Why More Christians Should Believe in Mary's Immaculate Conception

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Why More Christians Should Believe in Mary’s Immaculate Conception
By Jack Mulder, Jr.

This quality of Mary’s Yes is wholly a function of the requirements of Christology…. [The dogmatic proposition] that she “was conceived immaculate”, says nothing but what is indispensable for the boundlessness of her Yes. For anyone affected in some way by original sin would be incapable of such a guileless openness to every disposition of God.¹

Introduction

In this paper, I articulate and defend an argument for the claim that it was important or necessary that Mary, the mother of Jesus, be conceived immaculately in order to give her free consent to the Incarnation. Despite the unsurprising fact that it has its roots in Catholic sources, I maintain that the argument itself does not require the use of distinctively Catholic (as opposed to distinctively Christian) premises. I will also simply note that, in contrast with other more foundational doctrines, such as the doctrine of justification, in my view most non-Catholic Christian theological traditions would not sacrifice anything essential (at least not obviously) by admitting this element of Marian piety. I would articulate the argument I wish to defend as follows:

1. If God were to impregnate a woman, then God would do everything necessary to ensure that her decision in this regard would be as fully free as possible (failing which God would be a rapist).
2. God wishes to impregnate the Virgin Mary for the salvation of the world.
3. Hence, God wishes to obtain Mary’s fully free consent to bear God’s Son.
4. The Virgin Mary’s inheritance of the scourge of original sin impedes the exercise of her fully free consent at the Annunciation.
5. God has the power to remove this impediment.
6. Therefore, God will choose to remove the impediment to Mary’s fully free consent.

In this paper, Jack Mulder, Jr. argues that those who hold 1) the major Christological and Trinitarian tenets of the historic Christian faith and 2) the view that original sin and its psychological consequences are in some way inherited and not learned (which includes a wide swath of leading figures in the historic Christian tradition) have strong reasons for why they should also hold that the Virgin Mary never received original sin (or its psychological consequences). Mr. Mulder is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Hope College.
Most of my energy in this paper will be devoted to arguing for the truth of premise 4. Beyond that, I wish to note several things about the argument right up front. The first thing I wish to note is that I am arguing for the Immaculate Conception based on the character of God (in premise 1), whom Christians regard as “perfect in holiness.” If Christians really wish to put God’s holiness first, then we had better look carefully at the monumental choice God made to enter into the human predicament, especially since this occurred through the impregnation of a woman. Indeed, if, as some Christians (and some notable Christian institutions) hold, “Adam sinned and... by his disobedience the entire race was alienated from God, depraved and totally lost,” then we should examine how the tide was turned, starting at its very beginning.

The second thing I wish to point out about this argument is that it relies on a view of original sin according to which the condition, whatever precisely it refers to, is inherited. Those who believe that “original sin” is simply a “brute fact” that refers only to the universality of sin in human beings will not be persuaded by this argument, though some more sophisticated contemporary analyses may need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. In general, I am using the word “inherited” in such a way that individuals possess “inherited” traits from the very first moment of their (pre-natal) existence, as opposed to acquiring them through learned behaviors, including behaviors they could not have failed to learn. As I will have occasion to note, the magisterial threads of the Protestant and Orthodox traditions (in addition to the Catholic tradition) generally do see original sin as something inherited, even if, as in the case of Orthodox Christians, its effects are seen as primarily having to do with disordered inclinations we have to disobey God. Since I claim that inherited disordered inclinations are enough to threaten Mary’s fully free consent, I believe that the number of Christians who have strong grounds for believing in Mary’s Immaculate Conception substantially outnumber those who do believe it.

A third point in regard to the argument of this paper is that I assume without argument that Jesus is God’s Son in the flesh, and that Mary is fittingly called “Mother of God.” If one denies this, one should look outside the Catholic tradition.

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1Hans Urs Von Balthasar, “Mary in the Church’s Doctrine and Devotion,” in Balthasar and (then) Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Mary: The Church at the Source, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 105.
2This passage is from Bethel University’s “Affirmation of Faith.” See http://www.bethel.edu/about/faith.
3This quotation is from the Cornerstone University confession (http://www.cornerstone.edu/about/identity_mission_vision/confession/), though there are many statements like it in the literature with which similar Christian colleges and universities use to describe themselves.
4Consider Neil Ormerod’s description of Alfred Vanneste’s “brute fact” view on the one hand, and Ormerod’s own discussion that follows, on the other hand (in Creation, Grace, and Redemption [Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007], 77-84). I thank Curtis Gruenler for stimulating some of my reflection on this topic.
to someone like Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson who writes, “As for Mary’s being… Mother of God, that of course is formal dogma for Catholics, Orthodox, and magisterial Protestants alike, laid down among other places in the decrees of Chalcedon. If one balks at that, one is simply a heretic.” While I have no special interest in calling out heretics, I would simply note that calling Mary the “Mother of God,” even if it is only taken to carry Christological meaning, should be natural to most of the historic Christian faith, and that is all I need.

