

ARCIC ON MARY, Or Things vainly invented

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I read the new ARCIC report with an increasing sense of incredulity. I had expected the claims made by the press, that Anglicans and Roman-Catholics have come to agreement on the doctrines of Mary, to be somewhat exaggerated, yet this is clearly what the members of ARCIC believe. The report covers four areas; Scripture, Christian Tradition, theological and practical.

The following are some of the conclusions reached:

- *'The Scriptures lead us together to praise and bless Mary as the handmaid of the Lord...'* (Para. 50)
- *'Our two communions are both heirs to a rich tradition which recognizes Mary as ever virgin, and sees her as the new Eve and as a type of the Church.'* (Para. 50)
- *'We .. are agreed that Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church.'* (Para. 50)
- *'the teaching about Mary in the two definitions of 1854 and 1950 ... understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of grace and hope outlined here, can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures and the ancient common traditions'.* (Para. 60) (1854=immaculate conception & sinlessness of Mary, 1950=bodily assumption)
- *Asking our brothers and sisters in heaven to pray for us is acceptable* (Para. 68).
- *'Authentic popular devotion to Mary, which by its nature displays a wide individual, regional and cultural diversity, is to be respected.'* (Para. 73).

Given the teaching of the Church of England and the rest of the Communion on these matters, how on earth could a body, which includes supposedly Anglican Bishops and scholars, come to make such statements?

One word that crops up regularly in the report is *re-reception*. It would have been possible to talk about error, doctrinal decay and the need for reform, from whatever perspective the authors took, but instead they have chosen to use this term. Most frequently this is intended to convey a need of Anglicans and Roman Catholics to get back to an understanding of Mary as held by the Church from the 5th and 6th Centuries.

Scripture

The authors say they are *'seeking to consider each passage about Mary in the context of the New Testament as a whole, against the background of the old, and in the light of Tradition.'* (Para. 7) It is the last phrase that is the key, they are seeking to interpret Scripture *in the light of Tradition* (with a capital T), but there is no attempt to critique this supposed Tradition in the light of Scripture.

The report acknowledges that Matthew has little to say on Mary but much is made of Luke's record. Here we begin to see how the authors impose a meaning on Scripture, when Mary says *'all generations will call me blessed'* (Lk 1.48) they assume that this means 'all generations will bless me' and assert blindly that this *'provides the scriptural basis for an appropriate devotion to Mary'* (Para. 15), without any attempt to ask whether the text bears such a meaning.

Then they assert that *'favoured one'* (Lk 1.48) should be understood to mean *'one who has been and remains endowed with grace'*, which is a typically Roman treatment of grace; as if it is some stuff that is dolloped out by God. This is then assumed to imply *'a prior sanctification by divine grace with a view to her calling'* (Para. 16).

Because of their exaggerated understanding of Mary the authors express 'surprise' (Para. 19) when encountering passages such as Mark 3.31 when Jesus seems to rebuff His mother. What we see here as elsewhere is Mary as an ordinary disciple, misunderstanding and having to grow in faith.

The report also makes sweeping claims with no justification in interpreting Scripture. For example, when Mary said to Gabriel - *Let it be to me according to your word* (Lk 1.38) this is interpreted as meaning that she was '*ready to let everything in her life happen according to God's word*' (Para. 20).

Likewise when at Cana Mary tells the servants at the feast '*do whatever he tells you*' (Jn 2.5), apparently '*from this moment on she commits herself totally to the Messiah and his word*' (Para 25).

The authors then attempt to justify Roman dogma by some unbelievably tenuous arguments. Of John's prologue (Jn 1.1-14) they say that '*Mary is not mentioned explicitly*' but then try to discern something of the significance of her role in salvation history (Para. 22).

When dealing with the the Wedding at Cana they assert that the text '*leaves room for a deeper symbolic reading of the event*' (Para. 24).

When Mary is at the foot of the cross (Jn 19.25-37) we are told that this '*surface reading*' again invites '*a symbolic and ecclesial reading*' (Para. 26). Likewise, '*implicit here perhaps is a Mary-Eve typology...*' (Para. 27).

The report also talks of '*symbolic and corporate readings*' in which '*images for the Church, Mary and discipleship interact with one another*'.

Finally, in Revelation 12, '*the possibility arose of a more explicit interpretation*', meaning, whilst they do not say it openly, that the woman is Mary.

