

# THE SCANDAL OF THE ASSUMPTION

BY

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

## I. *The Scandal of Particularity*



WE should not be ourselves scandalised because the announcement of the definition of Mary's Assumption has scandalised many earnest and honest minds. Rather may we ask whether we have fully appreciated its significance if we ourselves are not in some measure shocked and disturbed. True, the Pope will tell us nothing

that we have not always taken for granted as part and parcel of the Catholic faith; we have meditated upon it in the last two decades of the Rosary, we have celebrated unquestioningly every August 15th. Yet it is no obvious, easily credible commonplace which is to be formally proclaimed to be an article of our faith; rather does it tax and test our faith to the utmost, and present a crucial challenge to our profession of acceptance of the central Christian mystery.

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For years, indeed, we may have recited our last Glorious Mysteries and celebrated August 15th with untroubled equanimity and even delight. We must be insensitive indeed to be unmoved by the Mass and Office which sing the final triumphs of Mary in majestic language borrowed from the length and breadth of the Scriptures. Here we are reminded of the promise to the first Eve in Genesis, of the sun-clad, moon-treading, star-encircled Woman of the Apocalypse; but it is the rhapsodies of the Lover and the Beloved in Canticles that predominate: *Who is this woman who ascends like the rising dawn, lovely as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible like an army set in battle array?*

Who, indeed? So long as it is nobody in particular there is no cause for scandal. We do not perhaps need even supernatural faith to derive something more than a purely aesthetic pleasure from the countless old pictures of Mary's Assumption and Coronation. Even an unbeliever may have the sensibility to find in them something which seems to arouse some deep response in human nature: a symbol for something which he can hardly express, but which for him need have nothing to do with one particular Jewess who lived and died nineteen centuries ago. There seems to be some strange rightness in the portrayal of this reunion in splendour of Son and Mother, Father and Daughter, Spirit and Matter: in the gracious bending of the Divine Persons to crown the Woman, even

(if our contemplations take a more ethical turn) in this exaltation of lowliness and simplicity. Varied as they were, those old paintings, prints, tympanums, windows, follow a pretty regular convention of composition, whether they be the work of the great thirteenth-century sculptors, Fra Angelico, El Greco, Dürer or the cruder products of forgotten village craftsmen. They have a peculiarly satisfying blend of form and content, of pattern and significance: the crowned figure of the Virgin rounds off the gaping semi-circle of crowning Father, Son and Holy Ghost, squares the awkward triangle of the Trinity. We can hardly wonder that the pattern had a peculiar fascination for artists: it afforded unrivalled opportunities for variations on the most elementary forms, and to convey a sense of balance, proportion, rhythm, completion, finality, the tranquillity of order and repose.

Nor, would it seem, is the underlying motif itself even peculiarly Christian; rather would it seem to be but one expression of a universal archetypal pattern, which somehow responds to some deep and widespread human need, and which finds other similar expressions in countless myths and rituals, poems and pictures, practices and even philosophies, all over the globe. Rachel Levy's book, *The Gate of Horn*,<sup>1</sup> traces the theme of the apotheosis of the Woman back to the wall-paintings and figurines of our earliest cavemen ancestors. John Layard in his *Stone Men of Malekula*<sup>2</sup> and *The Making of Man in Malekula*<sup>3</sup> shows that a similar intuition underlies the beliefs, myths and rituals of surviving stone-age peoples. Though with countless variations, we find a similar theme from China to Peru. In China most notably, with its perception of the unmixed union of Yang and the Yin—the male and female principles—as the supreme manifestation of Tao, the ultimate Wisdom, the goal of the human Way. (It is curious that the favourite symbol of this, called the *t'ai chi t'u* [the 'Supreme Ultimate'], the circle within the square—containing the interpenetrating but unmingled waves of brightness and darkness—has become familiarised to us as the national badge of the South Koreans.) In India we find many yantras (abstract designs for contemplation) which, we are told, express the same archetypal theme; we find it too, more dramatically, in countless representations and stories of, for instance, Shiva and Shakti. In Kundalini-yoga the ascent of the earthy, serpentine feminine principle to a transcendental union with her Lord becomes a psycho-physical experience. We may find it again, though perhaps more disguised, in numberless Greek and Hellenistic myths and rituals; again, more obviously, in the Gnostic

