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Abstract

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, variously accepted or rejected by the different Christian traditions, may seem to focus on a single issue – original sin. However, a major school of Indian thought, Kashmir Shaivism, opens up surprising new approaches to the dogma. It shifts the focus from the topic of original sin to the ‘singular grace and privilege’ emphasised in the Bull. It adds to Marian vocabulary and shows how her experience opens up opportunities for Christian thought and practice.

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Introduction

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was defined by Pope Pius IX in his Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*¹ promulgated on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December, 1854. It reads as follows.

We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.²

The school of thought called Kashmir Shaivism emerged in the 10th and 11th centuries, during Kashmir's 'golden age', and climaxed in the work of Abhinavagupta (c. 975-1025), poet, mystic and theologian who reinterpreted the many tantras of his day in his *Tantrāloka* (Light on the Tantras). He was followed by figures such as Kṣemarāja, his disciple, and Jayaratha (c. 1225-1275), his learned commentator, after which the tradition largely fell into obscurity.

This short article cannot hope to summarise the encyclopaedic teaching of a writer now recognised as an outstanding figure of Hindu thought. It can only touch on some of the views that pertain more closely to our topic.

Abhinavagupta calls his system *Trika* ('Threefold') where he holds that the god, Siva, the goddess, Śakti, and the human dimension, are in fact non-dual, one implying the other. Within this context, he shifts the focus from the masculine to the feminine, from the ordered to the spontaneous, from compliance to freedom, from the external to the internal. He rises above the divisive categories of pure and impure, divine and human, transcendence and immanence, and comes to realise the divine state.

¹ Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius IX on the Immaculate Conception, *Ineffabilis Deus*, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9ineff.htm> accessed 1 January 2025. The text does not have paragraph numbers. Denziger Schönmetzer, n. 2803, calls it a Bull (*bullā*), a term we will often use in this article.

² *Ineffabilis Deus* readily acknowledges its indebtedness to Pope Alexander VII (1599-1667). Cf. C. A. Bouman, 'The Immaculate Conception in the Liturgy', in E. D. O'Connor (ed.), *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance*, University of Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958, 113-159, 157. R. Laurentin, 'The Role of the Papal Magisterium in the Development of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception', trans. and abridged by C. E. Sheedy, and E. S. Shea, in O'Connor (ed.), *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception*, 271-325, 311-312, footnote 171, shows the indebtedness as follows.

Alexander VII:

*ejus animam
in primo instanti creationis
et infusionis in corpus
fuisse speciali Dei
gratia et privilegio
intuitu meritorum Jesu Christi,
ejus filii, humani generis Redemptoris
a macula peccati originalis
praeservatam immunem.*

Pius IX:

*animam Beatissimae V. Mariae
cum primum fuit creata
et in suum corpus infusa
fuisse singulari omnipotentis Dei
gratia et privilegio
intuitu meritorum Christi Jesu
Salvatoris humani generis
ab omni originalis culpa labe
praeservatam immunem.*

Why call on a tradition from one thousand years ago? The Church has always drawn on more ancient traditions. For example, Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4–1109), after leaving his native Italy and encountering the Germanic world, explored, in his *Cur Deus Homo*, the saving work of Christ in light of their practice of *wergild*. Thomas Aquinas famously used the writings of Aristotle from over 1500 years earlier to explore doctrine of the Eucharist. Since he teaches that ‘Every truth, by whomsoever it is said, is from the Holy Spirit’,³ our use of Kashmir Shaivism seems justified in following suit.

To do so, this article uses the method called ‘comparative theology’, which is to be distinguished from the ‘comparative study of religions’. The latter notes the similarities and differences between traditions without any personal involvement. By contrast:

Comparative theology ... marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions.⁴

This article does not hold that such and such a term in Kashmir Shaivism can be applied uncritically to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, for aspects of Kashmir Shaivism are incompatible with classical Christian doctrine, as are aspects of Aristotle’s thought. Rather, we are suggesting that some of Abhinavagupta’s views can in fact bring to the surface elements of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception that are already present but not so clearly noted.

The pages that follow will quote a phrase from the Declaration, examine it from a Christian point of view, present aspects of Kashmir Shaivism, and then show what can be learned.

PART 1 ‘in the first instance of her conception’

Mary’s conception

The Apostolic Constitution mentions Anna, Mary’s mother, only in passing and does not refer to her intercourse with Joachim, her husband. This the story of her conception is adumbrated in the left-hand portal of the facade of Notre Dame in Paris. Its lower lintel represents the marriages of Anne and Joachim, as well as of Mary and Joseph, in scenes taken from two apocryphal works, the *Protoevangelium of St James*, dated to the second century CE, and the *Pseudo-Matthew*⁵ which reaches its final state around the 9th century. Anna and Joachim, devout and faithful to their tradition, are nevertheless faced with the grave problem of

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, q. 109, a. 1 in 1.

⁴ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, Chichester UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 10.

⁵ *The Other Gospels, Accounts of Jesus from Outside the New Testament* edited and translated by Bart D. Ehman and Zlatko Pleše. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

childlessness. It is in answer to their earnest prayer that Anna conceives in the usual way according to *Pseudo-Matthew* but less clearly in the *Proto-Evangelium*.