The distinguishing feature of the argument that interests me is that it finds the necessity for Mary’s Immaculate Conception in her free consent at the Annunciation. In contrast, in this paper I am not arguing that bearing a sinless individual or even God the Son, of itself, requires the Immaculate Conception. Karl Barth’s claim that even Jesus inherited the sinful nature that the rest of us did may cause trouble for some such arguments, but from the point of view of the argument I intend to develop here, which nature the Son of God inherits (and for what very precise salvific purposes) is neither here nor there. Rather, I am arguing that an immaculately conceived individual makes for the best and least coerced recipient of the invitation to bear God the Son.

There is no need here to recite the wide body of work by Christians in recent years to reclaim aspects of the wider Christian tradition, which have included turning from merely negative comments on the Blessed Virgin. In this environment, the reason why Christians should be relearning to appreciate Mary is fairly obvious to any faithful reader of the Bible, and is well stated by Timothy George, who writes, Without forsaking any of the evangelical essentials, can we echo Elizabeth’s acclamation, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (Luke 1:42), or resonate with the Spirit-filled maid of the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:46-48)?

To bring an end to the caveats, my goal in this paper is not to manufacture Catholics. I merely wish to put forward an argument for why Christians should take the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception seriously, and not simply hold it up as a rhetorical extreme representing where retrievals of Mary need not go. Several Catholic documents and theologians have given some version, however brief, of the argument that concerns me, but despite its pedigree, the recent wave

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6For one version of such an argument (which I am not impugning as worthless), see John Henry Cardinal Newman, Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations, new impression (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921), 369.
7See Church Dogmatics I/2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 152-159. I thank Andrew Peterson for bringing this point to my attention.
8See Timothy George, “The Blessed Virgin Mary in Evangelical Perspective,” in Mary: Mother of God, eds. Braaten and Jenson, 104.
of Protestant discussion regarding Mary has perhaps entirely failed to notice it.\textsuperscript{10} I believe that one reason for the fact that it has not been substantially discussed in an ecumenical environment is that the argument itself is underdeveloped as of yet and awaits a philosophically sensitive treatment. In this paper, I attempt to put some flesh on this skeleton of an argument. The result, I hope, will be that many Christians of an ecumenical stripe are given strong reason to believe that the Immaculate Conception of Mary is, if not logically required, at least preeminently appropriate should God desire to become incarnate through the route of human pregnancy.

\textbf{Some Brief Historical Notes on the Doctrine and a Preliminary Objection}

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is often popularly thought of as a stumbling block to Christian unity, since it is usually denied by Protestants and often considered unnecessary and false by Eastern Orthodox Christians, who do hold Mary to be free from actual sin.\textsuperscript{11} It is the Catholic understanding of Mary and her Immaculate Conception that I want to argue for here, and in the text in which the dogma was defined we read, “the most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin...”\textsuperscript{12} It is important to note that in this dogma of the Catholic Church, Mary is clearly held to be redeemed by Christ. On this point, Pope John Paul II writes, “By virtue of the richness of the grace of the beloved Son, by reason of the redemptive merits of him who willed to become her Son, Mary was \textit{preserved from the inheritance of original sin}.”\textsuperscript{13} This is why Mary’s redemption by Christ is sometimes called “preservative rather

\textsuperscript{10}I can find no real awareness of the argument in most of the books reviewed by Rachel Hostetter Smith in her essay, “The Trouble With Mary? Considering the Person and Place of Mary in Christian Theology and Person Devotion – A Review Essay,” \textit{Christian Scholar’s Review} 37 (2008): 357-380. For more on the trend of retrieving thought on Mary, one might also consider Lawrence S. Cunningham’s essay, “Some Recent Books on Mary,” \textit{Pro Ecclesia} 19 (2010): 93-101, as well as the rest of the issue of \textit{Pro Ecclesia} in which Cunningham’s essay appears.


\textsuperscript{13}See John Paul II’s encyclical \textit{Redemptoris Mater}, paragraph 10, italics original. I use the translation in \textit{Mary: God’s Yes to Man: John Paul II’s encyclical Redemptoris Mater} (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), which includes an introduction by (then) Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and a commentary by Hans Urs Von Balthasar.
In the formulation of the doctrine, the idea that Mary could have never contracted the stain of original sin at all was thought by many, including St. Thomas Aquinas, to suggest that Mary did not need redeeming by Christ, and thus to threaten the universality of redemption by Christ. Accordingly, Aquinas argued that she had been redeemed at a time between her conception and her birth, and committed no actual sin thereafter. Later, especially through Duns Scotus and the Franciscans, it was argued that redemption by Christ in the manner of exemption from original sin was possible, and the view that it was actual in the case of Mary was gradually adopted by the Church until it was defined in 1854 by Pope Pius IX in the passage noted earlier. Now there are some difficulties in understanding just how original sin is transmitted so that it can be, in a sense, “blocked” before reaching Mary, who would otherwise have received its stain were it not for her anticipatory redemption. However, I propose to grant that such a possibility (which is assumed in premise 5 of my argument) can be understood adequately, and move onto the question of what reasons may exist for wanting to affirm its actuality.