1 Faber & Faber, 1948.

2 London, 1942.

3 *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 1948.

stories of the redemption of Haecamoth-Sophia. Here we can only allude in passing to a complex but worldwide mass of material, which has been more thoroughly collected and studied elsewhere. (Dr Esther Harding's *Women's Mysteries* contains many more examples, and a study of their psychological significance will be found scattered throughout the later writings of Dr C. G. Jung.) Our pictures of the Assumption and Coronation could in fact be used almost as well to express many another story or perception. In fact they *have* been used for a purpose which we might suppose to be totally alien: we are surprised to find them frequently in the weird treatises of the old alchemists. That is hardly intelligible until we understand that their aim—very often, at least—was not the manufacture of ordinary gold from base metals, but something more like a gruelling mystical process of self-redemption by divine grace and inspiration through the redemption of matter.<sup>4</sup> It is hardly surprising that they found in the pictures of the Assumption a symbol and prototype of their own *opus*. One of the more beautiful and more intelligible of these treatises, the *Aurora Consurgens* (attributed to St Thomas Aquinas!), might often read as a profound meditation on the Assumption, and the somewhat decadent attempt of Melchior von Hermannstadt to compose an 'alchemical Mass', borrows from the Assumption-day liturgy. He includes the beautiful (but now, unhappily, obsolete) sequence hymn *Ave praeclara*, and describes it as 'the Testament of the [alchemical] Art'.<sup>5</sup> For Goethe, too, *das ewige Weibliche* (the eternal feminine) is embodied in the *Mater Gloriosa* of the *Doctor Marianus*, and it is she, herself glorified, who 'draws on' Faust to his own final redemption.

None of this strikes us as very shocking, though some of it may appear foreign and fanciful to our modern Western ways of thinking. It may even appeal to us more or less, according to our temperament, not only as fictitious poetry, but as somehow symbolic and revealing about the depths of human nature and its aspirations. The Assumption itself does not shock us as a picture for our purely mental contemplation. What is disturbing and offensive is this insistence, not on the universal symbolism, but on the particular matter of fact; that a matter of fact is a matter of faith, and a matter of faith a matter of fact; in the further insistence that this fact of faith is realised in precise units of space and time, and in a definite specimen of flesh and blood—*haec ossa, haec carnes*. This 'scandal of particularity' is inseparable from the doctrine of the Assumption, but it is not peculiar to it. It is bound up with those

<sup>4</sup> See C. G. Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie*, but cf. F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists*.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Jung, *op. cit.*, p. 540.

fundamental Christian mysteries which are its own cause and prototype—the Incarnation in Nazareth, the death ‘under Pontius Pilate’, the Resurrection and Ascension in specified places and on specified dates. In the abstract, on paper, in poetry, in imagery, the glorification of the Feminine Principle, the union of the Heavenly and the Earthly, the Spiritual and the Material, is all very fine. It is quite another thing to say that, at a particular place and a particular time, the dead physical body of a particular woman came to life again, and that the eternal and only God took her to himself.<sup>6</sup> Here scientist and poet must unite in protest: the scientist that his world of verifiable fact is invaded by the world of faith; the poet that his world of vision is tarnished or ruined by being dragged into the prosaic world of fact. We need be neither scientists nor poets to have some sympathy with their points of view, sufficient at least to be on our guard lest our emphasis on the particular fact obscures the universal mystery, or our emphasis on the mystery weakens our adherence to the Christian ‘scandal of particularity’, the scandal of Christian ‘materialism’, the scandal of the earthly *embodiment* of the mystery.