Abhinavagupta's conception

Abhinava's conception occurs in a strikingly different way. He places the identical poem at the start of his *Tantrāloka* and of its summary, the *Tantrasāra*, and of another major work, the *Parātriṃśikāvivaraṇa*, which shows its importance for him. It can be read as an encomium either of the God and Goddess or of his parents, Narasimhagupta and Vimalā.⁶ The ambiguity of the poem is intentional, for Abhinavagupta holds that his parents, in the moment of their sexual union, became the divine Couple, such that he himself has a divine character.

This viewpoint is illustrated in the explicit ritual intercourse, the third Kula 'sacrifice' of chapter 29 of Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*, based on the couple⁷ the many details of which need not be given here. In his commentary, Jayaratha quotes a text which describes the mind-set of the couple. 'Let [the practitioners] contemplate themselves as having the form of Śiva and Sakti.'⁸ This sacrifice leads to a result comparable to Abhinavagupta's conception. He writes, 'Any body conceived during such a [ritualised sexual] mating, which develops in the womb, is called 'yoginī-born'. In his very self, he is a repository of knowledge, a Rudra.'⁹

What can be learned from Kashmir Shaivism ?

Abhinavagupta's view of his parents' intercourse contrasts vividly with the viewpoint of Augustine (354 - 430) who taught that all couples without exception, because of the *libido* involved in the concupiscence of their intercourse, were tainted by original sin.¹⁰ This would seem to imply that Mary was inescapably soiled by her parents' union, although Augustine hesitated to say so, as we shall see. By contrast John Damascene, considered to be the last of the great Greek Fathers, calls Joachim's semen immaculate and does not hesitate to focus on Anna's womb. He writes, 'O happy loins of Joachim, which had produced a germ which is all

⁶ A. G. J. S. Sanderson, 'A Commentary on the Opening verse of the *Tantrasāra* of Abhinavagupta', in S. Das and E. Fülring (eds), *Samarasya: Studies in Indian Arts, Philosophy and Interreligious dialogue – in Honour of Bettina Bäumer*, Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2005, 89-148, 89.

⁷ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka*, with the Commentary of Jayaratha, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987. The abbreviation for Jayaratha's commentary (*viveka*) is *TĀV*.

⁸ *TĀV*, 3363.

⁹ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 29.162b-163a. Rudra is an alias for Śiva. Dyczkowski comments that Abhinavagupta is implicitly referring to himself in this text. *Abhinavagupta, Tantrāloka: The Light on and of the Tantras, with the Commentary called Viveka by Jayaratha*, ed. and trans. M. S. G. Dyczkowski, vol. 2, *Chapters Twenty-eight and Twenty-nine*, Copyright Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, 2023, 341, footnote 401.

¹⁰ C. Balić, 'The Mediaeval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus', in E. D. O'Connor (ed.), *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance*, University of Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958, 161-212, 162.

immaculate. O wondrous womb of Anne in which an all-holy child slowly grew and took shape...'¹¹ For John, Mary's conception does not take place in the context of sinful libido.

In the light of Kashmir Shaivism and of John Damascene and indeed of the apocryphal writings we have considered, Mary's immaculate conception could be seen more properly in the context of holy intercourse. This shift, with its many implications, is the first of several presented in this article.

PART 2 'by a singular grace and privilege granted by almighty God'

Christianity

Bede (c. 673 - 735), in his commentary on John the Baptist 'leaping with joy' in his mother's womb (Lk 1:41, 44), introduces the fundamental principle that the Holy Spirit can come upon a person at any time. 'It is certain, according to the dependable judgment of the Fathers, that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not bound by any law.'¹² Bede, speaking of John, does not apply this principle to Mary, but later centuries in the West will.¹³ For example, Osbert of Clare (+ 1158) asks: 'Why should we be surprised if God sanctified the glorious matter of the Virgin's body in its very conception, when He willed to sanctify Jeremias and certain others while still in their mothers' wombs?'¹⁴ *Ineffabilis Deus* reflects this idea, stating that 'the soul of the Blessed Virgin, in its creation and infusion into the body, was endowed with the grace of the Holy Spirit'.

Kashmir Shaivism

In chapters 2 – 5 of the *Tantrāloka*, Abhinavagupta sets out the four means or ways (*upāya*) of becoming one with the Divine. These are not exclusive of each other. In fact, all four are experienced to some degree but with differences in emphasis and focus.

The 'non-means'

The first means is more exactly a non-means (*an-upāya*). Full unity with the Divine occurs suddenly and without effort. He writes, 'the revelation [*deśanā*] [of this Light] is given once

¹¹ F. Dvornik, 'The Byzantine Church and the Immaculate Conception', in E. D. O'Connor (ed.), *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance*, University of Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958, 87-112, 97.

¹² G. Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church and the Immaculate Conception', in E. D. O'Connor (ed.), *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* 51-85, 78-79.

¹³ Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church', 79.

¹⁴ Balić, 'The Mediaeval Controversy', 174.

and for all, after which there is no means'.¹⁵ It can still be classed as a 'means' since something has happened.