There is a further worry that one might have about this “anticipatory redemption,” and it might go something like this: does not Mary’s being given an anticipatory redemption nullify the very freedom from coercion that I am trying to uphold, since her being freed from original sin may enhance her freedom from coercion at the Annunciation, but she still had no choice about whether to be granted this anticipatory redemption? In raising this worry, the pitfall we need to avoid is conflating redemption with salvation. Although the Catholic Church believes that its version of predestination to salvation (where either Thomist or Molinist conceptions are seen as orthodox) is compatible with human freedom, nothing in this paper is concerned with Mary’s predestination in itself as opposed to simply safeguarding Mary from the initial reception of original sin, by way of an anticipatory redemption. While it is true that the Catholic Church, along

15See Summa Theologica, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1948, repr. Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981). This work is cited by Part, Question, and Article, and this reference is from ST, III.27.2.
16Ibid., articles 1 and 2.
19Some forms of these difficulties will need to be confronted even by those who deny the Immaculate Conception but affirm Jesus’ exemption from original sin, since Jesus was, of course, the son of Mary in addition to being the Son of God.
20This worry, or something like it, was voiced by an anonymous reviewer of this paper, to whom I am indebted for many helpful suggestions.
21See CCC, 488-489.
with the Orthodox Church, holds that Mary remained free from any personal sin throughout her life, the argument in this paper does not claim that her lifelong freedom from personal sin is logically entailed by God’s decision that she be immaculately conceived. The fact that Mary was rescued (in an anticipatory way) from original sin speaks to her redemption, but the fact that she enjoys salvation can only be through her perseverance in grace to the end of her life, and this requires freedom. For this reason, it still makes sense to honor Mary, since her perseverance in grace was free in the requisite sense, even if her initial rescue from ever having contracted original sin was not. In what follows, I will attempt to provide one way of explaining why the Immaculate Conception was necessary or at any rate, appropriate, and thus necessary given God’s aims, for Mary to give her free consent in the Annunciation.

**Freedom, Redemption, and the Nature of Coercion**

In order to begin developing an argument for the most crucial premise of my argument, which I take to be premise 4, I want first to consider a passage from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Book III, where Aristotle considers the voluntariness of human actions, he writes,

But what about actions done because of fear of greater evils...? Suppose, for instance, a tyrant tells you to do something shameful, when he has control over your parents and children, and if you do it, they will live, but if not, they will die. These cases raise dispute about whether they are voluntary or involuntary. However, the same sort [of unwelcome choice] is found in throwing cargo overboard in storms. For no one willingly throws cargo overboard, without qualification, but anyone with any sense throws it overboard to save himself and the others. These sorts of actions, then, are mixed.”

Now Aristotle does not go so far as to say that actions such as throwing the cargo overboard during a storm are wholly unfree. Instead, he claims, they are “mixed.” Presumably this means that they are mixed with free elements (since one could theoretically choose to keep the cargo at the expense of the crew) and coerced elements (one is forced by the circumstances of the weather into an unpleasant choice, whose ultimate decision is all but determined for people “with any sense”).

With this in mind, let us discuss what it might mean to be coerced. We have a helpful model in Michael J. Murray’s essay, “Coercion and the Hiddenness of God.” In that essay, Murray argues that God cannot become manifest in a theophany in which God demands belief, because then the decision to believe and enter into a loving relationship with God would be coerced. In his discussion of coercion along these lines, Murray gives three factors in any coercive threat

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that have to do with the severity of it. The first factor is “threat strength.” Here Murray notices the obvious fact that

The degree to which I feel compelled to do an act that I would not otherwise do (say, to give all my money to a stranger) would be much greater if the threatener held a gun to my back than if he threatened to call me a dirty word if I failed to comply with his wish.24

The next factor is “threat imminence.” Although there are three types of threat imminence, we can glimpse them by way of an example. Consider the case of an individual who contemplates smoking but is met with the threat that smoking causes cancer. A person who considers the probability that the cigarette at hand and any subsequent addiction will cause cancer is concerned with “probabilistic threat imminence.” Someone who supposes that regular but moderate smoking could cause cancer but only at a ripe old age is inclined to downplay the “temporal imminence” of the threat. Finally, someone who has just watched a particularly gripping advertisement intended to scare those who smoke is likely to feel that the threat is more “epistemically imminent” for her. A final factor for Murray is called “wantonness.” Murray claims that certain individuals may have a wanton “feeling of indifference for one’s well-being in cases where that well-being is threatened should there be a refusal to submit to the terms of some restriction on one’s freedom.”25 Murray goes on to write,

While it is surely impossible to quantify these characteristics in order to define exactly what constitutes a threat which overwhelms freedom, it can be said that the degree to which freedom is compromised is directly proportional to threat strength and imminence and inversely proportional to wantonness.26