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The ‘scandal of particularity’ is, as has been said, not peculiar to the doctrine of the Assumption; it is inherent in the religion of the Incarnation, and it always was and always will be an offence to cultured truth-seekers.

Just because in fallen man there is the constant lust of the flesh against the spirit and of the spirit against the flesh, there is also a constant resistance against recognising in a matter of fact a matter of faith. (*Is not this the carpenter's son? . . . And they were scandalised in his regard.*—Matt. 13, 55), or in a matter of faith a matter of fact. (*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*—John 6, 53.)

St Paul's experience in the Areopagus of Athens—the cultural centre of the world—is especially instructive. So long as he preached to the Athenians about their Unknown God he was heard with interest and even eagerness. Indeed, the Stoics and Epicureans<sup>7</sup> had positively compelled him to expound his faith to them. (Acts 17, 18 ff.) A God not made with hands, a universal indwelling Father of all mankind, in whom we live and move and have our being,

<sup>6</sup> cf. St Thomas, *Summa Theol.* III, 3, 1: *dicitur enim assumere quasi ad se sumere* ('to assume' means as it were 'to take to oneself').

<sup>7</sup> These ancient Stoics were probably not so stoical, nor the Epicureans such epicures as we might suppose. But it is interesting that they represent two opposite solutions of the human flesh-spirit conflict: the Stoics the exaltation of universal Mind at the expense of the individual flesh and its parts and passions, the Epicureans the enslavement of the spirit for the refined satisfactions of the flesh.

whose offspring we all are—all that was acceptable enough, even familiar. But *when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.* (ibid. 38.)

From the standpoint of the eager proselytiser the apostle had made a bad tactical blunder in mentioning the resurrection of the body at all. It was not to be expected that these philosophers who had outgrown popular idolatry and superstition, who had attained the realisation of the transcendence of the incomprehensibility of the Divine Principle, should again embrace the old myth of dying and rising gods, let alone believe it had become fact in the physical body of a certain Jesus of Nazareth, still less that this particular resurrection was the forerunner of a general resurrection of all and each. So far from satisfying their hunger for a more elevated, more purely spiritual and idealistic religion than they already possessed, this Paul was putting the clock back, confusing the worlds of Reality and of Appearance, of Spirit and Matter, of Eternity and Time, which centuries of Greek thought had distinguished at immense cost and labour. He dashed any possible hope that his Christianity might provide a common ground for the brotherhood of intelligent men of goodwill, a framework for the syncretism of all religions and philosophies which that age—like our own—seemed so urgently to need. A tactful silence on these cruder features of the Gospel story might have gained thousands of converts for the Church, spared her the blood of her martyrs, and brought peace rather than a sword to subsequent generations of all mankind.

But such silence was, and remains, impossible. *Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel* (1 Cor. 9, 16). The Gospel is God's saving Word of health and holiness to men, and that *Word* (though also *in the beginning with God*) *was made FLESH and dwelt among us* (John 1, 2 and 14); not only mentally contemplated, but *heard, . . . seen with our eyes . . . looked upon . . . handled.* (1 John 1, 1.) Moreover this Word of God to man is not only concerning the flesh, and itself made flesh, it is also his word *to the flesh*—and not only to the mind or spirit: *For the word of God is living and effectual, and more piercing than any two-edged sword: and reaching unto the division of the soul and the spirit, of the joints also and the marrow.* (Heb. 4, 12.) The distinctive Christian revelation is set out in what is perhaps an early credal hymn as;

*The mystery of godliness:  
manifested in the flesh,  
justified into the spirit . . .  
taken up into glory.* (1 Tim. 3, 16.)

The resurrection of the flesh, and its assumption or taking up into

the eternal *Shekinah* or glory, stands in the very centre of the specifically Christian faith. *The body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. Now God hath both raised up the Lord, and will raise us up also by his power.* (1 Cor. 6, 13-14.)