Jayaratha explains that the term *deśanā* can also refer, by synecdoche, to a 'very reduced means' (*alpa-upāya*)¹⁶ or 'subsidiary means' (*parikaratva*).¹⁷ He gives some examples: the sight of perfected beings oral transmission a silent transmission of consciousness.¹⁸

Accordingly, the term '*deśanā*' refers to a total and sudden revelation, which can occur in two ways, either independently or dependant on a particular situation.¹⁹

Abhinavagupta goes on to explore the impact of the *deśanā*. He writes, 'The supreme state is ... beyond the realm of words. It is located at the apophatic level.'²⁰ '[For those who have attained this highest state], notions of pleasure and pain, fear and anguish, disappear completely: the knower has arrived at supremely non-differentiated thought.'²¹ They have a paradoxical character, for while they are essentially one with the Transcendent they still live in a transient reality. This state is portrayed by the familiar image of the swan gliding over the waters and from time to time inserting its beak to drink, 'knowing happiness and sadness ...' Abhinavagupta goes on to say that those who have been transformed by the non-means 'have no other work to accomplish but to confer grace',²² a most important point we will examine later in this article.

The second, third and fourth means

Abhinavagupta contrasts the first means with the other three. The first has no need of what pertains to the others: 'For [the first] there is no mantra, no meditation, no cultic worship, nor

¹⁵ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.2b. This article prefers the translation *révélation* used in Lilian Silburn and André Padoux, *La Lumière sur les tantras: chapitres 1-5 du Tantrāloka*, Paris: E. de Boccard, 1998, 130. It is translated as 'instruction' by Gnoli and Dyczkowski, a word which does not reflect the suddenness of the revelation.

¹⁶ *TĀV*, 312.

¹⁷ *TĀV*, 3420.

¹⁸ Cf. Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka*, vol. 2, *Chapters Two and Three*, 3, 7.

¹⁹ An example of the spontaneous imparting of grace can perhaps be found in the case of Rāmāna Mahārṣi when he was about 15 years old. He recounts as follows: 'I just felt "I am going to die." He then lay down on the ground. Then came the thought, "I am the deathless Spirit." All this was not a dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as a living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought-process. ... Absorption in the Self continues unbroken from that time on.' B.V. Narasimha Swami, *Self-Realisation*, Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 2013, insert facing page 10.

An example of the impact of seeing a perfected being can perhaps be found in the case of the Benedictine monk Henri Le Saux (1910-1973, aka Abhishiktananda) who, on merely seeing Rāmāna Mahārṣi in his ashram in Tiruvannamalai, was overwhelmed at this manifestation of the Divine. Without exchanging a word with Rāmāna, he committed himself to the work of linking Christian and Hindu mysticism (Jacques Dupuis, 'Hindou-chrétien et chrétien-hindou', in Jacques Scheuer and Dennis Gira (eds), *Vivre plusieurs religions*, Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2000, 61).

²⁰ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.33.

²¹ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.36.

²² Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.38b.

visualisation, nor the commotion involved in ordinary initiation, consecration of the master, and so on.’²³ They are described as ‘immaculate beings (*nirmala-ātmāno*)’²⁴ who are wholly focused on their own [divine] consciousness which is acquired without any means (*nirupāyām*),²⁵ whereas, ‘... those whose consciousness is not utterly pure (*nirmala*) receive grace only by following one of the paths’.²⁶ The first are also contrasted according to the suddenness of the grace. ‘Since [Śiva] radiates his light in innumerable ways, some have access to Him gradually, others all at once.’²⁷

The second means is ‘the way of Śiva’ (*śāmbhava-upāya*) in which the will predominates. This ‘will’ is not wilfulness. It ‘can be summed up as a total yet simple and direct identification ... of the yogin with the original impetus of the divinity’. The third method is ‘the way of power’ (*śākta-upāya*) where knowledge predominates. It consists in ‘a lucid vision of the understanding where intuitive reasoning is awakened on the basis of differentiated thought leading to mystic realisation’.²⁸ The ‘way of the individual’ (*āṇava-upāya*) involves action, such as recitation and ritual, pilgrimage and austerities.

What can be learned from Kashmir Shaivism?

Using Abhinava’s language, this article proposes that Mary is the most perfect case of the ‘non-means’ in that she receives the *deśanā* at the first moment of her existence.

The fact that Mary has ‘arrived at the highest state’ and ‘at the apophatic level’ does not imply detachment from the vicissitudes of the human condition. Rather, these are seen from a different angle. She is not overwhelmed by the vicissitudes but is able ‘to confer grace’ instead. Her ability to enter into the ‘happiness and sadness, consciousness and ignorance’ of human existence is implied in the Bull by its reference to the Litany of Loreto where Mary is called ‘Tower of David’, ‘Health of the sick’, ‘Comfort of the Afflicted’. She experiences her own joys and sorrows, as recounted in the infancy narratives (Mt. 1–2; Lk. 1–2), but is not defined by them because she has ‘arrived at supremely non-differentiated thought’ ‘beyond the realm of words’ or, as the Bull says, ‘she is the seat of all divine graces’. Whereas the Baptist receives *révélation* in the womb, we suggest, by virtue of a ‘subsidiary non means’,²⁹ contemplatives need to enter into stillness, theologians need to be inspired by their studies and others need the sacred rites. Mary does take part in these means, we may suppose, but does not depend on them because, as the Apostolic Constitution says, ‘by a singular grace and

²³ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.37.