Bringing this analysis to reflect on matters that pertain more traditionally to Christian revelation, Murray writes, “the threat posed by the prospect of eternal damnation is equal to the strongest imaginable threat.”27 Narrowing our scope even further, let us reflect on Mary’s case. In doing so, we should keep in mind that it scarcely appears negotiable for Christians that Mary’s consent to bear Jesus was free. God, after all, is not a rapist, and however extraordinary her pregnancy, it is God who is the child’s (only) father and Mary his mother, and this relationship cannot give place to coercion.28 In the Catholic tradition, Mary’s full consent

24Ibid., 245.
25Ibid., 246.
26Ibid., 246-247.
27Ibid., 247.
28See Balthasar, “Mary in the Church’s Doctrine and Devotion,” for more on the necessity of Mary’s virginity. I suppose some Christians now see room to doubt whether Christ’s conception was virginal. Suppose, as I do not hold, that it was not. Then I think Christians who hold this should be willing to endorse God’s invitation to Mary to bear the Son of God through her physical impregnation by Joseph. Such people will still need Mary’s free consent in the way that I argue for it here. The other option, it seems to me, is for these Christians to rest content with Mary being forced to bear or subsequently surprised to have borne the son of God (assuming the untenability of adoptionism), while not being forced to bear or subse-
is usually thought to be rendered in saying “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Now ordinarily, becoming pregnant absent a human father and prior to living with one’s spouse in the context of second temple Judaism would have had little to commend it. Of course, Mary’s case is not ordinary. She was told (Luke 1:32-33) that her son would be Israel’s great hope and the restoration of the Davidic covenant. Such things might make the promise on offer a bit more appealing.

Still, let us consider a hypothetical agent; call her Martha, for the moment. Suppose that Martha is a quite ordinary human agent who is infected with the kind of original sin that, much of traditional western Christianity would claim, ordinary human agents are, and now suppose that Martha is confronted, in something like the Annunciation, with the prospect of becoming the mother of the Son of God. Already it is difficult to imagine that Martha’s fallen nature could be very depraved. For consider what would happen if Mary’s nature were as depraved as some of the reformers held the rest of our fallen natures to be. The point of this exercise is to see that some views of the scope and effect of original sin seem untenable in Mary’s case right on their face. It matters not which tradition we consult or in which order, since we already know that, as a matter of logic, some views of “original sin” are untouched by the argument at hand. But as for those that raise some red flags in Mary’s case, consider Luther’s view in the Heidelberg Disputation, according to which “Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.” On this view, supposing for the minute (as it is not clear that Luther would have been willing to do) that this view applies to Mary at the Annunciation, it seems impossible that her decision to acquiesce to her spiritual vocation would have been freely made for the right reasons. Consider also Question and Answer 8 from The Heidelberg Catechism in the Reformed Tradition. There, we read, “Q: But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil? A: Yes, unless we are born again, by the Spirit of God.” On this view (again, supposing that this must apply to Mary), unless Mary is redeemed prior to, or in the moment of, the Annunciation, God would knowingly either impregnate a woman without her consent or have the Son of God enter the world through an act of sin. How a Christian could find this tenable is simply beyond me. It seems little wonder that Luther would have held Mary in high honor, if for no other reason than that his thought would have required it.

Returning to our hypothetical Martha, then, perhaps we suppose that she was granted some kind of anticipatory redemption through Christ, but that this redemption could have come at any of a number of points. Indeed, perhaps she

is presently surprised to have borne the son of Joseph (as it was and will no doubt be thought). People who are content with this will not be persuaded by the argument of this paper.


could have been granted a kind of redemption just prior to the imaginary Annunciation (or at whatever counts as a safe temporal distance from it) so that she would be suitably free to offer her consent, if she were to choose to do so. Leaving aside the question of how strange this makes the whole affair seem (Martha is redeemed just in time for and just for the purpose of rendering her free consent), we need to ask about this case’s hypothetical plausibility.

Here we have some thorny questions to confront regarding Martha’s psychology at the moment of this imaginary Annunciation. Suppose that Martha refuses. Even if she does not have quite as robust a conception of the Christian afterlife as we argue over in our contemporary period, the consequence of Sheol, vastly inferior to this life, would seem almost as much of a threat as damnation. Further, the refusal to bear the promised Messiah could easily be imagined as a serious rebellion, and Jews would have ample testimony regarding God’s dealings with rebels, such as Korah, whose rebellion against Moses saw the very earth open up to swallow the rebels alive, and fire coming from heaven to consume them.31 Given the testimony of the Torah, then, a refusal on the part of our hypothetical Martha to bear the Messiah of Israel could be considered a rebellion whose punishment could be temporally quite imminent.

In this context, Gabriel’s announcement to Martha amounts to this: “take upon yourself the motherhood of Christ or you and/or all Israel will miss out on the promised Messiah!” Martha might be left to imagine how her rebellion would be punished. This suggests that coercion is very clearly being brought to bear, but the case is not actually quite as clear as all that. Murray, for instance, in an article he authored with David F. Dudrick, argues that one of the necessary conditions involved in coercion is that “The threat is the reason for [an agent’s] choosing [the act required].”32 On one level, this seems obvious. In our ordinary parlance, coercion implies the loss of the will’s autonomy, and autonomy is still present even if someone puts a gun to your head and says, “Eat this bowl of ice cream,” provided you had already formed the intention to eat the ice cream, and were subject to no second-guessing regarding the safety of doing so.