At the time of writing we do not know the precise terms in which the Assumption of our Lady will be formulated and dogmatically defined. As it has ordinarily been taught and believed in the Church, it is not *only* one particular, individual, specimen case of the resurrection and glorification of the bodies of all the faithful in which we profess belief in the creeds. But that much it certainly is; and just because it particularises it to *this* body (and body-in-general is a non-existent abstraction), it accentuates the scandal of this fundamental article of our belief. For that reason alone it is of importance. It is however this particular particularity that claims our attention: it is not *any* particular body, but the body of *Mary* that is revived and assumed.

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*A woman from the crowd lifting up her voice said to him: Blessed is the womb that bore thee, and the paps that gave thee suck* (Luke 11, 27.) This is the first recorded human praise of the *body* of Mary, which has subsequently echoed down the ages. We notice that this cry comes from the *crowd* (the democratic *New Statesman and Nation* has been particularly pained that the Assumption should be defined in response to the demands of the ignorant proletariat); and that it comes from a *woman*. We need not suppose that she had any precise dogmatic understanding as yet either of the divinity of Jesus or of the divine maternity of Mary. It is the spontaneous, almost physiological, sympathy (which no male can share) of woman for woman, even organ for organ: a quasi-physical bond of motherly pride in the begetting and suckling of such a splendid Son.

*But he said: Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it.* (ib. 28.) Perhaps, in a manner not unknown to her sex, she had been so intent in admiration of the Speaker that she had hardly heard the speech. In any case, this preoccupation with the purely physical bliss of Mary's body had to be checked and balanced: the bliss of her body's fruitfulness was itself due to the fact that, by her *Fiat*, she had heard the word of God and kept it. All generations should call her blessed, but only *because he that is mighty hath done great things to me.* (Luke 1, 49.) Our Lord himself (being *tempted in all things, like as we are, without sin*—Heb. 4, 15) must be freed for his own life and work from the purely physical and psychological bond to his mother: *Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?* (Luke 2, 49); *And stretching forth his hands towards his disciples, he said: Behold*

*my mother and my brethren . . . whosoever shall do the will of my Father. (Matt. 12, 48-49.)*

So, throughout the centuries, the Church's preachers and spiritual writers have rightly insisted with St Augustine that Mary was more blessed in conceiving the Word of God in her mind than in conceiving him in her womb, and that our admiration for the latter is unavailing without imitation of the former. But while the thought of the bliss and glory of her body must be checked and balanced, it could never be denied; increasingly it was affirmed. There is nothing squeamish or ethereal in the language employed by the Church in her liturgical praises; its physiological detail is almost untranslatable into non-medical but polite English: *Beata viscera . . . Beata ubera . . . Gestant puellae viscera . . . Ventris sub arcu clausus est . . . Cujus per alvum jusus est . . . Non ex virili semine . . . Alvus tumsescit Virginis. . . .*

Newman, in his magnificent sermon on 'The Fitness of the Glories of Mary' has shown how the definition of Mary's prerogatives had to await the definition of the prerogatives of her Son, of which they are the effect and consequence, and how they illuminate his own. The Church's spontaneous glorification of Mary's body down the ages receives its final seal and justification in the definition of its Assumption. It is right for us to glorify it because 'he that is mighty' has taken it into his glory.

## II. *The Scandal of Universality*

While some minds stumble at the fleshly matter-of-factness of the Christian dogmas, at the 'scandal of particularity', there are other minds that stop short there and can see no further. They will adhere resolutely to the physical aspects of the virgin birth, to the factual character of the Gospel miracles, to the historicity of the empty tomb and the phenomenon of levitation recorded of the Lord's Ascension, but they seem insensible to anything except the bare externals of these events. It does not seem to occur to such minds that these events have any wider meaning or significance; they are objects for their admiration, but certainly not for their imitation. Such minds adhere to the letter, but wholly miss the spirit; unwittingly they make of these events a senseless and wanton thaumaturgy, manifestations of nothing but superior power and will for the intimidation of the doubter.