²⁴ The term ‘immaculate’ will be discussed more fully later in the article.

²⁵ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.7.

²⁶ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.47b.

²⁷ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.5.

²⁸ Silburn and Padoux, *La Lumière sur les tantras*, 56.

²⁹ Mary’s greeting (Lk. 1:43), at which the unborn John the Baptist, already 6 months old, ‘leaped in his mother’s womb’, could be viewed as a case of a ‘subsidiary means’, namely by ‘oral transmission’.

privilege' she is already 'adorned with all gifts of the Holy Spirit', from the first moment of her existence.

The different ministries have their place in the Church, as St Paul teaches, and all four means in Kashmir Shaivism lead to union with the divine, but Abhinava holds that the sudden illumination without effort is supreme. This is because for him the invisible is greater than the visible, silence greater than words, experience greater than its expression. Accordingly, the figure of Mary suggests a shift of focus from the outer to the inner.

PART 3 'in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race'

Christianity

In Catholic theological reflection, two principles are involved: the redemption of all mankind, Mary included, which is achieved through the Paschal Mystery, and the full outpouring of the Spirit on Mary in her conception. But how can the effect take place before the cause? How can Mary be redeemed before the redemption on Calvary? The two principles are clear, but their relationship in time is not.³⁰ The Bull does not try fully to resolve the tension, for it generally avoids particular questions and scholarly opinions.³¹

The bond between causality and time is loosened by Anselm of Canterbury who teaches that the effects of Christ's Passion 'extend even to those who are absent in time and place', and that Mary therefore was pure through his future death.³² Duns Scotus (c. 1265 –1308) adds that if Christ was the perfect Redeemer he must have preserved at least one person from the taint of original sin, and this must be his own Mother. 'The most perfect mediator exercises the most perfect act of mediation possible with respect to some person for whom he mediates ... but this would not be so if He had not merited to preserve [Mary] from original sin.'³³ This is classed as *opinio Scoti* and is to be contrasted with what is called the *opinio Thomae*, who states, 'Of all the members of the human race, Christ alone did not need redemption, because He is our Head; all others are to be redeemed by Him. But this could not be, if there was ever another soul which never had the stain of original sin. Therefore, this was not granted to the Blessed Virgin nor to anyone besides Christ.'³⁴

The two opposing points of view will remain in contest until 1854.³⁵

³⁰ The precise nature of time has remained unclear, since as early as Aristotle and Augustine, and increasingly in modern scientific debate.

³¹ Laurentin, 'The Role of the Papal Magisterium', 312.

³² Balić, 'The Mediaeval Controversy', 171.

³³ Balić, 'The Mediaeval Controversy', 207.

³⁴ Thomas, Sent. III, q.7 a.1 sol. 2 (Parmae, VII, 38).

³⁵ Balić, 'The Mediaeval Controversy', 212.

Adding to the complexity of the issue, two other major points of view existed as to why the Word became flesh. Albert the Great (c. 1200-1280), Thomas' teacher, believes that 'the Son of God would have become man even if there had been no sin ... [because it] is more in harmony with the piety of faith'.³⁶ Francis de Sales (1567-1622) continues along this same line: 'In God, the divine nature is eternally shared ... [in order that the] supreme loving-kindness could be shared so perfectly with a creature outside itself ... ' and God did so through 'the blessed Virgin, our Lady'. Such is God's primary purpose even though, co-incidentally, 'He also clearly foresaw that the first man would abuse his freedom'.³⁷

The opening sentence of the Apostolic Constitution seems to cater for these different points of view. It speaks of the ineffable God 'having foreseen from all eternity the lamentable wretchedness of the entire human race which would result from the sin of Adam', but also states that 'above all creatures did God so love her that truly in her was the Father well pleased with singular delight'. This seems to suggest that Mary is not only a means of salvation but that God enjoys endowing 'her with the abundance of all heavenly gifts poured from the treasury of his divinity'. The shift is away from a focus on human sin to an emphasis on divine generosity.

This 'pouring out' is not an imposition. Indeed, the issue of freedom is central to our discussion. Hans Urs von Balthasar holds that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is 'indispensable for the boundlessness of [Mary's] "Yes" in Luke's story of the Annunciation'³⁸ and that any lessening of her total 'Yes' would imply a form of divine rape! Mary's declaration, 'I am the handmaid of the Lord', is not just compliance. Her freedom and initiative, we propose, are also central to the account.

The story of the annunciation has biblical links. The angel's appearance to the unnamed wife of Manoah in Jg 13: 3 does not disturb her, the angel's appearance to Zechariah does (Lk 1:12), but it is the angelic greeting that disturbs Mary.³⁹ The greeting, 'hail' (*chaire*), is best translated as 'rejoice'⁴⁰ and can 'refer to the joy that greets a divine saving act, announcement or promise'⁴¹ with messianic overtones. However, the angel's message, vv. 31-33 seems, in fact, no more than a repeat of other biblical annunciations.⁴² The same phrase, 'You are to conceive and bear a son', is addressed to both the wife and the virgin. Indeed, it seems no more significant than a promise of freedom from the Philistines or a restoration of

³⁶ Albert the Great, III *In Sententiarum* d. 20, a. 4.

