departure of Roman Catholic teaching from 'the authority of the holy fathers':

We despise them [the fathers] not therefore, but rather give God thanks in their behalf, for that it hath pleased him to provide so worthy instruments for his church; and therefore we justly reprove you, for that so unadvisedly and without cause ye have forsaken the steps of so holy fathers. The four general councils wherein you dwell so long, as they make nothing against us, so in sundry points they fight expressly against you.²⁶

Jewel's standard is clearly the teaching that is common to the Scriptures, to the fathers of the Church, and to the first four General Councils. All three converge in his vigorous defence of *theotokos*, the term used at the Council of Ephesus to define Mary's role in the Incarnation.²⁷

There is an important point about language here, made very clearly by Whitaker:

We readily receive even new terms, provided they are such as expound the genuine sense of scripture. Such are *consubstantial*, *Trinity*, *person*, *supposition*, *unbegotten*, *theotokos*, and the like, which are convenient exponents of the meaning of scripture. But we should cautiously avoid those terms which are foreign from the scriptures, such as *transubstantiation*,

²⁵ Jewel, 'Defence', *Works*, vol. 3, p 224.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

²⁷ The *theotokos* is also defended by Whitaker as 'grounded upon the scriptures'. See 'The First Controversy' in *A Disputation on Holy Scripture against the Papists*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1849), pp. 538-9.

*consubstantiation, concomitance, ubiquity, and the like.*²⁸

The controversy about the reading of Scripture, and especially the role of the Church in the reading of Scripture, which is central to the whole Reformation dispute, is exemplified perfectly by the controversy over Marian teaching and devotion.

Some Anglican writers are united in their rejection of the Immaculate Conception. Tyndale, with typical irony, points out the division of opinion between Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus on this issue:

And of your dead saints let us take one for an example. Thomas de Aquino is a saint full of miracles, as friars tell; and his doctrine was, that our lady was born in original sin. And Duns, doing no miracle at all, because, I suppose, no man wotteth where he lieth, improveth that with his sophistry, and affirmeth the contrary. And of the contrary hath the pope, for the devotion of that the grey friars gave him, ye may well think, made an article of the faith.²⁹

Arguing on the same grounds as Jewel - that the *novelty* of the Immaculate Conception is the reason why it cannot be an article of faith - Whitaker writes, But the papists affirm that the church can now prescribe some new article of faith, which had not been esteemed in former ages as a necessary dogma.

That the virgin Mary was conceived without original sin, was formerly

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 603. It is clear from the terms mentioned that Whitaker is differentiating his position not only from Roman Catholic theological terminology but also from Lutheran. On 'transubstantiation', compare Article XXVIII, 'Of the Lord's Supper', (1553, significantly amended 1563): 'Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament,...

²⁹ W. Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1850), pp. 131-2; see also, 'Obedience of a Christian Man', in *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scripture*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1848), pp. 159, 313, 316; W. Fulke, 'The Answer to the Preface', in *Defence*, pp. 35-6; Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England*, p. 100, commenting on Article IX, 'Of Original or Birth-sin' (1553), against 'the Papists, who say, that original sin was not at all, much less remained in the Virgin Mary'; Jewel, 'Defence', *Works*, vol. 3, p. 611.

thought a free opinion, not a necessary part of faith ... But, at present, it is not permitted amongst papists to retain the ancient liberty of opinion on this subject; and he is hardly deemed a catholic, who ascribes any even the slightest taint of sin to Mary.³⁰

The assertion by the Council of Trent that, in speaking of Original Sin, it did not intend to include 'the blessed and immaculate virgin Mary, who gave birth to God'³¹ increased the pressure on Anglican theologians to distance themselves from teaching which they saw as going beyond the witness of Scripture. In commenting on Article XV, 'Of Christ alone without Sin' (1553), Rogers began by presenting Roman Catholic doctrine:

The Papists say that the blessed virgin was pure from all sin, both original and actual. For (these are their own words) "Our Lady never sinned;" Our Lady "sinned not so much as venially in all her life;" she exactly filled the whole law, that is, was without sin.³²

The 'Papists', who teach this, are listed first among 'the adversaries' of the truth that 'All men besides Christ, though regenerate, be sinners'.