On another level, though, it seems to me that there are certain degrees of coercion in light of which Murray’s and Dudrick’s requirement here is too strong. Suppose that Sally decides to give the cash in her wallet to a man on the street (call him Tony) who looks to be rather down on his luck. In fact, suppose that Sally forms such an intense resolution to do so that she even considers that a threat to her life would be evidence only of the desperation of Tony as an assailant rather than of his vice. As Sally approaches Tony, Tony pulls a gun on Sally and exclaims, “Your money or your life!” Now, Sally’s decision was already sufficient for her offer to Tony of the money, and so we can grant that the threat was not the reason for the choice to give Tony the money. However, in this situation, it seems simplistic

31See Numbers 16.
to suggest that there is no coercion here at all, simply because Tony’s threat was
not the sole reason for Sally’s handing over the money. This kind of threat is jar-
rning and it produces fear in the agent to whom it is issued. If Sally is an ordinary
agent, and let us stipulate that she is, then her frame of mind will vacillate between
the thought “I had better give this man the cash for I don’t want to die,” and the
thought, “you see, he’s desperate; this is why my prior decision should guide my
action,” and it is hard to imagine that the former does not escalate very quickly
in Sally’s consciousness. What can we say of this agent? Again, I think Murray
and Dudrick are right to think that something like this would not be objectively
or forensically real coercion, but objectively real coercion is only what you are
concerned with if you are a legislator or a judge (or a theoretical ethicist). If you
are a spouse, it is an entirely different matter.33

As those of us who have been reared in a modern western context of court-
ship, proposal, and marriage know, very few people upon offering marriage to a
potential spouse, seriously hope for the person to say in response, “could I have
some time to think?” We tend to think that consent, spontaneously and joyfully
rendered, is the more appropriate response, suggesting, as I think it does in many
cases, that the person given the offer had already been predisposed and happy to
render her or his consent. Now, of course, not every case is like this, and indeed,
I think in some cases, “could I have some time to think?” might be a perfectly
acceptable, mature, and reasonable response from a potential spouse.34 In such
cases, a person simply wishes to make such a momentous decision not in an instant
of emotional rapture, but in a quiet moment of solemn reflection. Here are some
questions that seem appropriate in such a context: “Do I really love so-and-so?,”
“Am I ready to pledge unconditional devotion and affection to so-and-so?,” “Am
I prepared to love and care for children that may spring from such a union?” and
so on. Here is one question that signals an inappropriate relationship: “What will
so-and-so (or my family, or so-and-so’s family) do to me if I refuse?” If the agent to
whom the proposal is given consents to the union out of worries based on the last
question, what we are dealing with is some degree of coercion. While the coercion
may not always be legally punishable, as when a parent exercises such influence
that the daughter or son does not wish to disappoint her or his parent by refusing
a longed-for match (as opposed to the coercion in cases of rape), any amount of
coercion seems to make this agent’s freedom at least “mixed” in Aristotle’s sense.

At this point, let us return to our hypothetical Martha. She is visited by an
angel who informs her that she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, with at
least the implicit understanding that her consent is called for. What will she do in

33See CCC, 505, where we read, “The spousal character of the human vocation in relation to
God is fulfilled perfectly in Mary’s virginal motherhood.”
34An anonymous reviewer noted that this response seemed perfectly acceptable, and my
position does not require me to disagree, but in the cases where such a response is compat-
ible with the absence of any inclination to refuse, there are appropriate considerations the
potential spouse might bring to the deliberation, and considerations that are inappropriate,
about which see the main text.
this situation? I submit that if she is not already predisposed to act in accordance with every dictate of God’s will she will vacillate between the thought, “I had better consent for I know how God’s wrath has been discharged with rebels in the past,” and the thought, “Surely this is a wonderful offer from the Most High.” A redeemed human being who freely acquiesces to the angel’s announcement will consent for reasons similar to the second thought. A coerced individual (what degree of coercion is not important since God would presumably hope to minimize it to the extent that is feasible) will acquiesce for reasons similar to the first thought. At this point, someone will surely interject, “Of course, but one needn’t have been immaculately conceived to give pride of place to the right motivation for a choice!” On one level, of course this is the case. However, let us inquire a bit more into Martha’s deliberation.

The Relevance of the Fall

In the Christian tradition, there has usually been an awareness that even after baptism and entry into the Christian life, the “regenerate” person will continue to struggle with temptations toward sin that are not adequately explained apart from the fall. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: “Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ’s grace, erases original sin and turns a man back toward God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle.”35 As Leo Scheffczyk puts it, “Only thus is concupiscence revealed as it is in the present economy of salvation. It is the rebelliousness of man under sin against his ‘supernatural’ orientation and his infinite destiny.”36 Although the finer points regarding concupiscence are not agreed upon by all Christians (indeed the mechanics of it are disputed among Catholics),37 the awareness that we remain inclined toward evil because of the fall, and even after what is often called “regeneration” is widely recognized.