³⁷ Francis de Sales, *The Love of God: A Treatise*, trans. V. Kerins, London: Burns & Oates, 1962, 58-60.

³⁸ J. Mulder Jr., 'A Response to Van Kuiken on the Immaculate Conception', *Christian Scholar's Review* 47, 2018, 281.

³⁹ This disturbance is different from that of Isaiah who is dismayed at the sound of the voice because he knows his lips are impure (Is 6:4-5). There is no suggestion of impurity in the case of Mary. Moses is afraid to look on God (Ex 3:6), but Mary is disturbed by the implications of the greeting. The situations are contrasting.

⁴⁰ Stanislas Lyonnet, 'Χαίρε, χεχαριτωμένη', *Biblica* 1939, 131-141, 136.

⁴¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 322-323.

⁴² As in Jdg 13.

Davidic kingship.⁴³ Mary, we suggest, senses a discrepancy between the angel's greeting with its messianic overtones and his relatively banal message. Her objection 'is a classical difficulty for exegetes, and no one interpretation has yet secured universal acceptance'.⁴⁴ This article proposes another interpretation which supports Von Balthasar's contention.

Where Zechariah's objection, 'How can this come about,' merits rebuke and silencing. Mary's objection, similarly phrased, is not seen as indicating a lack of faith. We suggest it denotes a shift from the idea of Davidic restoration to the hope of messianic fulfilment, elements of which are voiced by Zechariah when he regains his speech (Lk 1:76-79). We propose that this is because Mary has the wisdom of the Spirit who came to her at the beginning of her existence. She knows, not the scriptural texts *verbatim*, but their meaning, their essence. She knows the Word. Her refusal shows both her discernment and her independence. The angel must therefore go on to say, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.'

It is only on hearing this promise that Mary gives her assent, which is carefully phrased. She is indeed 'the handmaid of the Lord', but she also decides, 'let it be done' (*genoito*), which recalls the *fiat* of creation, 'let there be' light (*genêthêôtô*). She does not say 'I submit', but 'let it be so'. She is both obedient and commanding. Two freedoms coincide, the divine and the human.⁴⁵

The relationship of these freedoms has long been the subject of intense theological debate: Pelagianism, grace and free will, Quietism, the limits of divine supremacy, predestination. How can the human be free if God is free, and vice versa? Reflection on that question goes beyond the scope of this article.

Kashmir Shaivism

In describing the process of initiation in chapter 13 of the *Tantrāloka*, Abhinavagupta prefers the term *śaktipāta*⁴⁶ ('descent of energy') which emphasises the suddenness and unexpectedness of grace (*anugraha*).⁴⁷ He classifies the descent of energy into three groups: 'intense' (*tīvra*), 'moderate' (*madhya*) and 'slight' (*manda*). Each of the three is again divided into three, to form nine levels. When the descent of energy is at the third level, 'slightly

⁴³ Francis J. Moloney, *Mary, Woman and Mother*, Homebush NSW: St Paul's Publications, 1988, 20.

⁴⁴ John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975, 173. Max Zerwick, '... quoniam virum non cognosco', *Verbum Domini* 37 (1959): 212-224, 276-288, gives a survey of views.

⁴⁵ This episode is more fully studied in J. R. Dupuche, 'The Goddess Kali and the Virgin Mary', *Australian e-Journal of Theology* 19.1, 2012, 43-57.

⁴⁶ The term *śaktipāta* is composed of two words: 'descent' (*pāta*) and 'energy' (*śakti*).

⁴⁷ Silburn and Padoux, *La Lumière sur les tantras*, 45.

intense' (*manda-tīvra*), the disciple must find an 'authentic guru' who will provide sound teaching, confer initiation and grant liberation.

The first two levels are of interest here. While Abhinavagupta, as we have seen, holds that he received the revelation of light, becoming a 'repository of knowledge', a Rudra, from the moment of his conception, it would seem that he received only a 'moderately intense' (*madhya-tīvra*) gift of grace. He has been 'initiated by the goddesses'⁴⁸ and not by a human guru. He is fully enlightened, without the need for a teacher or instruction in the sacred texts. He is 'an intuitive guru',⁴⁹ in fact 'the best of gurus',⁵⁰ not only liberated, but also able to confer liberation. In *TĀ* 4.33-85, Abhinava discourses at length about the characteristics of such a person. For example, their look is full of bliss and in their presence other gurus 'lose their qualification'.⁵¹

Great as these gifts are, Abhinavagupta envisages the possibility of a greater initiation, a 'very intense' (*tīvra-tīvra*) communication of grace from above. Its recipient is not involved in action and does not become a 'guru' in the same way as a person who receives a 'moderately intense' level of grace. The recipient is removed from this world immediately, or perhaps at a later stage, and seeks nothing, not even liberation,⁵² for, in fact, this 'very intense' initiation, a state that is identified with the 'non-means' mentioned above,⁵³ implies liberation already.

As regards the Word, Abhinava teaches that there are four stages. The supreme Word (*vāc*) is the fullness of divine knowledge. The second stage is 'intuition' (*paśyantī*), which is insight into an aspect of the Word. The next stage is 'middle' or 'transitional' (*madhya*) where words are being sought that describe the intuition. The fourth stage is when the insight is actually expounded (*vaikharī*). The receptive disciple, on hearing such words, is taken back by them through the successive stages to a knowledge of the supreme Word, the divine Mind.