Such a limited view is of course alien, indeed opposed, to the whole spirit of the Gospels. Our Lord in fact resolutely resists the temptation to work marvels for the sake of marvels, or to give performances of superhuman power to impress and win his hearers. Indeed, in all the Gospel narratives, but most conspicuously in

St Mark's, we find him in almost constant flight from such evil results of his miracles. Even when the demands of divine love and the fulfilment of his mission in manifesting his Father's designs for man's salvation drive him to perform these wonders, even then he usually accompanies it with some such command as, *See thou tell no man*. For what is important is not the observed marvel as a marvel, but what the marvel means, what it reveals of the hidden ways of God for man's weal to such as are enabled to accept them.

Indeed the very 'particularity' of the principal Christian truths loses its point if divorced from a meaning of universal application; only as having some cosmic significance, some applicability to all and each outside their particular limitations of space and time, beyond the restricted confines of *haec ossa, hae carnes* (these bones, this flesh), have they any 'sense', any *raison d'être* at all. The hidden mystery of divinity is indeed *manifested in the flesh*, but must be *justified in the spirit*. Lest attachment to the fleshly manifestation distract them from spiritual understanding, our Lord tells his disciples: *It is expedient for you that I go, for if I go not the Paraclete will not come to you.* (John 16, 7.) Yet the manifestation in the flesh is essential to the spiritual mystery itself, for the mystery is not just cognitional but existential; not just an object for contemplation but a subject for realisation. The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, for instance, tell not just of the glorification and integration into the Godhead of an idea or image of the flesh, but of the flesh itself. Unless we adhere to the fact we miss the distinctive sense of the mystery—and of the demands it makes upon the whole being of all and each. *That was not first which was spiritual, but which is natural: afterwards that which is spiritual.* (1 Cor. 15, 46.) *If we have known Christ according to flesh (and since he is the Word made flesh we have not known him at all unless we have known him in the flesh), now we know him so no longer. If any there be in Christ a new creature, the old things are passed away; behold, all things are made new.* (2 Cor. 5, 17.)

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Of this New Creation, of this transformation of *all* things in the sight of those who are oned by the Spirit into Christ, Mary is the Womb; the fertile, obedient Earth in which all is rooted and nourished; her body is the *mater-materia* from which the divine Spirit, in fashioning the Body of Christ, fashions the new cosmos. This thought is no extravagance of rococo Mariolatry: it can be traced back at least to St Irenaeus, writing in the second century:

The substance of the first-formed man was from the Will and the Wisdom of God, and from the virgin earth. *For God had not sent rain, the Scripture says, upon the earth before man was made;*



and *there was no man to till the earth*. So then the Lord, summing up afresh this man, took the same dispensation of entry into flesh, being born from a virgin by the Will and Wisdom of God. . . . Just as through a disobedient virgin man was stricken down and fell into death, so through a virgin who was obedient to the word of God man was reanimated and received life. . . . It was necessary that Adam should be summed up in Christ that mortality might be swallowed up and overwhelmed by immortality; and Eve summed up in Mary, that a virgin should be a virgin's intercessor, and by a virgin's obedience undo and put away the disobedience of a virgin.<sup>8</sup>