Although the Reformation churches understand the term “concupiscence” in a different way than the Catholic tradition does,38 it is worth noting that there are clearly elements in these traditions that remain after baptism and answer in many ways to what the Catholic tradition calls the concupiscence that remains after baptism. Thus, for ease of reference, I will simply call this widely-agreed-upon psychological proneness toward evil the having of “disordered inclinations.”

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35CCC, 405.
38A good explanation of a classical Reformed perspective on this is found in chapter 2 of Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), vol. 3.
Again taking Luther as one example among many, consider this text from his *Large Catechism*:

For we must keep at it incessantly, always purging out whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new man may come forth. What is the old man? He is what is born in us from Adam, irascible, spiteful, envious, unchaste, greedy, lazy, proud, yes, and unbelieving; he is beset with all vices and by nature has nothing good in him. Now, when we enter Christ’s kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease, so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more free from greed, hatred, envy, and pride.39

Here, it seems, we can gradually wean ourselves off of the vicious tendencies we continue to have, even after coming into “the kingdom of Christ.” Calvin, in discussing the “mortification of the flesh,” and the renewal that brings this about, writes,

This renewal, indeed, is not accomplished in a moment, a day, or a year, but by uninterrupted, sometimes even by slow, progress God abolishes the remains of carnal corruption in his elect, cleanses them from pollution, and consecrates them as his temples, restoring all their inclinations to real purity, so that during their whole lives they may practice repentance, and know that death is the only termination of this warfare.40

In his commentary on the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Zacharias Ursinus (also its principal author), writes, in regard to “sin which does not thus reign,” “Such sins are disordered inclinations and unholy desires, a want of righteousness, and many sins of ignorance, of omission, and of infirmity, which remain in the godly as long as they continue in this life.”41 In the Anglican Communion, the ninth of the thirty-nine articles reads,

Man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God’s wrath and damnation. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated.42

In the Orthodox tradition, Vladimir Lossky’s widely cited *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* affirms, “sin, this parasite of nature, rooted in the will, lives in it, makes it a prisoner of the devil, himself a prisoner of his own will frozen forever in evil.”43 Lossky goes on to cite with approval passages from Orthodox

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authorities, as in St. John Damascene: “repentance is a return, accompanied by trial and toil, from that which is contrary to nature to that which is in accordance with nature: a return from the devil to God,” and St. Isaac the Syrian: “until the moment of death neither the time nor the works of repentance can ever be complete.”

Now, neither the passage from Luther nor the 39 articles says, as Calvin, Ursinus, and Lossky at least suggest, that we will struggle with what we are calling “disordered inclinations” throughout our whole life. Still, Calvin, Ursinus, and Lossky suggest that the war to achieve holiness will always remain even with the regenerate until death. This seems to be the majority view among Protestants, as Jerry L. Walls notes. He writes,

Unlike most Protestant theologians, Wesley believed that entire sanctification is possible in this life.... Wesley also stressed the processive dimensions of sanctification and thought that entire sanctification could not normally be received without years of gradual growth and progress in grace and holiness.

Now it is not obvious whether this view of Wesley’s entails the removal of disordered inclinations in a definitive way (unless one lapses back into sin, which is always possible) or not, but I should note that if anyone believes that such inclinations can be definitively erased in this life without remainder then that person may not be persuaded by the argument in this paper. It is worth noting, however, that this view seems to be a minority opinion among Christian theologians.

Let us return to Martha. We have already given reasons for why it is implausible for her to be infected with, and not redeemed from, original sin, at least as it is understood in the West. Let us consider further whether the disordered inclinations that result from original sin (usually in both East and West) might also cause problems for Mary’s consent. On this point, we might consider James Alison’s remark that

When the [Catholic] Church teaches us that Christ and the Virgin Mary were without concupiscence, having been without original sin, the content of what is being taught is that they were both (in different ways, of course) fully active constructors of the new creation and that the resistance that they suffered to their work of bringing about the new creation was exterior to them, and not interior to them, as it is with us.

Ibid., 204-206. Note that the fact that Orthodoxy has a lighter view of the fall than the West does not mean that disordered inclinations are not inherited through original sin. See Ware, The Orthodox Church, 223.

Jerry L. Walls, Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 53. One might object that the Catholic tradition holds a class of Christian perfection similar to Wesley’s category. In one sense, this is true (ST, II-II.24.9), but it is not true that concupiscence is ever totally destroyed in this life (ST, I-II.74.3). See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange (Christian Perfection and Contemplation, trans. Sister M. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: Herder, 1937), 168-169), who notes that the perfect “still commit venial sins through frailty or surprise,” which is easy to imagine in the case of the Annunciation.