What can be learned from Kashmir Shaivism?

This article leaves to another time the question of the retroactive effect of Christ's passion. It does not tackle the meaning of 'in view of', 'merits', or 'saviour' and the other questions that pertain more closely to Christology. It does propose, however, that Mary, in terms of Kashmir Shaivism, has been initiated in the 'highly intense' manner from the moment of her conception. She can be understood as possessing a knowledge of the Word (*vāc*) from the start since she is from the beginning, as the Bull notes, 'the only one who has become the

⁴⁸ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 13.142a.

⁴⁹ Abhinavagupta, *The Tantrasāra of Abhinavagupta*, 120.

⁵⁰ Silburn and Padoux, *La Lumière sur les tantras*, 46.

⁵¹ Abhinavagupta, *The Tantrasāra of Abhinavagupta*, 122.

⁵² Silburn and Padoux, *La Lumière sur les tantras*, 44.

⁵³ Silburn and Padoux, *La Lumière sur les tantras*, 56.

dwelling place of all the graces of the most Holy Spirit'. Her intuition (*paśyanti*) is of the Word that will be made flesh and is destined to be sacrificed. More than Abhinavagupta, she is an 'intuitive guru', indeed the 'best of all gurus', fully illuminated by the Holy Spirit. In contrast to the prophets – and to Abhinavagupta in his own way – who spoke the Word in words (Cf. Heb. 1:1) incipiently as in the transitional stage of the Word (*madhya*), Mary 'spoke' the Word (*vaikhari*) in flesh such that the communication of God to humans would be total, human flesh speaking to human flesh in every dimension.

Mary is not initiated as are other Christians, for she is initiated hiddenly and most intensely from the first moment of her existence. She does not teach, as do the disciples, nor is she involved in celebrating rituals. She does not expound or explain the faith. These, of undeniable value, belong to lesser levels of initiation. She is Queen of apostles and prophets.

PART 4 'was preserved free from all stain of original sin'

4.a 'free from'

Christianity

Mary is maculate

The Apostolic Constitution's statement, '... illustrious documents of venerable antiquity, of both the Eastern and the Western Church, very forcibly testify that this doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the most Blessed Virgin ... always existed in the Church', is not quite correct, for even if Origen (c. 185 – c. 253) speaks devoutly of the Virgin Mary, he often mentions the many sins she is supposed to have committed, especially during the Passion when she sinned more gravely even than the Apostles,⁵⁴ a view which was popularised throughout the Churches of the East.⁵⁵ In the West, Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 220) attributes even greater sinfulness to Mary.⁵⁶ Augustine, in his controversy with Pelagius, holds that all the saints have sinned, but hesitates to speak of Mary in these terms, saying 'except for the holy virgin Mary, about whom I do not wish any question to be raised when sin is being discussed – for whence do we know what greater grace of complete triumph over sin may have been given to her who merited to conceive and bear Him Who was certainly without any sin?'⁵⁷ A convinced follower of Augustine's teaching, Fulgentius of Ruspe (460-533) is less reluctant, holding that 'the flesh of Mary, having been conceived in sin, as is the condition of humans, was indeed sinful flesh, and begot the Son of God in the likeness of sinful flesh'.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church', 55.

⁵⁵ Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church', 56.

⁵⁶ Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church', 66.

⁵⁷ Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church', 70.

⁵⁸ Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church', 75.

Mary is sanctified

The Bull's statement is more accurate with regard to the later Eastern Church, for while the Latins were long embroiled in questions of the immaculate conception,⁵⁹ the Greeks, being less interested in defining the nature of original sin,⁶⁰ seem not to have spent much time considering it.⁶¹ However, some Eastern theologians concluded that Mary, being the Mother of God, must have been free from original sin and its effects from the very moment of her conception.⁶² For example, George Scholarios (c. 1400 – c. 1473), Patriarch of Constantinople, though appreciative of the writings of Thomas Aquinas, did not agree with him and professed a clear belief in the immaculate conception of the Virgin.⁶³

But the Latin theologians were unaware of the developments in the East concerning the complete sinlessness of Mary.⁶⁴ Indeed, Bonaventure could categorically state that 'none of those to whom we have been able to listen with our own ears has ever asserted that the Blessed Mary was immune from original sin'.⁶⁵ In their opinion, 'it is Mary's sanctification, rather than her conception, that is celebrated'⁶⁶ on December 8th, to which *Ineffabilis Deus* retorts, '[The Popes] denounced as false and absolutely foreign to the mind of the Church the opinion of those who held and affirmed that it was not the conception of the Virgin but her sanctification that was honoured by the Church.'

Mary is immaculate

The term *immaculata* does not itself occur in the Bull even though, in 1806, Pius VII granted permission for the Franciscans to use the phrase '*et te in Conceptione Immaculata*' in the preface of the feast of December 8th, a permission that was followed by a rush of applications, such that by the end of his pontificate in 1823 he had acceded to almost 300 requests to do likewise.⁶⁷ The devotion continued unabated.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church', 83.

⁶⁰ Dvornik, 'The Byzantine Church', 91.

⁶¹ Jouassard, 'The Fathers of the Church', 64.

