

Theotokos
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His Holiness the Dalai Lama, one of the wisest voices in the world today, said recently, "You westerners have a problem: you have no second womb." This is a poetic way of talking about our attitude to death: we see it simply as an end, a cut-off of the only life we know, and not as a return to the womb to be reborn. In other words, we have, each, *our own* mother; we do not have a *cosmic* mother.

This has a profound effect on us psychologically. It means that our end is something threatening, to be put off as long as we can, to be thought about as little as possible. And if you think about it, to feel this way about where we are most certainly going is to be without freedom. In a penetrating phrase, the Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ, risen from the dead, sets free "those who, through fear of death, have been slaves their whole life long."

So instead of the dreaded and hopeless end to all we are and all we do, we need a beckoning and welcoming second womb, the hope to be wombed again, born again.

But to be born again - what on earth does *that* mean? We don't remember being born, so how can we want or need to be born again? If there's nothing about being born that appeals to us, how can we possibly want a *second* birth? How can we want a second that we have no first to be second to? In other words, unless there *is* something in our being born that is appealing, then there is nothing appealing about being born again.

And there is. Each one of us is mothered, and stays mothered all our life. We grow up, yes, and we leave home. A man, says the Bible, leaves father and mother and cleaves to his wife. But we never cease to be related to the mother psychologically, so that a man's attitude to all women is coloured by his primordial sexual affair, which is with his mother. "What nonsense Freud is talking! I *never* wanted to sleep with my mother or kill my father!" someone said to me the other day. Translation: "I'm not in the least introspective!" Freud is pointing, in the language of the myths we live by, to the fact that the relation of the man with the womb he comes from is his primordial love-affair. In fact, an English psychiatrist has recently said that all his male clients reveal an overwhelming tendency to look to the women they love for the love they first received from the mother, which no woman can possibly give as adult to adult, hence men's distrust and fear of women, who, they think, always "fail" them. We are insatiably hungry for that first mother-love. And if we feel, as some do, that we never had it, this only intensifies the need for it now.

Nor is this only a male experience. A leading American feminist author, Edna O'Brien, said a few years ago that the woman's great love affair is with her mother, not her father, and went on to observe that while there are many myths to validate the male love-affair with the mother - the Oedipal one being the obvious, with Hamlet a tortured runner-up - there are no myths that glorify the woman's passion for her mother.

So we all want Mum! Badly!

But we want her in a form that she would find it hard to recognise and impossible to supply. At least we do, if we have begun to get beyond wanting her *again*, wanting a repeat of the love she gave us, or a substitute for it if we think she didn't.

In what form do we want her? Well, remember those moments when you are totally dissatisfied with everything, and just know that this is not all there is. The Beatles, always on the money, had a song about it, "Is this all there is?" In response to these moments, a myth is born: to be born again. New, all new, new birth. And the mythic image of the new birth is birth *as at the very beginning*, when the spirit of God, like a great brooding bird, hovered over the waters. There's no male here. Male is a later invention. Rebirth is virgin birth.

Now hold on! Fasten seat-belts! We want Mum in the form of rebirther, of new-earthier, of new start. This means we want her virgin. Not, I hasten to add, in the way of the Spanish male chauvinist who says, "All women are whores, except my Mother who is a saint!" We want a second, a cosmic womb. What is on offer here?

Well, the first real rebirth happened when Jesus rose from the dead. Paul actually calls him the first-born of the dead. Into this rebirth Jesus drew, first, the women and men whom he appeared to, changing their lives as they encountered their true self that they had killed, now alive forever and forgiving them this self-hatred that is the root of all the evil we do and suffer, this healing contact spread through all the world by the touch of the Holy Spirit so that we become a fresh start, free of the past, the albatross of shame and guilt sinking into the sea of oblivion. Those first generations of Christians had an overwhelming sense of being reborn to a life that, being Christ's own life, can never die.

This sense of being reborn had to have a virgin womb to be born of: and this was "Holy Mother Church," a phrase that is now virtually impossible to hear as they heard it, tarnished as it is with the tinsel of the ecclesiastical. Originally it means a new, originating virginal humanity, passive to Holy Spirit and bringing to birth the Son of the eternal Father as the body of us all.

This new humanity, new human matrix, was the womb of the new People, the "called" (which is what *ecclesia* means). This image of a new humanity starting ab ovo through the Spirit of God was concretized for them in Mary, whom the most ancient tradition calls Theotokos or God-bearer. The story of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel, in which the woman "who knows not man," consents to be the womb of the new life in person, Jesus the Christ, is heavy with the sense of rebirth that is what it felt like to be a follower of what was first called "the way," the way of rebirth, the way of the new start, the new age, the new world. No word expresses the original Christian ecstasy so well as the word "new," as the Jesus thing exploded in a world that felt horribly old and tired - as ours does after all. And this word "new," applied to absolutely everything, finds its symbol in the virgin womb, the womb beyond paternity as death is beyond all custom.

The staggering thing about Christian belief is, that the new humanity has come *in person*. Jesus is the new humanity. So he, it seems, has to come from a virgin womb. But the virginal conception of Jesus presents a huge problem for the modern mind, informed with a scientific approach that it cannot and should not abandon. A male child needs the Y chromosome, that only comes from the father.