In the first creation, in Paradise (that is to say, in man's original and typical condition in God's designs) there is perfect harmony between the creature and the Creator, matter and spirit, nature and God. There is no pantheistic confusion between them: matter is material and God is God. But man, being made in the image and likeness of God, his mind in harmony with the creative mind of all, is in harmony with nature and with matter as well. He has *dominion over the fishes . . . the fowls . . . the beasts . . . the whole earth*. (Gen. 1, 26.) Material nature is friendly and compliant, both in the world around and beneath him (*God said, Behold I have given you every herb . . . and all trees . . . all beasts . . . every fowl . . . to feed upon*—Gen. 1, 30) and in his own body (*They were both naked, to wit Adam and his wife, and were not ashamed*—Gen. 2, 25). But the Fall destroys that primitive harmony: man (but first woman) being recalcitrant to the Word of God, renders material nature recalcitrant to himself; this likewise takes place both in the world around and beneath (*Cursed is the earth in thy work . . . thorns and thistles shall it bring*—Gen. 3, 17-18), and in the human body itself (*I will multiply thy sorrows and thy conceptions: in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children . . . dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return*—Gen. 3, 16-19). History thereafter becomes an ever widening tension and struggle between human mind and matter, male and female (*Thou shalt be under thy husband's power*—Gen. 3, 16), the spiritual and the carnal. The woman's body remains the source and portal for all human life, but also the cause of human death and destruction—the face of Helen launches the thousand ships. Organic and inorganic matter share in the crescendo of man's exploitation and abuse, which issues in the internecine strife of the human race which begins with Abel the shepherd and Cain the agriculturalist. The development is not indeed in a straight line—there are recessions as well as advances—but it might seem to reach its apex in our age of the atom-bomb, soil-erosion, the 'pin-up', and

<sup>8</sup> St Irenaeus, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, tr. and ed. J. Armitage Robinson (1920), chap. 33.

neurotic repression. St Paul sees material nature, both around and within man, longing for rehabilitation and deliverance from man's compulsive frustration and misdirection of its laws and resources: *For we know that every creature groaneth, and travaileth in pain until now; and not only it, but ourselves also . . . groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption of the sons of God, the redemption of our body.* (Rom. 8, 22.) Matter is delivered only when the tyrant rebel which is man's spirit is again obedient to the Word of the Creator. Throughout history we find men (especially perhaps in the myths and ritual of the so-called Nature Religions) making painful efforts to reunite what God had joined together but man had put asunder. But it cannot be done until God himself gives his Word, and Mary's body and soul humbly accepts it.

This remarriage of heaven and earth can take place only within man, who alone is part of material nature and yet made to God's image and likeness. It takes place in Mary's womb in the Incarnation: God and man become one single Person. It is consummated in his Resurrection and Ascension to the glory of his Father. But the ground for this new Creation is formed and prepared by the Immaculate Conception, and finds its full effect in the Assumption. The rehabilitation of Nature and of Woman, and *the redemption of our body*, is completed, but also pre-typified, in the taking of Mary, body and soul, into the glory of the divinity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A few somewhat technical theological points may here be suggested for meditation:

1. At the Incarnation, the three divine Persons 'assume' a created human nature (not a human person) into hypostatic union with the Person of the Son: Jesus Christ is one single Person, the Son of God, in two Natures, divine and human: God and man is one single Being (*habet unum esse*). At the Assumption of our Lady, the three divine Persons 'assume' a human person into the one glory of the one Godhead: her human personality, being and nature remain intact in their pure creatureliness. For all her supreme participation in the divine glory and vision, she eternally remains purely human in her nature and personality, and infinitely distinct from the eternal Godhead.
2. The mysteries of Christ (the Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, Ascension, etc.) are the mysteries of the Redeemer, although also prototypes (*causae exemplares*) of the processes through which we must attain redemption. But the mysteries of Mary are exclusively those of the redeemed: the first and supreme specimen (if we may so express it) of the effects of Christ's saving work. It is 'in view of the merits of Christ' that the Church has defined her to have been conceived immaculate, and in virtue of the same merits and through the sole power of God she is assumed into heaven.
3. The doctrine of the Assumption, so far from encouraging, should therefore act as a safeguard against 'Mariolatry' or any derogation of the infinite all-sufficiency of Christ's merits and mediatorship, or any dilution of the *Soli Deo gloria* (Glory to God alone) principle. Her glory is entirely his, and none is her own independently of his. Participating in that glory she can in no way detract from it, nor distract us from it; nor can she in any way stand between it and us. The 'particularity' of her Assumption, body and soul, into the glory of the one God, ensures that in no sense does she become a Goddess, which can only mean some autonomous and superhuman power. Yet her exaltation by the one God ensures that she

