New Series
Volume 5
No. 2
November
2025

Pages 1-7

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Title: **The Virginal Conception of Jesus of Nazareth: A Theological Response to Chris Maunder**

Abstract

According to the Church Fathers, the fact that Jesus was born of a woman signifies that he was truly human, and the fact that he was born of a virgin signifies that he was truly God. Chris Maunder has argued that the story of the virginal conception communicates these and other truths about Jesus' identity, but that it does so as a theological metaphor, and not as an historical reality. In this short reflection, I shall suggest that Chris's position is neither correct nor tenable.

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According to the Church Fathers, the fact that Jesus was born of a woman signifies that he was truly human, and the fact that he was born of a virgin signifies that he was truly God. Chris Maunder has argued that the story of the virginal conception communicates these and other truths about Jesus' identity, but that it does so as a theological metaphor, and not as an historical reality. In this short reflection, I shall suggest that Chris's position is neither correct nor tenable.[1]

The Mystery

The conception of Jesus by his virgin mother Mary is a mystery, in two senses of the word. Its precise mechanism is unknowable, and in that sense mysterious, and it also is a sacred event in which the Church continues to participate through the ages, and is thus a holy mystery for initiates—that is, for the baptised. Let us consider the mystery under these two corresponding headings: as *incomprehensible* and as *sacramental*.

The Incomprehensible

The claim that Mary conceived her son when she was still a virgin is a claim that a *miracle* took place. At least, this is how Christians have always understood it. To clear the ground, it is helpful to consider what is meant by the term 'miracle'. This question has been discussed since at least the early Middle Ages, and I present my own understanding of it.

In the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), following Aristotle, everything that exists does so according to its *nature*. Everything participates in a nature, and this nature determines key aspects of its physical, psychological and spiritual being. Thus, each rose has the nature of the rose, each lion has the nature of the lion, and each human being has the nature of humanity. The nature of a rose determines all those things about it that it has in common with other roses—its greatest and smallest possible sizes, its possible colours, and so on. The nature of a human being similarly determines a human person's constraints and possibilities. In this case, these are the constraints and possibilities of a *rational animal*, that is to say, a being with the spiritual power of understanding and reasoning, along with the bodily needs and potentialities of animals in general. Human nature includes more than this, of course. For example, human beings are by nature social, forming co-operative communities such as kin groups or nations. When considering the virginal conception, however, we are concerned primarily with the nature of human bodily processes.

[1] I thank Professor John Harding for discussing an earlier draft of this article with me. His comments caused me to alter—and, I hope, improve—it considerably.

Now, it often happens that a given nature in a particular individual or group is in some way defective, or corrupted, as happens in a case of an ailment. For example, it is in the nature of human beings that we have the power of sight, but this power is defective in many people and entirely lacking in others. Those of us who need spectacles possess a nature that is human, but in our case, the nature suffers a defect.

In the case of an ailment, it is sometimes within a nature's power to overcome its deficiency. Most Europeans are able to recover from the common cold without difficulty, because our nature has the power of developing immunity to at least some diseases. In other cases, a natural power can be enhanced or restored by human intervention, such as medical, surgical or nursing care. In all these instances, the natural processes are assisted by the grace of God.

However, there are other occasions on which none of these natural processes or deliberate interventions are at work. In these cases, the ailment will not usually be healed. Yet it sometimes happens that the action of God's grace alone may enable a nature to be restored to its proper condition, and this is one type of case that is designated as *miraculous*.

There is also another type of miracle which occurs when God's grace extends the powers of a healthy nature so that it can accomplish things that would normally be beyond its capability. This is the type of miracle that is claimed in respect of the virginal conception, in which Mary's natural power of human procreation was enhanced to enable her to conceive and gestate the Son of God.

Now, to say that something is a miracle means that its working cannot be comprehended by disciplines of a purely secular kind. The natural and social sciences are concerned to study those things that are predictable: predictable either because of their own regularity or because their behaviour participates in regular natures that are open to human investigation. A miracle such as the virginal conception falls outside this arena of enquiry, since it is, by definition, outside the regular range of natural capabilities. However, this does not mean that the natural sciences are of no help in understanding the character of a particular miracle. On the contrary, they can help the scholar or the enquirer to understand more precisely the claim that is being made when it is said, for example, that Jesus was conceived by a woman who had never had sexual intercourse.