Of course God can do *anything*, as the Angel actually says to Mary in the story, who has just asked, "How can this be?" But I think that the real difficulty with the virginal conception is not the difficulty of believing in miracles. That is a difficulty in believing in God at all, I think, and a person who doesn't believe in God is not interested in Christianity being true. But there are many people who deeply believe that Christianity is true, but who have a problem with the virginal conception. What is *their* problem? Which means, what is the real problem? It's not a problem as to whether God *could* effect it, so what *is* the problem?

I think it is, that the story of the Virgin Birth works so well *as myth* that it doesn't seem to work *as factual*, historical. To understand this, you have to have - against our whole popular-scientific culture - a wholly positive view of myth. Myths are the most powerful, the most real things we have. Falling in love is being engulfed by myth, and there's nothing so real as falling in love. Just to shake us out of the modern understanding, it has been well said that when something ceases to be believed it ceases to be a myth! Communism has pretty well collapsed as a live, motivating myth, and the effect is devastating. So this is what I mean by myth. The real difficulty is that the power of virgin birth, its hold on the imagination as offering a new start, is mythic, and that it *seems to lose* this power if we try to translate it into fact, with a miraculous substitution for the lack of the Y chromosome.

So you have two quite different sorts of people who reject the Virgin Birth: those who find it "only a myth" (which means they don't know what a myth is)

and those who find it too beautiful to be factual. It is with the latter that I am concerned. The myth of virgin birth seems to lose its power as myth when translated into history, with a girl becoming miraculously pregnant. But this brings us to the real point. Christianity is a terrifying beautiful and risk-laden meeting, fusion, of myth with fact. Christianity itself breaks the rule that puts myth in one part of the mind, fact in another. It is their fusion, which we understand very imperfectly. And the *place* where myth and fact most explosively and incomprehensibly meet is the Virgin's womb.

No scene in the Gospel story has so frequently seized the artist as the Annunciation. It is by far the most depicted scene in the Bible. And the reason for this seems to contradict what I have said about myth being spoiled when converted into fact, namely, that the thing that has fascinated artists and poets is the theme of a woman *consenting* to be the God-bearer - "let it be done to me as you say" we repeat every time we say the Angelus, which is never, except during cricket matches, to impress the opposing team. I mean, consent is a thoroughly historical thing, it's something a live person does with her life. So it seems that the myth does grab the imagination *as history*.

And the fascinating thing I find is that the more you take the story *literally*, the better it becomes, a young woman taken out of herself to embrace a new and unforeseeable destiny. And the more you understand the Virgin Birth *as myth*, the better it becomes, the cosmic image of our rebirth. So the literal and the mythic *work together*, enhance one another. This knitting of divine myth into history is what we call revelation.

So I think the real question is not: How can a virginal conception happen? but: How does the union of myth with fact happen? How is myth, in Christianity, history? (I did once ask God the *first* question, how did it happen? The reply I got was, "I'm not going to tell you. My ways are not your ways.")

One thing is quite clear. The intention of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is to tell us: Yes, there *is* Virgin Birth, there *is* the new birth, there *is* the second womb, there is the new and eternal beginning: not just as a pious wish, not even as only the hope of the wise, but as the heart of history. This is the meaning of that woman, who appears to people all over the world accompanied with a dancing sun. So we are not to be "those who, through the fear of death, have been slaves their whole life long." We are people who know her, the eternal feminine, Theotokos.

Finally, two thousand years of Christianity have made one thing overwhelmingly clear: that when Mary drops out of the picture, Jesus soon follows her; the whole thing goes cerebral, the emphasis falls on his teaching, where perforce he ranks with the many other great teachers of life; he is no longer the Word made flesh, through whose blood we are saved. So that is

Mary; the silent woman who is the condition of Jesus being "the point of intersection of the timeless with time," as easily forgotten as "the eternal feminine" of Goethe, and as fatally, or rather more so: for to lose the point of intersection is to let slip the hand stretched out to us from beyond the stars. And in the end, the best words I know on Mary were spoken to me by an old nun, when I was in middle life, the time when people's lives tend to fall to pieces as mine certainly was. She wrote, out of the blue, that she had heard I was in a bad way, and begged for my indulgence of her experience as an old woman. "Hold tight to our Lady. We are proud, lonely and complicated creatures, and she understands."

The Virgin Birth seems too true to be true.
If I deny it, though, Jesus as life
Fades into Jesus as the teacher who
Did not rise from the dead - instead took a wife.

And Mother Church, the matrix of rebirth,
Who is she if the Virgin is not there
To mirror her, what is her image worth
Confirmed to mind, myth leaving history bare?

Yet mind persists with its Y chromosome
Needing the man to make a man of him
And she is there, old never-doubting Rome
Whose need for power fills faith's interim.

And so the dialectic of the soul
Probes on, programmed never to find the whole.
A woman who says Yes to the unknown,
The virgin birthing of a world to come:
Here myth and history knit into one

Calls to us who so easily succumb
To their division: dream and waking war
Making our deep imagination dumb

Unable to break out in praise of her
Who joins for us the worlds we keep apart
In the strict bafflement of either-or

And thus the Virgin Birth loses its art
And shrivels to mothering without sex
Which it finds faulted from the very start.

And so the truth that both our worlds connects
Casts upon many Catholics a hex.