Now, what if our hypothetical Martha still has the “disordered inclinations” that remain even after regeneration, according to most Christian thinkers? If so, then Martha will have some semblance of a disordered inclination to heed the call of sin. What if Martha does not give her consent to bear the Messiah? To raise this problem with particular acuity, suppose we are “open theists” and deny comprehensive divine foreknowledge. Certainly God will not overtly coerce Martha. Would an individual with disordered inclinations plausibly consent for the right reasons? Since so much hangs on this, why would God not grant Martha (or at least some subset of women) freedom from original sin just to increase the probability that she (or the next woman in line, or the next) would give a fully free consent? Is God content with a free consent rendered after weighing one’s options and contending with disordered inclinations to oppose God in this, perhaps the most intimate cooperation between God and a human being imaginable? Note that this case is not the case of the joyful potential spouse who just happens to be reflective. It is rather analogous to the case of a potential spouse who works to resolve a battle within her about whether she wishes to accept the offer of marriage. Here we should ask ourselves the simple question: if there is some way for God to have (or even enhance the probability of having) the most willing human being possible to bear God in the flesh, would not that be what God would want?

Indeed, even supposing that God could foreknow everything there were to know about Martha’s choice, how is it plausible that at this momentous occasion, in addition to the fear instilled by the angel’s appearance (which would only be rational), and the momentary confusion she might have regarding the possibility of the thing, our Martha, due to her disordered inclinations, does not consider with herself that she would rather not bear the Messiah? In response to this situation, she could either persuade herself that this was the smart play, not wishing to be subject to whatever penalties God might have in mind for refusal, or she could simply convince herself, in spite of her inclinations, that this offer from the Most High was to be looked upon as wonderful, and much to be preferred, even with the suggestion of scandal that it bears. Yet it seems to me that an individual infected with disordered inclinations would have to do one of these things, and contending with disordered inclinations to refuse, however briefly, would make our Martha vacillate between the fear of punishment for refusal, and the willingness to consent freely. If God foresees (the probability or actuality of) this vacillation, is this vacillation enough hesitancy on Martha’s part for God to act in an anticipatory way, and grant Martha freedom from original sin and its psychological consequences?


48Catholic teaching holds that God possesses such foreknowledge. See Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 41.
I think the answer is yes. It would be one thing if God were on the same level of agency as Mary, and the removal of original sin and its consequences in her resulted only in more openness to generally good things (like kind marriage proposals from worthy suitors) than might be found in other humans. But a paradox of freedom for Christians is that, since God is a person’s blessedness, the enhancing of freedom just is an increasing openness to God. The idea that we have perfect liberty in morally significant settings only where there is indifference in the agent is widely recognized as a myth. This does not, and indeed it must not, make morally significant and genuinely free choice altogether impossible. But if one were to enhance freedom, one would hardly introduce disordered inclinations into a person’s soul so as to distort her real preferences. Indeed, the removal of such disordered inclinations is by definition the return to right order within a person’s motivations. In preparation for a woman’s free decision of whether or not to have a child with God, I believe that God would find this removal fitting in the extreme.

Now God’s majesty perhaps cannot eliminate the awe Martha would feel, but if she is already disinclined to consent to her extraordinary vocation, then her fear to refuse, in this surprising situation, would give rise to some vacillation, much as in our case of Sally’s decision to give Tony her money. The vacillation would be between the fear of reprisal for her refusal, and the willingness to consent to God’s plan, and this suggests to me a level of coercion that God would like to do without. While it is true that the coercion would not be intended by God, one must remember that with disordered inclinations, the individual does not view God’s invitation simply under the aspect of her blessedness but also as carrying with it an awesome threat. Instead, exempt Martha from original sin and its consequences, so that she could, with the grace of God (and her own perseverance), refrain from sin until the moment of the Annunciation. Then, supposing she gives the consent she will have every reason to give, she fulfills perfectly the spousal character in relation to God. Indeed, in an ordinary encounter that leads to pregnancy the kind of docility and delight in doing God’s will Martha would have would be idolatry. However, in response to God, in whom we live, and move, and have our being, it is the fullest expression of spiritual love. At this point, epistemic confusion and doubt are understandable, precisely because someone so humbly disposed to God’s will would need persuading, not that this was an honor, but that the honor was to be hers.

Objections

Objection 1

The trouble with your talking this way about Mary’s agency is that Jesus also must have free agency in the fullest measure, and yet he agonizes about his impending death (Luke 22:39-46), whereas Mary seems docile and eager to bear Jesus, even with the scorn it will bring her. Does not this suggest that Jesus is not
fully free in the way that you want Mary to be, or that your requirements for her freedom are a little too stringent?

Response

Any Christian who does not think Jesus himself inherits a fallen nature is going to need to tell a story about how the elements Jesus is struggling with at Gethsemane are not the disordered inclinations that result from the fall. On the other hand, a Barthian who holds that it is precisely a sinful nature that Christ assumes (as I do not) will have no trouble explaining why Christ is less free than I argue Mary should be. Clearly, if Christ has the disordered inclinations that result from the fall, it will be easy to explain why he would struggle in a way that Mary would not (though it might be difficult for such people to explain how Jesus managed to acquire a sinful nature not possessed by his mother, but I cannot concern myself with this issue here).