The rejection of the Immaculate Conception by some Anglican writers was supported by the critical reading of the text of the Vulgate. Whitaker was only one of a number of Reformers³³ who drew attention to the corruption of the Vulgate text at Genesis

³⁰ Whitaker, *Disputation*, p. 504.

³¹ Council of Trent, *De Pecc. Orig.*, 6. Richard Hooker (c1554-1600) gives a careful reading of the Council's teaching in his 'Answer to Travers' (see *Hooker's Works*, vol. 3, Oxford: Clarendon, 1888, pp. 579-83.): 'In the end, they did wisely cut out their canon by a middle thread, establishing the feast of the Virgin's conception, and leaving the other question [that of Mary's sinlessness] doubtful as they found it; giving only a caveat, that no man should take the decree which pronounced all mankind originally sinful, for a definite sentence concerning the Blessed Virgin' (p. 581). He concludes, 'The Fathers of Trent have not set down any certainty about this question, but left it doubtful and indifferent' (p. 582). Hooker discusses the question no further.

³² Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England*, p. 134.

³³ See also Fulke, *Defence*, p. 74, p.532. That the 'seed' referred to is Christ not Mary

3:15:

Ipsa conteret caput tuum. So it is wrongly and corruptly read in the Vulgate. For the reading ought to be *Ipse* or *Ipsum*, so as to make the reference to the Seed of the woman, not to the woman herself. ... Though all the fathers were to say that we should read *Ipsa*, yet it should by no means be admitted or approved. For the Hebrew copies constantly read *Hu*; the Septuagint exhibits *autos*; the Chaldee Paraphrase confirms the same reading; and lastly, some copies of the Vulgate edition retain *ipse*, some *Ipsum*. Finally, the very drift of the sentence requires that we should understand it of the Seed of the woman, not of the woman. What woman could crush the serpent's head? Was it Mary? I am well aware that this is what is said by them. But how? When she bore Christ? But to bear Christ is not to crush the head of the serpent: ... Was it when she believed in Christ? But this applies to all believers. Christ therefore, and Christ only, is he who by his power could crush and destroy the head of the infernal serpent, and rescue and deliver us out of his jaws.³⁴

However, Latimer in his *Articles untrully, unjustly, uncharitably imputed to me by Dr Powell of Salisbury* seems to accept Mary's sinlessness as part of the *consensus fidelium*:

...foreasmuch as now it is universally and constantly received and applied that she was no sinner, it becometh every man to stand and agree the same, "and so will I," quoth I...Good authors have written that she was no sinner; but

is taught in the Catechism of Edward VI (*The Two Liturgies*, Parker Society edition, Cambridge: 1844, p. 503); by Thomas Becon (c1511-67), though he takes 'an woman' to be 'the most pure and blessed virgin Mary' (*Early Works*, Parker Society edition, Cambridge: 1843, p. 71); by Alexander Nowell (c1507-1602, *Catechism*, Parker Society edition, Cambridge: 1853, p. 151); and by the Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75), whose translated sermons (1577) had a wide circulation in Elizabethan England (see *Decades*, vol. 3, Parker Society edition, Cambridge: 1851, pp. 13-14).

