

1974

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Recommended Citation

Schmemmann, Alexander (1974) "Mary: The Archetype of Mankind," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 11: No. 3, Article 11.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol11/iss3/11>

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Mary: The Archetype of Mankind

Alexander Schmemmann

1.

Virtually all Christian doctrine — the precise, conceptual formulation of the Church's faith and experience—developed as response and reaction to various mutilations and distortions of that faith, to *heresies* in the literal meaning of the Greek word "*airesis*"—choice, i.e. reduction; therefore, deformation. Hence, one of the best ways to recover the essential meaning of this or that particular doctrine is to see it precisely in relation to the "heresy" it denounced, the question it answered.

We live today in a world full of "heresies": arbitrary choices and arbitrary reductions. Not only is it truly a broken world, with a broken vision and a broken knowledge, but its deep tragedy lies in this: that each "fragment" resulting from that brokenness is affirmed and experienced as the *whole* truth, each "reduction" is announced as "wholeness." Of this tragical reductionism Christians are more guilty than anyone else; for instead of healing it by the light and the power of the *catholic*, i.e. precisely whole, all-embracing and total vision, they themselves—for the sake of a superficial "relevance"—so often surrender to partial and broken "reductions" of "this world."

The best example here is precisely Mariology. While some Christians make of it the very symbol of their staunch "conservatism" and live in the nostalgia of its medieval splendor, many others, indeed the majority, quietly abandon it as something precisely "medieval," "archaic," and therefore non-essential for what they want to be a new encounter of Christianity with the "modern" world. And they do it because they do not ask: to what eternal question is the Mariological experience of the Church the answer; of what basic—explicit or implicit—heresy is it the overcoming and the refutation? Yet only if we are able to rediscover in our knowledge and veneration of Mary that which is precisely *essential*, and this means that without which our Christian vision ceases to be *catholic*, becomes distorted, obscured, mutilated, only if, in other words, we learn how to relate Mariology to the fullness of Christian faith can we make ours again the true meaning of the Church's Mariological experience.

2.

All I can do in this short paper is to outline briefly, without either "proving" or developing it, the very general perspective in which, in my opinion, the rich Mariological tradition of the Church ought to be studied and understood today in our spiritually broken world.

It seems to me that the first task here consists in determining precisely that

"heresy" to which the Christian answer is revealed in Mariology, although this answer itself obviously transcends the question and ultimately transforms its very nature. I have no doubt that this "heresy" concerns man and human nature, and that the essential theological context for the proper understanding of the Church's veneration of Mary is above all *anthropological*. This was true centuries ago when Mariology began to develop in its doctrinal aspects; this is especially true today.

Indeed the fundamental spiritual disease of our time, if one looks at it from a Christian standpoint, must be termed *anthropological heresy*. Its root is a deeply distorted understanding by man of his own nature and life. The most amazing, truly paradoxical aspect of that heresy, the aspect which strangely enough seems to be ignored by the defenders as well as the enemies of that heresy, is its fundamental inner contradiction, its being simultaneously an anthropological *minimalism* and an anthropological *maximalism*.

First, an anthropological *minimalism*. It is revealed and affirmed above all in the so-called *human sciences* whose entire emphasis lies precisely in the *reduction* of man to a phenomenon wholly determined by a network of impersonal natural laws of which man himself is but a result and "instrument." This reduction is studied and affirmed on many levels: the biological and genetical, the economical, the sociological, the psychological, but in all of them what is equally absent is precisely *freedom*, the possibility in man for a true personal self-determination. The old Feuerbachian definition: "man is what he eats has been expanded so as to cover the entire "phenomenon of man," so as to become the basic "working hypothesis" in all possible approaches to that phenomenon.

At the same time, however, our culture is permeated with and truly based on an unprecedented *exaltation* of man, is the expression of an *anthropological maximalism* of proportions unknown in the past. The pathos of our "modern world" is the endless affirmation of man's absolute *rights* and *freedom*, the seeking of his *liberation* and *self-fulfillment*, the rejection of any limits to his "potential."

The amazing paradox of our culture, however, is that these two views of man, these two "anthropologies" so obviously excluding one another, are, in fact, "held together," constitute the fundamental world view of the "modern man" who, in addition, seems to be totally unaware of its basic absurdity. The man is "nothing" yet he shall be "everything." There is no "freedom" in him, yet he is free. The person does not exist as a subject "transcending" its nature, but man has personal "rights." He is determined by his body but has the right truly to "dispose" of it. He has no "soul" but is an "absolute value . . ."

Had this paradox, this absurdity been confined to the area of a mere theoretical speculation, it could easily be dismissed as a curious example of logical inconsistency. In reality, however, it is the very source of the present tragedy and predicament of man, of the apocalyptic flavor more and more evident in our culture. In Christian terms, it itself is precisely that *heresy* about man which, as all heresy, is above all an *existential*, and not merely theoretical, mutilation and distortion, result-

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ing sooner or later in total chaos and total darkness. It is of this darkness that we have today the unmistakable foretaste . . . And the darkness is in this: that however *exalted* and *liberated*, i.e. "maximalized," man remains inescapably a *slave* of his own ontological "minimalism," a slave whose very dreams of happiness and self-fulfillment are—in the absolute sense of this word—*meaningless*.