In the thirteenth century, John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) pursued this question in the light of the embryology of Aristotle, to which Scotus generally subscribed. Aristotle teaches that the conception of a new human life requires an active principle and a passive principle, the active principle being provided by the father's seed and the passive principle by the mother's blood and other matter which provide the soil and nourishment necessary for the seed to grow. On the basis of this biology, Scotus asked how Christ could have been conceived

in the absence of male seed.[2] Scotus argues that the mother, as well as the father, provides formative power, but as a less principal cause.[3] In the words of John Lawrence Polis, what this means is: 'By nature, the causality of the lower cause, the woman, is remote, while that of the higher cause, the man, is proximate. For it is he who fecundates her, placing her in proximate potency to conceive.'[4] In Mary's case, the proximate potency of the male was missing, but it was bestowed on her instead by the Holy Spirit.[5] Taking his lead from St John Damascene, Scotus argues that she was given the power not only to conceive, but also to beget.[6] In this way, Christ was both divinely conceived by a virgin and yet fully human because conceived by a woman. By explaining how Mary both begot and conceived her Son, Scotus's account pinpoints one of the miracles that was involved in Christ's conception.[7]

Drawing on modern genetic science, Chris Maunder raises a question related to that of Duns Scotus, namely, how could Jesus be fully human if he did not have the chromosome and DNA that would be provided by a human father. Maunder notes that, if parthenogenesis were to occur in nature, the offspring would be female, not male. But the Christian claim about the virginal conception of Christ is precisely that it did not occur within the usual course of nature, but by a unique act of God. The answer to the question of how Jesus could be fully human—and, indeed, male—requires us to identify a point in the process of conception at which God might have intervened so as to confer upon Mary the procreative power to conceive a male child, without the contribution of a human father.

In brief, we may say the following. If the virginal conception took place, then it was a miracle. So the question of how a human son could have been conceived by a virgin may be reformulated thus: At what point in the process of the conception did the miracle occur? We cannot know the answer to this, but, like Duns Scotus, we can speculate on it without compromising Christ's full humanity.[8]

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[2] *John Duns Scotus: Four Questions on Mary*, Latin text with English translation, ed. Allan Wolter (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2000), 93-131.

[3] John Lawrence M. Polis, FI, *The Virgin Shall Give Birth: The Validity of the Traditional Doctrine and Scotist Explanations of Mary's Cooperation with the Miracle* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2022), 152-155.

[4] Lawrence, *The Virgin*, 160.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Lawrence, *The Virgin*, 153.

[7] I say, 'one of the miracles', rather than 'the miracle', because, when Christ was conceived, the greater miracle was the incarnation of God in a human being: the virginal conception was the lesser miracle that was the means for the realisation of the greater.

[8] I would also question the extent to which our DNA and chromosomes are indeed what make us human. A great deal of our DNA is common to other mammals, and the chromosomes and DNA of human beings can vary considerably between individuals. A human person is a union of body and soul, and determining what aspects of a body make it properly human is one that can occupy philosophers endlessly.

The Sacramental

The virginal conception is also a *mystery* in the specifically Christian sense of the word. It is a reality in which the Church and the soul continue to participate. As Origen wrote, 'Every virginal, incorrupt soul, having conceived of the Holy Spirit to engender the will of the Father is a mother of Christ' (*Fragment of Commentary on Matthew*, 281). Not only the devout soul, but the whole Church participates in this spiritual childbirth, since Mary is the Church's type and the two have a spiritual union almost to the point of identity.

Now, it might be said that one does not have to accept the historicity of the virginal conception to accept this mystical understanding of its significance for the Church and the human soul. After all, if we follow Chris Maunder in saying that the virginal conception is not an historical event but a theological metaphor, we might still say that part of the metaphor's richness consists in its designating a state of spiritual fecundity in which the Church and the soul participate. This participation is one aspect of the character and vocation of the Church and the Christian life.

The difficulty with this view is that it is not clear what one is supposed to be participating in. Is it a feeling of emotional elevation? Is it membership of a Church that seeks to be pure in its fidelity to God and fruitful in holy works? One might hope so, but these things are social, psychological, and, at their best, spiritual, so they do not guarantee that we are being brought into union with the divine, or even with that which is most fundamental to human life—with birth, death, and their divine meanings. In short, the Christian Gospel requires its adherents to believe that the virginal conception is not, in the first instance, an evocative description of a spiritual state; rather, it is the true story of that spiritual state's origin. The virginal conception has a primal, or originary, character, such that it is a historical reality which continues through time in the manner of something sacramental.

If we understand that we are participating in a reality that was once realised bodily, in Mary's flesh and by the power of the Holy Spirit, then we participate in an event which occurred at a particular time and place, and which, precisely because of this, can extend throughout all times and places. This is to say that, like the sacraments, its saving reality in the present is guaranteed by its historical reality in the past. If we lose our grip on bodiliness, time, and location—which, in the Christian understanding, are the foundations for our knowledge of transcendence—then we are in danger of wandering into a religion of fantasies.

The virginal conception is not only a figurative account of Christian experience in later centuries, but was a temporal and spatial event that remains simultaneously eternal and trans-finite, guaranteed to be a work of God that was accomplished in human flesh, in a particular natural environment, and at a particular point in human history. This is why we can still participate in it as a single reality that unites Christians over the centuries and across the world.

A Question about the Scriptures

Chris draws attention to the fact that only Matthew and Luke tell of the virginal conception, and that the Epistles and two of the Gospels do not mention it. He asks why it would have been left out if the authors had known of it. Well, there are several possible answers to this, and it is obvious that authors in general do not necessarily (or usually) write down everything they know about the subject on which they are writing.