The scandalousness of the 'particularity' of Christian dogmas, that which most arouses the resistance of our rebellious natures, lies chiefly in their demands on *universal* realisation, in concrete existence, in flesh and blood, here and now. No Christian dogma is just a proposition that requires a purely intellectual assent; nor is it even just a symbolic presentation of ultimate reality offered for purely theoretic contemplation. A dogma is the Church's infallible formulation of her obedient acceptance of the Word of God, and that Word is always a *Verbum salutis* (a word or message of salvation). Its acceptance is 'necessary for salvation', not merely because Pope or Council infallibly say so; Pope or Council infallibly say so because it does in fact show God's way for man's salvation (cf. *Summa*, I, 1, 1). A dogma offers a pattern for behaviour and imitation, not just an object for assent and admiration. Even the inner mysteries of the Godhead, the sublime dogmas about the uncreated Trinity, are revealed to us for reproduction on the human level, as the Model for the 'made trinity', the created image of the Trinity which is man. Still more obviously so the mysteries of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ. Thus all dogmatic theology is profoundly moral, and all moral theology is concerned with the realisation of dogma—as St Thomas implies in his introduction to the second part of his *Summa*. A dogma is not only an article of faith to be believed, it is also a task to be achieved.

What then, we may ask, is the task to which the newly defined dogma of the Assumption will summon us? Has its solemn definition in this mid-twentieth century, rather than earlier or later, any special opportuneness in the providence of God? We have perhaps already said enough to suggest that it has. The doctrine of the Assumption precisely 'concretises' and particularises the universal

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is raised above anything ever claimed for any Goddess, and entitles her to all the worthier attributes ever given to one.

4. Nevertheless there is a true and important sense in which the Assumption of our Lady may be called her Apotheosis, Divinisation, even her Deification, though such words must clearly be used only with understanding and caution. Most early Fathers and many spiritual writers regularly use the words *theosis* or *deificatio* for the final sanctification or glorification of *all* the predestined; sometimes they even called them Gods or God, e.g., in commenting on the words of the Psalm, *Ego dixi, dñi estis* (I said, you are gods). St Thomas follows this usage (e.g., in *Summa* III, 1, 2, quoting St Augustine's 'God became man that man might become God'), and he justifies and explains it in his careful analysis of the various analogous (i.e., essentially different but related) meanings of the word 'God' in *Summa* I, 13, 9 & 10. Thus understood, the Assumption is in a supreme degree a 'deification', effected, of course, not by the Pope or the Church (who only proclaim it), but by the one God himself (the *Summum Analogatum*). This 'deification' of a human person, though prior in time and importance in the Christian dispensation, and prototypical of that of the whole Mystical Body, does not seem to differ in *kind* from that to which God calls us all: it remains a 'sharing' or 'participation' of Godhead by a purely human being.