It is this "broken anthropology," the source of all our tragedies and dead ends, that Christians ought to seek to heal today. And it is in Mariology, I am convinced, that they can discover the vision and the power necessary for that healing.

3.

On the doctrinal level, Mariology, as is well known, began as the elucidation of the term *Theotokos*—the "Birthgiver of God," i.e. within the great Christological debate of the fourth and fifth centuries. This means that from the very beginning Mariology was understood as precisely an integral part of *Christology* and thus—ultimately—of the Christian experience of God and man. The term *Theotokos* which appeared at first within the *lex orandi*, i.e. as a liturgical term, was challenged as theologically absurd—How can God have a mother?—and misleading—Mary is the Mother of Christ and not of God. However, not only was that term maintained as liturgically permissible, it was moreover affirmed by the Church (Third Ecumenical Council: Ephesus, 431) as the adequate expression of the mystery of Incarnation, as an essential *epiphany* of its meaning. And although the Ephesus victory expressed itself in the liturgical veneration of Mary more than in theological speculation about her, it resulted in a vision of ineffable depth and beauty. It is this vision that we must decipher today, for—and this is my essential point—this vision contains and reveals precisely the *anthropological* expression and dimension of Christology; is, so to speak, the fruit of Christology in anthropology.

Mariology developed in two simultaneous and, one should say, complementary movements. Both are not only possible, but equally essential and therefore necessary. The first one—the "Christological" proper—consists in explaining and experiencing the role of Mary in the Incarnation, the role which one can term *instrumental*. There can be no doubt that we have here the source and the essential basis of Mariology—that the latter begins with Christ, not with Mary "in herself." It is Christ, not Mary, that stands at the center of our faith, as its absolute content and power, fulness and joy. Yet—and this constitutes the second movement—looking at Mary's role in the Incarnation, at the "instrumentality" of that role, we unavoidably receive the revelation of Mary *herself*, and our knowledge *about* Mary is fulfilled as our knowledge of *her*. Because the "instrument" is revealed to us as a *person*, it is the person that gives the ultimate meaning of the "instrument." I am convinced that both aspects, both dimensions which together constitute, in a marvelous and beautiful synthesis, the very essence of the Church's veneration of the *Theotokos*, are essential for the Christian understanding of man, and contain the fundamental presuppositions of a truly Christian anthropology.

4.

There are those who think—and today more than ever—that the theological investigation of Mariology should not extend beyond the study of its “instrumental” aspect. We are concerned with Mary only inasmuch as she is the “instrument” of Christ’s assuming human nature. Such seems to be their standpoint. They would accept mariological devotion but precisely as devotion, without seeking its significance for theology. What they do not seem to understand is that by setting such a limit, by drawing a line between theology and “devotion,” they transform the latter into a virtually autonomous area, make Mariology into an almost independent “cult,” whose dangers and exaggerations have been properly denounced in recent years. They do not see that if Mary is an essential part of the answer to the essential question, Who is Christ?, this answer in turn concerns the other essential question, Who is Mary?—and, therefore, *who* and *what* is the human being itself. But perhaps it is by referring the totality of Mariology to the anthropological “heresy” mentioned above that we can see the importance of both *movements* within the Christian faith, the fundamental Christian “worldview.”

Paradoxical as it may sound, Mariology in its first aspect—the “instrumental” one—supplies the “minimalistic” dimension of the modern view of man with a certain theological justification. At least it helps us to understand the anthropological minimalism as a *vérité chrétienne devenue folle* (a “Christian truth gone astray”) and thus to restore it as the partial truth it certainly contains and implies.

Challenged with the modern exaltation of man and of his boundless “freedom,” Christianity would stress, as does modern science, that man not only is part of “nature,” but a part truly depending on nature, fundamentally subordinated to its “laws.” There exists thus a certain parallel between the scientific view of man, in which the main category is that of dependence, and the theological, biblical view of man stressing his total dependence on God, the Creator of the world, of “nature” and of its “laws.” There is also a convergence here in seeing the man as an “instrument”: be it of a natural process or of God’s design and plan. Just as science requests from man “obedience” to the objective laws of nature, the Bible and the Christian faith begin with an “unconditional surrender” of man to God, with total obedience and humility.

Is there any need to prove that in the economy of Christian faith Mary stands, first of all, as the ultimate expression of that fundamental humility and obedience to God’s will and this means to “nature” itself which ultimately is the “instrument” of that Divine will and design? This, incidentally, is one of the main reasons for Mary’s “rejection” by many “modern” Christians: she can hardly be construed as the symbol of that “liberation” which stresses the absolute “right” of man to dispose of his life and of his body in a manner which he himself chooses, to a “self-fulfillment” which he himself determines.