⁶² Dvornik, 'The Byzantine Church and the Immaculate Conception', 91.

⁶³ Dvornik, 'The Byzantine Church and the Immaculate Conception', 111.

⁶⁴ Balić, 'The Mediaeval Controversy', 162.

⁶⁵ Balić, 'The Mediaeval Controversy', 201.

⁶⁶ Laurentin, 'The Role of the Papal Magisterium', 278-280.

⁶⁷ Laurentin, 'The Role of the Papal Magisterium', 291.

⁶⁸ The Miraculous Medal, whose design was shown to Catherine Labouré in Mary's apparitions to her in Paris in 1830, bears the inscription '*Ô Marie, conçue sans péché, priez pour nous qui avons recours à vous*' ('O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee'). By the time of Catherine's death in 1876, more than a billion medals had been distributed. In our own day, about 3 million people visit the chapel of the apparitions every year. In 1858, in Lourdes, Bernadette heard the Lady say in the Gaston Occitan dialect '*Que*

The Bull prefers designations such as *immunis* or *libera*. Note that the Bull is restrained, using privative terms, ‘free from every stain of sin, and from all corruption’. More positively, the Bull places few limits on its description of Mary’s state, saying, ‘God alone excepted, Mary is more excellent than all, and by nature fair and beautiful, and more holy than the Cherubim and Seraphim.’ The Bull’s emphasis on the positive is a significant shift.

Kashmir Shaivism

Stain

Kashmir Shaivism teaches that the ‘stain’ (*mala*) affecting humans is ignorance.⁶⁹ In fact, the primary stain is thinking of oneself as just an individual (*āṇava-mala*). For example, I think I am only such and not otherwise, that I am confined to this time and place, with partial knowledge, dependent and constrained by necessity. Taken altogether, these errors constitute the stain of illusion (*māyā-mala*), which in turn leads to sinful action (*karma-mala*) whereby I am condemned to the cycle of rebirths until such time as I come to know the ‘blazing fire of consciousness’. Abhinavagupta puts it succinctly: ‘The wise describe the stain of ignorance, that is [the stain of] individuality, as the root cause of the stains of *māyā* and *karma*. That same seed of the worn-out tree of [transmigratory] existence is consumed instantly in the blazing fire of supreme consciousness.’⁷⁰

Without stain

In Kashmir Shaivism, the term *nirañjana* means ‘without pigment’. It can be translated as ‘immaculate’. Since the colour white can take on any hue without altering it, *nirañjana* can be understood as both transcendent and immanent; it is not limited to anything in particular but is capable of being everything.

For that reason, the term *nirañjana* is applied to that Reality from which all other realities proceed, the divine source where energy is found in its purest and fullest form,⁷¹ a state that transcends will (*icchā*), knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*kriyā*)⁷² and at the same time holds them in unity. So, those who are immaculate know what they want, want what they know, do what they want, know what they are doing. The faculties function without hindrance, mutually enabling each other. By contrast, when these compete, disharmony

soy era immaculada councepciou (‘I am the Immaculate Conception’). About 5 million pilgrims visit the site each year. Thus, the two apparitions enclose the Definition made in 1854.

⁶⁹ By contrast, in the Christian tradition emphasis is placed on sin as disobedience. For example, God asks of Adam, ‘Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ (Gen. 3:11).

⁷⁰ Abhinavagupta, *Il commento di Abhinavagupta alla Parātrīṣikā*, trans. R. Gnoli, Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1985, 223.

⁷¹ Lilian Silburn, *Le Vijñāna Bhairava*, Paris: E. de Boccard, 1983, 109-110.

⁷² Silburn and Padoux, *La Lumière sur les tantras*, 45.

ensues; it is the state of impurity. The enlightened person, therefore, rests simply on the unsullied foundation of supreme consciousness,⁷³ above all and within all.

What can be learned from Kashmir Shaivism?

The Bull's emphasis on the fact that Mary 'would possess that fullness of holy innocence and sanctity' means that her will is conformed to the will of God from the beginning. Using terms from Kashmir Shaivism, she is also without the stain of ignorance. She is free from every stain such that her faculties of will, knowledge and action are not in conflict. She is *nirañjana*, immaculate, from the start. She is at peace in herself and able to relate to every human condition.

4.b free to

Mary is not only 'free from' but also free to. Her excellence above all except the Almighty implies power on her part to accomplish great things.

Christianity

The lower lintel of the southern portal of the façade of Notre Dame⁷⁴ presents three prophets and three kings holding biblical texts that foretell Mary's assumption.⁷⁵ The upper lintel portrays the dormition of the Virgin whose shroud two angels are seen raising so as to lift her to heaven where Jesus, in the tympanum, presents her with the sceptre.⁷⁶ His gesture is not pantomime. Indeed, *Ineffabilis Deus* emphasises the reality of her power, saying, 'with her only-begotten Son, [she] is the most powerful Mediatrix and Conciliatrix in the whole world'.

She is given the sceptre. She is indeed the handmaid of the Lord, but she is not just compliant. Her sceptre is real. In her, human freedom and divine freedom are at one. The fact that she is not specifically involved in any role is not a lack or failure. She has 'all the graces'

⁷³ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 29.110b-111a.

