

Possible Response to 'Veneration of the Virgin Mary in Christianity'

According to some passages in the New Testament (for example, Matthew 1.18–25) of the *Bible*, Mary who was betrothed to Joseph was the virgin mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Blessed Virgin Mary is sometimes also referred to as 'Our Lady', and to her are dedicated numerous shrines, chapels and churches throughout Christendom. Visions of her abound particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition. Her status is not identical within the major branches of Christianity (in the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox churches).

Arguably, four main motifs may be discerned concerning the life of the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition: as the Mother of God; as a perpetual virgin; her Immaculate Conception (Mary's conception being without sin or stain); and her bodily Assumption into heaven. Other aspects of her character have also been given prominence by particular Christian churches. For example, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary was notable in Roman Catholic theology. In the nineteenth century, devotion to Mary as Wisdom (Sophia) developed particularly in Russian Orthodoxy. In the state of Kerala in south India, the Virgin Mary is worshipped at some temples as the sister of the Hindu goddess Bhagavati, receiving the offerings that are customary for Hindu goddesses, and prayed to for the curing of ailments and other assistance.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, references to the veneration of Mary are rare. However, in the *Protoevangelicum* of James, a very influential, non-canonical text (of the second century CE) on the nativity of Jesus, Mary was presented as the first Christian saint, as worthy of great devotion, as a perpetual virgin and as a compassionate mediator between her Son and suffering people. In *Dialogue with Trypho*, Saint Justin Martyr (d. 165 CE) contrasted the disobedience of Eve with the obedience of Mary, a theme also endorsed by Saint Irenaeus of Lyon (d. c. 200 CE), which remains an influential image within Christian thought. However, even in the third century CE, there is no evidence of a belief in Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven.

At the Councils of Ephesus (431 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE), the Virgin Mary was hailed as *Theotokos* (meaning 'bearer of God'), which sanctioned the use of icons representing the Virgin Mother and Child. The purpose of these Councils' proclamations was to establish that He who was born of Mary was both 'truly man' and also 'truly God'. At the Second Council of Nicea in 787 CE, a distinction was made, which is still maintained in the Roman Catholic tradition, between *latria*, which is worship that is reserved for God alone, and *dulia*, which is veneration for saints; *hyperdulia*, which is a 'higher' category of veneration, is for Mary. However, the Eastern Catholic church, Eastern Orthodox church and most Anglicans do not distinguish between *dulia* and *hyperdulia*, maintaining that there should be no distinction between the veneration of Mary and other saints; Mary is but the greatest saint.

During the Middle Ages, theological disagreement arose between various Christian orders over Mary's Immaculate Conception, as to whether or not she could have been completely sinless. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) famously believed that all people are born in sin, and maintained that Mary's sinless state was only acquired some time after her conception. This dispute in the Roman Catholic church was settled by the papal *dogma*, *Ineffabilis Deus*, issued by Pope Pius IX in 1854 to the effect that Mary was indeed subject to an Immaculate Conception.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII, who is considered to have been the most 'Marian' pope in church history, decreed in *Munificentissimus Deus* as *dogma* (which was the last infallible papal *dogma* to be issued) that Mary went bodily to heaven in the Assumption, so that by the time of the Second Vatican Council in 1963/4, the four motifs mentioned at the beginning of this article had become Roman Catholic *dogmas*.

A significance of the Assumption *dogma* for Christians is the potential consequence that, as bodily Assumed in heaven, the Virgin Mary may be called upon by petitioners as a 'redeemer', as *Co-Redemptrix*. Indeed, at the end of the twentieth century, in an unsuccessful petition of six million signatures (from 148 countries), Pope John Paul II was urged to issue a *dogma* decreeing that Mary was *Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces*. While a high level of veneration for Mary persists in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it has not been subject to the periodic dogmatic articulation of the Roman Catholic church.

The English Protestant position, which varies from denomination to denomination, was primarily based on the teachings of sixteenth-century Reformers, that Mary and other saints should not be addressed, the exception being in certain hymns, canticles and psalms. The English Reformation rejected the widespread veneration of Mary as *Co-Mediatrix* alongside Christ, veneration that had been established since the sixth century in England. Nonetheless, a degree of reverence for her has continued to be important in the Church of England, which currently allows Mary and the saints to be addressed. While evangelical or 'low church' Anglicans generally pay less attention to Mary, 'high church' Anglicans afford her more significance as the Mother of God, usually accepting and celebrating the Assumption (which is often called the Dormition) and Conception, which are regarded as legends by most 'low church' Anglicans.

During the twentieth century, Mary has been afforded increasing prominence in Anglicanism, and is mentioned again by name in liturgical prayers. However, reverence for Mary in the Protestant tradition is generally not as developed as it is in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, where parts of the ritual and liturgy are dedicated to the Virgin Mary.