When considering this matter, one point that must be taken into account is the purpose for which a particular document is being written. In the case of the Epistles, these were evidently written to address particular situations in particular churches, and they are not general catecheses. With regard to the Gospels, the situation is rather obscure. New Testament scholars have spilt gallons of ink on the subject of their genre, readership and purpose, without any definitive conclusion. It is therefore impossible to know whether the omission of Christ's conception from Mark and John is governed at all by the purposes for which these Gospel was written.

A second reason why an author might not mention something that we might now consider relevant to the general subject-matter is that they may consider the matter at issue to be too mysterious or sacred for it to be committed to writing. Many important religious teachings and practices have been transmitted only by word of mouth. My own view is that this is why the Gospel of Mark does not recount the virginal conception or, in what seems to be the Gospel's earliest form, the Resurrection. Mark's Gospel is characterised by a sense of the mysteriousness of Christ's identity and actions, and it would be in keeping with this that Mark would not put the most extraordinary and miraculous events into writing. They would be passed on only by word of mouth—and perhaps only to a small number of initiates. This may also be a reason why the story of Jesus's conception is not mentioned in the Epistles.

A third possible reason for not writing down the tradition of the virginal conception is that the Gospel writer's audience were already familiar with it, so that knowledge of the story could be presumed. This, I think, is the case with the Gospel of John. For example, John does not give an account of the Last Supper, but there are very few commentators who would say he knew nothing about it. With regard to the virginal conception, we can note that John writes of those 'who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God' (Jn 1:13). This seems to be a reference to Christ's eternal generation from God (1:1-2), to his conception without male co-operation or human initiative, and, most immediately, to the fact that those who receive him into their lives will undergo a spiritual re-birth that participates both in the Word's origin in God and in the miraculous human origin of the Word made flesh. Jesus says, 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (15:5). This is a strong image of participation in the Word, and suggests that Christ's followers are indeed united with him from their foundations. It would be fitting that their own spiritual re-birth should be

conformed to the likeness of the birth of the Word, since the disciples' union with him was made possible by the Word's becoming flesh.

John also teaches that one must be 'born of water and the Spirit' (3:5). This evidently refers back to the creation of the world (Genesis 1. 1-3): in Christ, one becomes a new creation. Yet the beginning of creation is also evoked in Luke's Annunciation narrative—in this case, in relation to the conception of Christ himself.[9] It is he who is the new creation in whom, according to John, his followers participate. Clearly, the idea of a virginal conception from water and the Spirit was important to the first Christians, together with the idea that a birth that came about by way of such a mystery was a work of new creation. So I suggest that, in the Gospel of John, the image of birth from water and the Spirit conjures up the story of the virginal conception. Christ is born of the waters of his mother's womb and the power of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the new Christian must be re-born from the waters of Baptism—from the font which is the womb of the Church—and the outpouring of the Spirit. Here again, it seems that the birth of the new Christian is a participation in the virginal birth of Christ. As I have written above, this participation can only be sustained if it is a participation in a primary act of the flesh in history.

Concluding Thoughts

Chris also raises the question of whether we, ordinary human beings, can follow Christ's example if Christ himself is remote from us because he is so unlike us—for example, by being the child of a virginal conception. The answer to this is surely in the affirmative. For we cannot follow Christ's example entirely by our own effort, but only by co-operating with the grace of God. Just as Christ entered the world by the intervention of the Holy Spirit, so we can imitate him by receiving the heavenly gift of God's grace. It is true that we are not divine by nature. As St Paul says, Christ is God's Son, but other Christians are God's children by adoption (Gal. 4:4).

Finally, I want to question why a Christian would not believe in the virginal conception, especially if that person claims to believe that the motif of the virginal conception is a rich theological metaphor. For one thing that seems to be completely clear is that that Mary's miraculous conception of Christ signifies that 'with God, nothing shall be impossible' (Lk. 1:37). Since the angel in Luke's Gospel states this explicitly, it is evidently part of the theological meaning of the Annunciation narrative. If one accepts this theological meaning (as the Christian must surely do), then there is no basis on which to reject the historical veracity of the claim that Mary was a virgin when she conceived her son. A nice illustration of this attitude is given in the following anecdote:

[9] Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Culture in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Cassell, 2000), 83-85; *Mary*, New Century Theology series (London: Continuum, 2004), 3-4.

The late John Austin Baker, one-time Bishop of Salisbury, was once giving a talk in which he referred to the virginal conception as something that was historically accurate. Afterwards, a man in the audience went up to him and said, ‘Surely you don’t believe that Mary was really a virgin?’ To this, Bishop Baker replied: ‘I believe that Jesus Christ was God incarnate. It is that which is the real miracle. So if I’m going to believe in the Incarnation, I might as well believe that it came about in the manner the Church has always taught.’