³⁴ Whitaker, *Disputation*, pp. 163-4.

good authors never wrote that she was not saved: for though she never sinned, yet she was not so impeccable, but she might have sinned, if she had not been preserved: it was of the goodness of God that she never sinned...³⁵

Again in Latimer's *Letter to Morice*, a future secretary to archbishop Cranmer, concerning Dr. Powell's accusation he could also be equivocal:

Occasioned of some, not only laymen, but also priests and beneficed men, which gave so much to our lady of devotion without judgment, as though she had not needed Christ to save her: to prove Christ her Saviour, to make Christ a whole Saviour of all that be or shall be saved, I reasoned after this manner: that either she was a sinner, or no sinner: there is no mean. If she were a sinner, then she was redeemed or delivered from sin by Christ, as other sinners be: if she were no sinner, then she was preserved from sin by Christ; so that Christ saved her, and was her necessary Saviour, whether she sinned or no.³⁶

When on the defensive, Latimer was careful not to emphasise his belief that Mary could be said to be a sinner, though he clearly accepted and taught this. At such times, he returned to his primary emphasis on Christ as Saviour:

It hath been said in times past, without sin, that our lady was a sinner; but it was never said, without sin, that our lady was not saved, but a Saviour. I go not about to make our lady a sinner, but to have Christ her Saviour. ... To make a pernicious and damnable lie, to have our lady no sinner, is neither honour nor yet pleasure to our lady; but great sin, to the dishonour and displeasure both of God and our lady.³⁷

It is not absolutely clear, but Nowell's Catechism can be read as affirming Mary's sinlessness - which is significant because it was approved in Convocation in 1563, though not printed until 1570:

³⁵Latimer, *Works*, Vol. 2 pp. 226-7

³⁶ Latimer, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 225-6; cf Letter of Latimer to Morice, pp. 358-9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

M. But why was [Jesus] conceived of the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary, rather than begotten after the usual and natural manner?

S. It behoved that he that should and could satisfy for sins, and entirely restore wicked and damned persons, should not himself be defiled or blemished with any stain or spot of sin ... Therefore, when the seed of man was wholly corrupt and defiled, it behoved that in conception of the Son of God, there should be the marvellous and secret working of the Holy Ghost, whereby he might be fashioned in the womb of the most chaste and pure Virgin, and of her substance that he should not be defiled with the common stain and infection of mankind.³⁸

Nowell appears to attribute this sinless conception jointly to the operation of the Holy Spirit and to Mary's purity ('fashioned in the womb of the most chaste and pure Virgin ... of her substance').³⁹

The Anglican Reformers were also much concerned with the translation of *kecharitomene* as *gratia plena* in Luke 1:28. Wycliffe and Tyndale translated the angel's greeting to Mary 'Hail, full of grace', but in the Geneva Bible of 1557 this became 'Hail, thou that art freely beloved', and in the Authorised Version of 1611, 'Hail, thou that art highly favoured'. Fulke commented:

That we have translated 'Hail, Mary, freely beloved,' or, 'that art in high favour', we have followed the truth of the Greek word, not so denying thereby, but that the virgin Mary, of God's special goodness without her merits, as she confesseth, was filled with all gracious gifts of the Holy Spirit, as much as any

³⁸ Nowell, *A Catechism*, pp. 152-3.

³⁹ Compare Roger Hutchinson (d. 1555, 'The Image of God, a Layman's Book', in *Works*, Parker Society edition, Cambridge: 1842, p. 147): 'But albeit he took flesh of his mother, yet it was holy flesh, not sinful flesh, that he took; forasmuch as it was conceived and wrought by the overshadowing of the Holy Ghost. Albeit the seed and flesh of other be sinful, yet hers was not so; but sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and most clean. For to her it was said, *Benedicta tu inter mulieres*.' This would suggest that the 'sanctification' of Mary took place in the conceiving of Jesus, a position commonly taken by the Reformers.

mortal creature might be, except our Saviour Christ, *whose only privilege it is to be free from sin*, and to have received the gifts of the Holy Ghost without measure in his manhood.⁴⁰

The issue of Mary's peccability was debated hotly by the early Reformers, particularly Latimer and Tyndale. Both found in Chrysostom support for the position that Mary was 'taken with a little vain-glory' (cf Luke 8:19-21);⁴¹ and Latimer claimed that Chrysostom and Augustine 'plainly affirm that Mary was somewhat arrogant' (cf John 2:3-4). He went on to note Jesus' sharp words to his parents, 'Know ye not that I must be in the business of my Father?' (Luke 2:49), concluding, 'Now, in all these places, as the writers say, *Passa est humanum*; "She hath shewed her frail nature."⁴² The thinness of the evidence is, however, palpable:

On a time when our Saviour was preaching, his mother came unto him, very desirous to speak with him, insomuch that she made means to speak with him, interrupting his sermon which was not good manners. ... She would have been known to be his mother, else she would not have been so hasty to speak with him. And here you may perceive that we gave her too much, thinking her to be without any sparkle of sin; which was too much: for no man born into this world is without sin, save Christ only.⁴³

There was universal agreement that Mary needed Christ as her Saviour. Thomas Becon (c1511-67) links this affirmation with the famous words of Augustine, refusing

⁴⁰ Fulke, *Defence*, p. 528 (our emphasis); cf pp. 149-50.

⁴¹ Tyndale, 'Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue', p. 207; Latimer, citing Augustine and Chrysostom: 'pricked with a little vain-glory' ('The Fourth Sermon on the Lord's Prayer', *Works*, vol. 1, p. 383), 'pricked with vain-glory', (*Works*, vol. 2, p. 117).

⁴² Latimer, *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 515-6.

⁴³ Latimer, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 383; cf p. 514: 'We ought not to live after any saint, nor after St Paul, or Peter, nor after Mary the mother of Christ, to follow them, I say, universally: we are not bound so to do, for they did many things amiss'; also vol.2, pp. 117-8, 157-8, 163-5. Latimer refers to Augustine, *Epistle 243*, *In Joan. Evangel. c. 1 Tract VIII* and Chrysostom, *Hom XLV in Matt. XII*, *In Joan. Hom. 22*.

to entertain the question of Mary's being a sinner:

I answer with St Austin: "Whensoever there is disputation of sin, all must needs confess themselves sinners, *except the holy virgin Mary*, of whom, for the honour of the Lord, I will have no question at all when we entreat of sin. For we know there was given to her more grace than to any other creature for to overcome sin on every part, forasmuch as she deserved to conceive and bring forth him, whom it is evident to have had no sin. Therefore, *this virgin except*, if we could gather all the saints both men and women ... if they might be asked this one thing, they would surely cry with one voice, 'If we should say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.' ... Yet this dare I boldly affirm and say, that this most holy, pure, and glorious virgin disdained not to confess Christ to be also her Lord and Saviour.⁴⁴

Not all Anglican writers, then, are as outspoken against Mary's sinlessness as Tyndale and Latimer, though it cannot be said they explore the matter with any depth or unanimity. Anglican writers are, however, unanimous in asserting Mary's need of a Saviour (although not pursuing the debate as to whether Mary was 'sanctified' at the conception of Jesus, or rather preserved from sin from her mother's womb, or even from her conception, some do raise these views). They are also unanimous in affirming Mary's virginity both before and after the birth of Christ. Little is said specifically about her being *virgo in partu*, but a great deal is said, both explicitly and implicitly about Mary as *semper virgo*.

Cranmer in correcting Henry VIII's *Institution of a Christian Man* (1538) records:

⁴⁴ T. Becon, 'A New Year's Gift', from *Early Works*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1843), p. 317 (our emphasis); cf T. Becon, *The Catechism, with other pieces written by him in the reign of Edward VI*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1844), p. 170: 'The glorious virgin Mary, although of all creatures most holy, most pure, most innocent (Christ Jesus her Son only excepted), in her song, considering certain imperfections to remain and abide in her, which she received of old Adam from her father and mother ... calleth God her Saviour, to declare that there was somewhat in her, from the which she must be saved by the mercy and goodness of God.'