And these really are the basis on which the report attempts to justify its conclusions. Their arguments demonstrate two things. First, there are no plain texts of scripture which support the conclusions they reach, all of them require symbolic readings and unwarranted conjecture. Secondly, this is not exegesis, the stated purpose and clear practice is to read Scripture in the light of the supposed Tradition, that is to distort the plain meaning of Scripture to prop up error.

The deafening silence.

The question has to be asked, if all that the report claims is true, why does the Bible not mention it clearly? The elevated claims about Mary are all read into a few verses in Luke and John. Furthermore, if this supposed teaching about Mary is so important why is it not mentioned explicitly in the New Testament? Aside from the beginning of Luke there is little about Mary in any of the gospels. In Acts we see the authentic gospel preached, but Mary is never mentioned, except as she waits among the other disciples for Pentecost. In the Epistles, where the Gospel is expounded and applied Mary is never mentioned except when Paul declares in Galatians 1.4 that Jesus was 'born of a woman'. If this teaching is so important why do we not find it in the writings of the early Church Fathers? In the first three-four centuries we find nothing apart from the reiteration of the straightforward facts that she was the mother of the Lord and she was a virgin when He was born.

It is apparent that if we truly re-receive the Scriptural and ancient teaching of the Church we must leave behind all the later conjecture and error. The supposed Tradition is clearly a late development with no evidence in Scripture or the early Church. The interest in Mary arose in part from the arguments to defend the true humanity of Christ (that he took his humanity from her), from a growing belief that sexual intercourse was necessarily sinful, and from the importing into Christianity of pagan beliefs and practices.

Anglican belief

How can the report square all this with Anglican belief? The authors make mention of the fact that many early reformers accepted that Mary was ever-virgin. This is probably true although the passages quoted do not show it. Latimer certainly defended the belief in a sermon of 1522. One of the quotations of Cranmer is actually from a work by Henry VIII and as everyone knows Henry held to Catholic doctrine to his dying day. The other two references, from Cranmer and Jewel are actually defending the doctrine of Sola Scriptura by showing that writers such as Augustine defended their belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary from Scripture not Tradition (in fact from Ezek 44.21). Cranmer and Jewel may well have continued to believe this but that is not the argument they set forward.

Beyond this attachment to the belief that Mary was ever-virgin, which was hard to shake, we see very plainly that the reformers went through a process of re-reception (to use the jargon) of the Scriptural and early Church teaching regarding Mary. They removed from Anglican worship all the erroneous teaching and practice regarding Mary returning to the basics in Scripture and the early Church. They retained the red-letter festival of the Annunciation, but changed the focus of the Purification to 'The Presentation of Christ in the Temple'. Reference to Mary in the two collects was removed.

ARCIC asserts that the primary concern of the Reformers was to uphold the sole mediatorial role of Christ. This was clearly a concern, but just as importantly they wished to bring the Church's teaching and practice into conformity with the Word of God and so they rejected the accretions concerning Mary that had arisen slowly from the fourth century onwards.

The infallible decrees.

The report addresses the thorny fact that the Papacy has issued two infallible decrees to prop up the Marian teaching regarding the immaculate conception and later sinlessness of Mary, and also the that she was assumed bodily into heaven. The nature of these dogmas is that they must be believed. Alongside this Anglicans assert that we can be required to believe nothing that is not contained in or cannot be proved from Scripture (Article 6). ARCIC attempt to square this circle first by arguing that Vatican II has softened to some degree the severity of the Marian dogmas, particularly in the way they were propagated (it will be interesting to see how the Vatican responds to this) and then by saying that it is possible to understand these doctrines in such a way that they are compatible with Scripture. We have already seen the sophistry required to reach such a view.

Practical Outworking

There has not been space here to deal with the practical outworkings of all this in terms of devotion to Mary and idolatry. The particular issue of the invocation of saints, which relates also to Mary, is considered in a separate article and some of the observations there are relevant to this issue.

Conclusion

If someone believes Roman Dogma concerning Mary to be true, they will so distort Scripture as to support their belief. However, to all others it is abundantly plain that Scripture does not teach these things, and that they were a later development. The ARCIC report fails miserably to do justice to what Anglicans believe. It is likely that the Vatican may also balk at some of its assertions, but it is in the end an attempt to defend the indefensible.