Thus, not only “science” but “religion” also begins with a certain “anthropological minimalism,” with the recognition of a certain *limitation* of man, with his acceptance of God and a divinely established order and nature. And Mary, the “*doulé kuríon*”

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—the “slave of the Lord” (Kk. 1:38)—stands in the very center of the Church’s vision of the world, of man and life as the ultimate fruit and therefore the highest expression of that “enslavement,” humility and obedience, without which there is no entrance into the mystery of man’s true communion with God.

But we part our ways with anthropological “minimalism” once we shift our attention from the first—“instrumental”—aspect of Mariology to the second one—to Mary as she is herself revealed in the mystery of the Incarnation and in the experience of the Church. For what we discover here is again the root, the initial inspiration, yet this time of anthropological “maximalism,” which as we have seen, constitutes the second pole of the modern world view. We discover it as another “Christian truth gone astray.”

Indeed what in the revelation of Mary—in the Gospel and then in the faith and the Tradition of the Church—is truly crucial, stands at its very center, and inspires the veneration of Mary with awesome amazement and endless joy, is another *dependence*: the dependence this time of the Incarnation itself, of the Divine plan itself, on the free and personal choice of Mary, on her free acceptance of the Divine challenge. The Divine plan and therefore “nature” are revealed as focused in a free person, i.e. a person capable of transcending all limitations, of revealing “nature” itself as fulfilling itself in freedom. Salvation is no longer the operation of rescuing an ontologically inferior and passive being; it is revealed as truly a *synergeia*, a cooperation between God and man. In Mary, obedience and humility are shown as rooted not in any “deficiency” of nature, aware of its own “limitations,” but as the very expression of man’s royal freedom, of his capacity freely to encounter Truth itself and freely to receive it. In the faith and the experience of the Church, Mary truly is the very icon of “anthropological maximalism,” its eternal *epiphany*.

5.

Properly understood, Mariology is thus the “*locus theologicus*” *par excellence* of Christian anthropology. In this unique knowledge of an unique Person, a knowledge which the Church always renews in her veneration of Mary, in communion with her and in joy about her, there can be dissolved the hopeless contradiction proper to the secular anthropology of our time: the contradiction between the “minimalistic” view of man stemming from science, and the “maximalistic” claims permeating our man-centered culture. What this personal knowledge and contemplation of Mary reveals in a manner in which no science, no theory, and probably even no “theology” as such can reveal, is precisely the tragical falsehood of both reductions—the “minimalistic” and the “maximalistic”—in their mutual alienation from one another, in their hopeless “brokenness”; yet also the hidden truth of both of them once they are integrated into that *wholeness* whose only bearer and focus in the world is the human *person*. What an abstract, i.e. impersonal, study of man posits as its self-evident conclusion: man as total dependence; what an equally abstract “exaltation” of man posits as its *a priori* premise: man as total *freedom*, are revealed in the unique *personal* experience of Mary, experience given to the Church and made into her experience, as one and the

same truth about man. In Mary, the very notions of “dependence” and “freedom” cease to be opposed to one another as mutually exclusive. We are inclined to think that where there is dependence there can be no freedom, where there is freedom there can be no dependence. She, however, accepts, she obeys, she humbles herself before—not her “dependence” on something or somebody—but the living Truth itself, a Presence, a Beauty, a Life, a Call so overwhelmingly evident that it makes the notion of “dependence” an empty one, or rather identical and coextensive with that of “freedom.” For as long as “freedom” is nothing but the “other side” of dependence: as a protest, a rebellion against dependence; in other words, as long as “freedom” itself depends on dependence for its meaning, it is also an empty notion: each time it “chooses” and “accepts” it ceases to be freedom . . . Here, however, in the unique experience of Mary, “freedom” becomes the very content of “dependence,” the one eternally fulfilling itself in the other as life, joy, knowledge, communion and fullness.

6.

These are poor, inadequate and clumsy human words about an experience, a vision, a reality which transcends all human words. But, having read them, look again at that Woman who eternally stands at the very heart of the Church, filling our hearts with a mysterious yet ineffable joy, making us repeat eternally that same salutation which she heard in the depth of her heart on the day of Annunciation: *Rejoice!* What is this joy about? Is it not about the revelation given us in her and through her and which—we know it—concerns each one of us and all of us, and which we tried, only tried, to indicate however poorly and inadequately in this paper? Truly she is unique because unique is her human perfection and unique her relation to her Son. And yet she is one of us, she is like us: her life, her experience are fully human. But then is it not in her and in her experience that we should seek the true “measure” of our own lives, the answer to the agonizing questions about man? Where else? Where else is the end and the solution of all the dichotomies and dead ends that threaten to dehumanize our world? She gave Christ to us. And He, who eternally remains her Son, gives her to us as the assurance that man is the image of His ineffable beauty, the object of an eternal love in an eternal Kingdom.