And I beleve also, that this child Jesu Christ was not only thus conceived without sin, but also that he was born in like manner of the said most blessed mother: and that she, both in conception, and also in the birth and nativity of this her child, and ever after, retained still her virginity pure and immaculate, and as clear without blot, as she was at the time that she was first born and ever after also we verily believe.⁴⁵

Whitaker acknowledges that the belief that 'the blessed Mary was always a virgin' was a matter of faith, though it was supported by Jerome, Ambrose and Epiphanius.⁴⁶ He also notes the opinion of Basil who thought it 'no article of faith'. Whitaker is one of a number of Anglican writers who mention the rejection of Mary's perpetual virginity by Helvidius⁴⁷ - and the opposition of the fathers to Helvidius's position. On the use of scripture to refute Helvidius, he is engagingly frank:

As to the perpetual virginity of Mary, it is no business of mine to meddle with that dispute. I content myself with saying, that the fathers, who managed the controversy with Helvidius, adduced not only some obscure traditions, which no one would rank very high, but made use also of testimonies from scripture. ... Therefore, if these fathers determined aright, this opinion is not absolutely without scriptural authority.⁴⁸

Tyndale takes a modified version of Basil's line on the perpetual virginity of Mary 'which, though it be never so true, is yet none article of our faith, to be saved by. But we believe it with a story faith, because we see no cause reasonable to think the

⁴⁵ Cranmer, *Works*, Vol 2, p.88

⁴⁶ Whitaker, 'The First Controversy', in *A Disputation*, p. 502; cf p. 539.

⁴⁷ Helvidius (a fourth century Latin theologian, against whom Jerome wrote *De perpetua virginitate B. Mariae adversus Helvidium*) is also explicitly refuted by Latimer (*Works*, vol. 2, p. 105); Hooper, (*Early Writings*, Parker Society Edition, Cambridge: 1843, p. 161); Thomas Cranmer, (1489-1556), *Works*, Parker Society edition, 2 vols, vol. 2, Cambridge: 1846, p. 60; Jewel 'Defence', *Works*, vol. 3, p. 440-1); John Philpot (1516-55), *Examinations and Writings*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1842), p. 427. Helvidius is also refuted by Bullinger (*Works*, vol. 4, p. 437).

⁴⁸ Whitaker, *Disputation*, p. 539.

contrary'.⁴⁹ Latimer asserts:

[Mary] had no more, neither before nor after, but was a clear virgin before she brought forth, and after she brought forth him she remained a virgin.⁵⁰

Cranmer also accepts, with 'Cyprian, Chrysostom, Jerome, Ambrose, Austin and all other speaking thereof' that 'the perpetual virginity of our lady is to be believed of necessity', and that this is to be defeded as 'written in scripture':

All the said authors prove her perpetual virginity by this text of scripture:

'This door shall be still shut, and not opened for any man to go through it, but only for the Lord God of Israel; yea, he shall go through it, else shall it be shut still.' For if these and such other fathers had not judged her perpetual virginity to have been written in the scriptures, they would never have judged it a thing to be believed under pain of damnation.⁵¹

Where Anglican writers discuss the doctrine of the Assumption, it is either rejected or held to be of the *adiaphora*. Tyndale several times wrote in knockabout style about his rejection of this and other Marian doctrines:

Of what text thou provest hell, will anotherprove purgatory; another *limbo patrum*; and another the assumption of our lady: and another shall prove of the same text that an ape hath a tail. And of what text the gray friar proveth that our lady was without original sin, of the same shall the black friar prove that she was conceived in original sin.⁵²

Whitaker is more restrained:

The papists celebrate the feast of the assumption of the blessed virgin Mary

⁴⁹ Tyndale, Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue, p. 96; cf p. 33. Tyndale repeats his opinion in his Marginal Notes on Saint Matthew's Gospel, from *Expositions and Notes on Sundry Portions of the Holy Scriptures*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1849), p. 227.

⁵⁰ Latimer, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 105.