However, to confront the objection more directly, I would say that Jesus experiences a strong anxiety about death precisely because he is so very united to the human condition. Yet I see no reason why an agent might not have an intense struggle that arose from purely instinctual sources and at no point willed any aspect of the struggle (as opposed to a drug addict, who might really be of “two minds” about two courses of action, on which note James 4:8). Jesus, let us say, was already conscious of his infinite dignity, but his experiential awareness of his coming death was becoming more real. Mary was just becoming conscious of her unique privilege, and this was just dawning on her. The point, in any case, is not that Mary cannot be frightened; the point is that she cannot be frightened into action by God. Jesus in Gethsemane, plausibly, is not a candidate for being frightened into action by God because he is God in the flesh. Through his gratuitous love for humanity, the second person of the Trinity, in concert with the Father and Holy Spirit, took on flesh for the redemption of the world, and in Gethsemane struggles with the physical and emotional repercussions of awaiting a gruesome bodily death. Jesus, as any human would, wishes to avoid this, other things being equal. Mary is perfectly permitted to have some wistfulness about the path her life might have taken, but not seriously to have disordered inclinations toward choosing or having chosen a different path, all things considered. I hold that the same is true for Jesus.

Objection 2

You have argued that the relationship that obtains between Mary as the Mother of Christ and God’s role as Father to Christ necessitates a consent free from

\textsuperscript{49}For a helpful interpretation of Christ’s experience that does not sacrifice his divine knowl-
any coercion on the part of Mary. Does your position entail that fully consensual intercourse between fallen and/or redeemed human beings is impossible?

Response

No, it does not entail that. We have disordered inclinations and urges and they are strong, to be sure. For one thing, it is precisely the sensual urges of human beings that are the most frequent case studies for concupiscence. So, given the right sort of environment (such as marriage), it might be precisely the act in question toward which the post-fall human beings would have inclinations. Although there are certainly ways in which an inclination toward something that in itself is good can be disordered, if the two human beings have inclinations (and volitions) toward the same thing, then it is hardly consent that is in jeopardy. Furthermore, we need to remember the unique character of the Annunciation. Nowhere else in the Christian story is anyone directly impregnated by God. God needs an extraordinary sort of consent to match his extraordinary agency and offer.

Objection 3

Your invocation of the uniqueness of the situation is interesting, since it is not clear why Mary needs to be the subject of this exceptional treatment and, say, the prophet Jonah does not.

Response

While prophecy is certainly a special vocation, it seems to me to be quite a different thing to bear God’s messages to the world, and to become the mother and caretaker of the Lord in his infancy. As Thomas Howard puts it, “They all bore witness to the Word. This woman bore the Word.” Thus, this paper does place some emphasis on the difference between punishing a petulant prophet (much as if he were a child in one’s care as well as one’s messenger) and coercing a woman to bear one’s child. Anything on the analogy of the latter suggests that there could be a degree to which God is a rapist. I have argued that for this reason God would eliminate coercive elements to the maximal degree feasible, which, I have also argued, entails cleansing Mary of the scourge and psychological consequences of original sin, at least insofar as they are understood in some major Catholic and non-Catholic Christian traditions. Jonah can rebel, but if he does, God will persuade him of his prophetic vocation. Mary’s role in giving birth to Christ is unparalleled with respect to the level of partnership it requires with God, so God should cleanse her in such a unique way as to be capable of such an unparalleled partnership.

50Thomas Howard, On Being Catholic (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 181, italics original.
Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that plausible ideas concerning human freedom and coercion put serious strain on those Christians who do not hold to the Virgin Mary’s Immaculate Conception. On several views of the fall and its effects, it seems Mary will need to be redeemed in some sense prior to the Annunciation, but I have further argued that her inheritance (via original sin) of what the Catholic tradition calls “concupiscence,” in the form of disordered inclinations to turn against God, also threatens to undo the fullness of freedom that presumably God would desire her to have, were God to select her to become the mother of His Son, Jesus. There is a way out: Aquinas, one of many medieval Dominicans who denied the Immaculate Conception, held that Mary was sanctified in the womb and that the “fomes of sin” (concupiscence) were bound in her. Although he notes that holy people can also bind the fomes in some manner, he regards Mary’s case as in some way a singular privilege, and elsewhere makes it fairly clear that the motions of evil concupiscence (the fomes) cannot, in the ordinary case at least, be bound entirely in this life. Those who find it possible to eliminate entirely any element of disordered inclinations (and doing so is not the same thing as eliminating the possibility of lapsing back into sin, though it does make the latter less likely) may find the argument of this paper unpersuasive. Since, as far as I can tell, this is a relatively small number of Christians, it seems to me that many more should consider carefully what reasons they already have for denying Mary’s Immaculate Conception.

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51ST, III.27.3.
52ST, I-II.74.3, reply to objection 2.
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