⁷⁴ The northern portal of the facade is concerned with Mary's conception; the southern portal is concerned with her coronation, the two events that delineate the whole trajectory of the Spirit.

⁷⁵ The dogma of the Assumption, forming a counterpart to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, was defined by Pope Pius XII in his Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* on 1 November, 1950. It reads: 'We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever-Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.'

⁷⁶ 'Le Portail de la Vierge', <https://www.notredamedeparis.fr/comprendre/architecture/le-portail-de-la-vierge>, accessed 18 November 2025.

whereas others have particular ministries. As 'Queen of heaven and earth, ... [she is] exalted above all the choirs of angels and saints'.

Kashmir Shaivism

Abhinava contrasts two sorts of people. There is 'the worldly person, [who] works assiduously for himself, and does nothing in favour of others'.⁷⁷ There is also 'the one who, having overcome all impurities, has achieved the divine state and works solely for the benefit of others'.⁷⁸ This person is not uninvolved, inactive or unconcerned but outgoing and generous. He adds, 'they have no other work to accomplish but to confer grace'.⁷⁹

What can be learned from Kashmir Shaivism?

Abhinavagupta describes an ideal figure without stating that such a person necessarily ever existed. He does not see himself as one but supposes that such a figure is at least theoretically possible. The Catholic tradition has sensed that Mary is that person.

In contrast with Eve who 'worked assiduously for herself', Mary's illumination and initiation at the moment of her conception meant that she conceived the Word in the depth of her being in order to conceive it later in her flesh, and to give it to the world. In eternity she still 'confers grace' and 'works solely for the benefit of others'.

Concluding remarks

The extraordinary declaration made in *Ineffabilis Deus* can hardly be justified by any explicit biblical statement but only by the enlightening impact of the Paraclete, 'who will bring the disciples to the fulness of the truth' (cf. Jn 16:13), not to a new revelation but to a deeper understanding; the Paraclete who, over the centuries, this article proposes, has led the Church increasingly to sense that Mary must be without sin. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is a striking example of the Church's ongoing access to the Truth.

In the language of Kashmir Shaivism, Mary could be understood as having received 'the revelation [*deśanā*] [of this Light] once and for all' such that she does not need 'mantra, meditation, cultic worship, visualisation, the commotion involved in ordinary initiation, consecration of the master, and so on'. She is without the need for a teacher or instruction in the sacred texts. She seeks nothing, not even liberation, since she has already received the

⁷⁷ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.39a.

⁷⁸ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.39b.

⁷⁹ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 2.38b.

fullest communication of grace from above. Indeed, she has 'no other work to accomplish but to confer grace'. She did so at Bethlehem, she continues to do so in heaven. Mary receives a fulness 'than which, under God, one cannot even imagine anything greater'. She is initiated at the very beginning and therefore independently of any context. John the Baptist received the revelation of Light but only after six months of existence. Abhinavagupta receives grace such that he is a Rudra from the start, but only to a 'moderately intense' degree whereas Mary has a 'very intense' communication of grace. Other Christians become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17); she does not become new but is new from the start. She not only gave the incarnate Word but continues to confer grace with a freedom uninhibited by sin or its aftermath. Thus, Mary is not just another Christian disciple; in her freedom she is the model for the Church.

Recent theology is coming to the opinion that 'the feminine [is] a distinctive property of one of the divine persons, namely the Holy Spirit'.⁸⁰ Since the Bible does not see the Spirit as subordinate or submissive, but as energetic and even unpredictable,⁸¹ Mary, fully inspired by the Spirit from first to last, is 'dangerous, perceptive, joyous, free, strong, demanding, commanding and successful more truly than water, fire and wind ... [an] icon of the Spirit'.⁸² In the annunciation episode, she shows her power of discernment, demurring at the angel's message and acceding only with the promise of the hovering Spirit. There is an intimacy between her and the Spirit. She accedes and also commands, 'Let it be done.'

Thus, a cumulative shift of focus has been taking place, this article proposes, from sin to grace, from the written word to the enlightenment of the Spirit, from law to freedom, from compliance to initiative, from submission to questioning, from nostalgia to innovation, from public role to inner experience.

Can the figure of Mary, more richly understood, help counter the suppression of 'feminine modes of understanding, of acting, of spirit, and of the heightened sense of the moment'?⁸³ Like Mary, cannot others who are sensitive to the working of the Spirit raise their voices and question what is being done, refuse what is inappropriate, discern what is happening in the depths, receive or reject, point out the sterility of some approaches and the fruitfulness of others, empower and disempower, acknowledge and affirm the good, inspire new developments in a world and a Church that is losing heart, suggesting the way forward to what is unexpected, abandoning nostalgia for the past? They do this openly and explicitly, courageously and courteously, with the delicacy and irresistible power of the Spirit. Such is the lesson of the Immaculate Conception.

⁸⁰ Anthony Kelly, *The Trinity of Love, A Theology of the Christian God*, Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989, 252.

⁸¹ J. G. Williams, 'Yahweh, Women and the Trinity', *Theology Today* 32, 1975, 234-242, 241.

⁸² Dupuche, 'The Goddess Kali and the Virgin Mary', 15.

⁸³ Ann Belford Ulanov, *The Feminine in Jungian Psychology and in Christian Theology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971, 317.