⁵¹ Cranmer, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 60. Cf. Ezek. 44:2

⁵² Tyndale, 'Obedience of a Christian Man', *Doctrinal Treatises*, pp. 158-9; cf pp. 313, 316; 'Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue', p. 28.

with the utmost honour, and the Rhemists in their notes on Acts I praise this custom exceedingly: yet Jerome, in his book to Paula and Eustochium, concerning the assumption of the blessed virgin, says that 'what is told about the translation of her body is apocryphal'. Erasmus, indeed, writes that that book is not by Jerome, but by Sophronius, who, however, was contemporary with Jerome.⁵³

Yet Tyndale can also write:

As pertaining to our lady's body, where it is, or where the body of Elias, of John the evangelist, and many other be, pertaineth not to us to know. One thing we are sure of, that they are where God hath laid them. If they are in hyevaen, we have never the more in Christ: if they be not there, we have never the less ... as for me, I commit all such matters unto those idle bellies, which have nought else to do than to move such questions; and give them free liberty to hold what they list, as long as it hurteth not he faith, whether it be so or no:...

⁵⁴

One other line of criticism is exegetical: of the 'woman clothed with the sun' in Revelation 12:1, John Bale (1495-1563) writes, 'Not Mary, Christ's mother, is this woman, though many hath so fantasied in their commentaries; but it is the true christian church, of whom Mary is a most notable member.'⁵⁵

Finally, we need to note that an embryonic Eve/Mary paralell is found in *The King's Book*⁵⁶. Commenting upon *The Salutation of the Angel to the Blessed Virgin Mary* it records:

And also how high grace was this, that after the default made through the

⁵³ Whitaker, *Disputation*, p. 667; cf pp. 579-80.

⁵⁴Tyndale, *Works*, Vol 1, p. 315f. A similar argument is forwarded by Tyndale in his *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, *Works*, Vol. 3, p.28

⁵⁵ John Bale, *Select Works*, Parker Society edition (Cambridge: 1849), p. 404.

⁵⁶*The King's Book*, published in 1543, was a revision of the *Bishops' Book* and issued under the sanction of the King in Convocation.

persuasion of the first woman, our mother Eve, by whom Adam was brought into disobedience, this blessed virgin was elect to be the instrument of our reparation, in that she was chosen to bear the Saviour and Redeemer of the world?⁵⁷

Noting the above arguments surrounding the mistranslation of Genesis 3:15, some Anglican writers could still associate Mary with this text. Henry Bullinger's *Decades*, first published in 1577, were held in high regard by members of the Church of England. Not only did he provide a haven for those who fled the persecution under Queen Mary, but also the Convocation of Canterbury in 1586 commended the reading of the *Decades* to every minister having the cure of Souls. Commenting on Genesis 3:15 Bullinger writes:

God in these words promiseth seed: the seed, I say, not of man, but of woman; and that too, of the most excellent, to wit, that most holy virgin Mary, the women that was blessed among women.⁵⁸

And more explicitly Hutchinson observes:

The seed which is promised unto Adam is named to be *semen mulieris*, “the seed of a woman:” the same seed of Eve; the selfsame afterward is called the seed of Abraham, of Jacob, the seed of David, and the blessed virgin.⁵⁹

Conclusion: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Anglican Devotion and Teaching

The broad lines of Anglican teaching about the Blessed Virgin Mary were clearly established in the sixteenth century, though Anglican devotion to Mary was much enriched in the seventeenth. Despite the continuation of theological controversy about doctrine, liturgy and devotion throughout the sixteenth century, there were no major changes to Anglican liturgical or doctrinal expressions of Marian teaching and

⁵⁷The King's Book, Ed T A Lacey, R Browning, London, 1865, p 137

⁵⁸Bullinger, *Decades*, Vol. 3, p.14 (Parker Society)

⁵⁹Hutchinson, *Works*, p. 146

devotion after the publication of the 1561 Calendar, which through the reign of Elizabeth accompanied the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*. The content of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* was largely completed a hundred years earlier.