abstract ideas of the reintegration of matter, the rehabilitation of nature, the taking up of the feminine principle into the divine Principle, *the redemption of our body*. It is of course a superhuman task; the doctrine itself emphasises that only God can achieve it: as once he achieved it for Mary, so he will achieve it in ways incomprehensible to us in *the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, in a new heaven and a new earth when the first heaven and the first earth is no more.* (Apoc. 21, 1.) But already the doctrine points the way for Christians on this earth. Never before in human history has the disintegration of spirit and matter proceeded at such a pace to such catastrophic proportions. It is unlikely that anything we Christians can do will avert world-catastrophe: we stand at the end of an era. Perhaps in God's designs *these things must come to pass* if a new era is to arise, and perhaps we can with his grace prepare its way. But already the definition of the Assumption should summon us to a reorientation of interest and effort within our own selves and our own environments however small. Few of the evils of our day cannot be traced to the fearful consequences of the profanation and secularisation of matter in recent centuries; and the process has been more encouraged than hindered by Christians themselves. The arts and sciences of matter have one after another been banished from the Temple and the Church which begot and reared them. It is not long since laboratory and oratory were synonymous, the dividing line between prayer and chemistry was hardly discernible, and temple and theatre were hardly distinguishable. Medicine and the healing of mind and body, no less than the arts of love, have become wholly secularised; the dance driven from the sanctuary to the *Palais*. Religion has become a speciality, occupying but a small section of the *minds* only of a dwindling section of humanity: the rest of human activity, spiritual, mental, creative, emotional, carnal, is, by the common consent of believer and unbeliever alike, accounted secular and profane. We need not deny that this 'emancipation' of the arts and sciences from the tutelage of religion has enabled them to advance by leaps and bounds; but the very speed of their evolution has immeasurably widened the split which this secularisation has produced in the human psyche. In the vogue of yoga, the growing interest in ancient paganism and modern oriental cults, may perhaps be discerned the yearnings of matter for spirit and of spirit for matter, the ending of this unnatural divorce. They are yearnings which, if we are heedful, we can hardly fail to hear within *ourselves also who have the first-fruits of the Spirit* (Rom. 8, 23), and to which the Assumption of our Lady should summon us to find our own answer, for ourselves and our posterity.

One last question must still be mentioned, although it cannot be answered with any certainty. What next? it is asked. Just where is this definition of dogmas going to stop? Without prophetic eyes we cannot be sure, but it is legitimate and perhaps stimulating to speculate.

There can be no addition to the glories of Mary beyond those which God himself has given her in her Assumption. In her Assumption too is the crowning effect of the atoning work of the incarnate Word—its *ne plus ultra*. Perhaps some yet unborn and unsuspected heresy will evoke another dogmatic definition of some truth about Christ and his Mother, but it might seem reasonable to think that we are witnesses of the end of the whole cycle of dogmatic definitions relating to the Incarnation and its effects which began with the Council of Nicea: in this respect too we may be standing at the end of an era. As the Assumption and Coronation of our Lady complete the triple crown of her Rosary, so perhaps their definition will complete the Church's confession of the mysteries of the Word made flesh.

But as her assumed body carries our eyes and thoughts with her to the unfathomable mysteries of the eternal Godhead whither she goes, so we may wonder if the definition of her Assumption will not lead us further into those depths, and so mark the beginning as well as the end of an epoch. Perhaps it will lead the Church to closer consideration and ultimate formulation of the deep mystery of the 'Motherhood of God'. For by her Assumption Mary returns to her own eternal Source, and not she but God himself is the ultimate and eternal prototype of Motherhood, Womanhood—even materiality. Another contributor to *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*<sup>10</sup> has shown how this mystery presented itself to Mother Julian of Norwich, its 'bottomless abyss of simple beatitude' is the final stage of Ruysbroeck's *Seven Steps of the Ladder of Spiritual Love*; it leaves many other traces in the records of many another Christian and non-Christian mystic. Its presence does not seem far away even in scholastic presentations of the theology of the Trinity;<sup>11</sup> and the Church's Liturgy has consistently seen in Mary the temporal embodiment of an eternal yet feminine Wisdom of God. The fact that Gnostics, Cabbalists, Boehme, the Russian Sophiologists, and others have presented unacceptable formulations of this obscure mystery is not to say that it does not exist. It might seem that a clearer consciousness of it will be called for in any new Christian

<sup>10</sup> 'God is our Mother', by S.M.A.. O.P.: May, 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Especially perhaps in consideration of the 'notion' of the Father's *innascibilitas*; but far more evidently than in Scholasticism in Eastern 'apophatic' (negative) theology.

era that awaits our race; and that, humanly speaking, a deeper awareness of it will be necessary if the Gospel is ever to become intelligible to the cultures of the Far East and its teeming millions.

As Christ, ascending to heaven, leads the way to God our Eternal Father, perhaps Mary, assumed into the same heaven, will lead us to deeper knowledge and love of God our Eternal Mother.



THE ASSUMPTION

*An early woodcut by David Jones*