In the Prayer Books of 1549 and 1552, the Calendar was greatly simplified. Of the Marian feasts, only the Annunciation and the Purification were retained by Cranmer in 1549. The Conception, the Nativity, the Visitation, and the Assumption were removed. However, in 1561, the Conception (*sic*) of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Visitation were all restored to join the Annunciation and the Purification as Marian feasts. The one, conspicuous, continuing omission was the Assumption, which disappeared from Anglican worship in 1549, only partially to return in some twentieth century Anglican calendars.⁶⁰

For some four hundred years, the Anglican calendar had five Marian feasts. However, only for the Annunciation were a collect, epistle and gospel prescribed: until 1662, for the Purification there was only a collect and gospel. What is striking about the collects for these feasts (which were simple translations from the Missal) is the absence of specific reference to Mary. The collect for the Annunciation reads:

We beseech thee, O Lord, pour thy grace into our hearts; that, as we have known the incarnation of thy Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by his cross and passion we may be brought unto the glory of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

And that for the Purification:

Almighty and everlasting God, we humbly beseech thy Majesty, that, as thy only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple in substance of our

⁶⁰ Not until recent liturgical revisions has there been within Anglicanism a Marian feast on August 15th, and then not of the Assumption. In England this is now a nonspecific Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In some Anglican Provinces it is celebrated as the Feast of the Dormition.

flesh, so we may be presented unto thee with pure and clean hearts, by the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The relatively generous provision in the Calendar for the celebration of Mary after 1561 is as striking as the relative absence of specific Marian texts not only for those feasts but throughout the *Book of Common Prayer*. This was the Elizabethan sequel to an interrupted official programme of 'reform within the shell of traditional forms',⁶¹ that had begun with the production of the King's Primer in 1545. Diarmaid MacCulloch comments that this officially sponsored Primer contains 'none of the exuberant conversations of medieval liturgy with Our Lady or the saints'.⁶² Though the book contained none of the traditional prayers to the Virgin, it did, however, contain the Litany, which was first translated in 1544, with the petition: 'Holye Virgin Mary mother of God our Savyoure Iesu Christ *Praye for us.*'⁶³ This petition was removed in the *Prayer Book* of 1549. The 1549 *Prayer Book*, nevertheless, retained the Eucharistic Canon, with the conclusion,

And here wee doe give unto thee most high prayse, & heartye thanks, for the wonderfull grace and vertue, declared in all thy saintes, from the beginning of the world: and chiefly in the glorious and most blessed virgin Mary, mother of thy sonne Iesu Christ our Lord and God ...⁶⁴

This was removed in 1552. From 1552, in the *Book of Common Prayer*, with the exception of the Creed, the Collect (already mentioned) and the proper Preface for Christmas Day ('who, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, was made very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary, his mother, and that without spot of sin, to make us free from all sin') there was no mention of Mary in the Communion. The 39 Articles of Religion (1563), though, as we have seen they mark out certain theological

⁶¹ D. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer, a Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 335; cf Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 446-7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁶³ See F.E. Brightman, *The English Rite*, 2 vols, (London: Rivingtons, 1915), vol. 1, p. 174.

⁶⁴ Brightman, vol. 2, p. 690.

positions which directly reflect controversy over Mary, contain, from start to finish, only one explicit, central, non-controversial Marian statement: 'The Son ... took Man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin, of her substance.'⁶⁵

This austerity in the Prayer Book, the Ordinal (including the Litany), and the Articles speaks volumes about the extent to which in the sixteenth century Anglican Marian devotion was 'cauterised' by the climate of reaction to the overblown Marian piety of the late Middle Ages. Much of that piety was, however, contained in devotions, prayers, and iconography which were not integral to the Liturgy. From 1561, the Anglican Prayer Book left considerable space for Marian piety (for example at the five Marian feasts) but the explicit focus remained determinedly Christological and determinedly Scriptural. Not until the seventeenth century did Anglicans again become creative in their reflection on Mary as a type of the Church's delight in God's Word and of the Church's obedience to God's Spirit, a creativity that was only possible when it was not immediately equated with ill-informed popular religion.

⁶⁵ Article II, 'Of the Word or Son of God, which was made very Man' (1553, slightly expanded 1563).