

“He hath made Himself...weak
enough, now into the world to come”:
The Embryo Christ in Lancelot
Andrewes and John Donne

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ABSTRACT: In the seventeenth century in England, prominent members of the Church of England held views on the humanity of the child in the womb in tune with those of modern pro-lifers. We see these views partly through their preaching on the nature of the Christ Child in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Anglican divine Lancelot Andrewes's considerations of the Incarnation included teachings on the Christ Child in the womb, from his conception by the Holy Spirit to his birth. These observations can illuminate the belief of John Donne, his younger and more famous contemporary, in the Christ Child's omniscience in the womb. The two men inherited a long tradition of Christian belief in the full humanity of the child in the womb, and in the full divinity of the Christ Child when he was an embryo. This essay focuses on Andrewes's Christmas sermon on the subject and Donne's poem from his La Corona sonnets, which he might have written right before or right after his conversion from Catholicism to the Anglican church. Both men demonstrate their belief in the pre-born Christ's salvific power and intent.

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WHAT WAS CHRIST doing while he was spending nine months in the womb of the Virgin Mary? Beginning his salvific mission, fully conscious, and fully divine as well as fully human: that is the answer of at least two seventeenth-century English divines and poets. In a century replete with religious strife, members of both the Roman Catholic and English churches were unified in the belief in the full divinity and humanity of the Christ Child from conception until his death on the cross and onward. We remark very often on the distinctions in belief that created divergences between Catholic and Protestant “poetics,” most often divergences in sacramentology and issues concerning justification and salvation. When it came to the Incarnation, belief was not different at all at first. But as the century progressed, there was more parting of the ways.

The fullness of divinity in the embryo Christ from the moment of his conception is a belief that would find some naysayers today. Not only do many Christians deny the full humanity of the child in the womb, but they also have been taught to think of the Christ Child as developing and learning like any human child. Priests in homilies even deny the omniscience, and hence the divinity, of the Christ Child in an attempt to emphasize his true humanity. However, in the seventeenth century, guided by their reading of the Fathers of the Church, preachers and poets spoke and wrote about the embryonic Christ’s divinity and omniscience. This belief made its way into the Nativity poetry of even so famous a poet as John Donne.

In this study, I show that Anglican divine Lancelot Andrewes’s considerations of the Incarnation included teachings on the Christ Child in the womb, from his conception by the Holy Spirit to his birth. These observations can illuminate the belief of John Donne, his younger contemporary, in the Christ Child’s omniscience in the womb. The two men inherited a long tradition of Christian belief in the full humanity of the child in the womb, and in the full divinity of the Christ Child when he was an embryo.¹

¹ Donne may still have been Roman Catholic when he wrote the *La Corona* sonnets, the collection to which his poem “Nativitie” belongs. For further

The Fathers of the Church do not use the word embryo, admittedly, when discussing the Christ Child in the womb. For Lancelot Andrewes, the words “embryo” and “fetus” would have been synonymous, whereas to modern English speakers they are not. *Embruon* or ἔμβρυον is simply the Greek equivalent for the Latin term *fetus*. It is first attested in Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which it refers to suckling lambs, not an animal *in utero*.² This usage changed over time. The Latin Fathers tend to use the word *infans*, partly because they often want to emphasize the paradox of the Christ Child as the unspeaking (the literal meaning of *in-fans*) Word.

The question of the extent of Christ’s knowledge and divinity in the womb had been discussed very early in the Church’s history. Augustine argued in harmony with Ambrose, Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, and others that Jesus could not have been ignorant like a normal child at any time from the moment of his incarnation. In a text that seems to have been one of Andrewes’s sources for this sermon, *A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants*, Augustine says:

Christ the savior even of infants; Christ, when an infant, was free from ignorance and mental weakness. He is therefore the Savior at once of infants and of adults, of whom the angel said, “There is born unto you this day a Savior”; and concerning whom it was declared to the Virgin Mary, “Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins,” where it is plainly shown that He was called Jesus because of the salvation which He bestows upon us, Jesus being tantamount to the Latin *Salvator*, “Savior.” Who then can be so bold as to maintain that the Lord Christ is Jesus only for adults and not for infants also? who came in the likeness of sinful flesh, to destroy the body of sin, with infants’ limbs fitted and suitable for no use in the extreme weakness of such body, and His rational soul oppressed with miserable ignorance! Now that such entire ignorance existed, I cannot

discussion of the issue of the Christ Child’s knowledge and divinity through the Middle Ages, see Mary Dzon, *The Quest for the Christ Child in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 123, 124, 133 et passim.

² Homer. *The Odyssey, Book IX*. Trans. M. Montgomery (Dublin: Brown & Nolan, 1882). The term appears three times, in Book IX, verses 245, 309, and 342. Homer speaks of the newborn lamb, not the unborn lamb. See G. C. *Vollständiges Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch über die Gedichte des Homeros und der Homeriden* (Hannover: Hahnschen Hofbuchhandlung, 1841), 156.

suppose in the infant in whom the Word was made flesh, that He might dwell among us; nor can I imagine that such weakness of the mental faculty ever existed in the infant Christ which we see in infants generally.³

Lancelot Andrewes's Christmas sermon from Christmas Day 1614 specifically uses the word "embryo" to describe the fetal stage of the Word's entrance into the world. That Andrewes means the initial portion of Christ's life in the womb is clear:

And when was that? *Ecce pariet* saith the text; *Ecce peperit* saith the day, this very day. This is the chief. But finding them here all, we will deal with them all. 1. Christ as embryo, in His conception. 2. Christ as ἀρτιγέννητὸν βρέφος, a new born babe, but yet ἀνόνητος, "without a name." 3. And Christ with His full Christendom, as named; and named with this name here in the text, the name of "Immanuel."⁴

Andrewes talks for many lines about the loving humility that brought the Son of God to endure existence, and the power that Christ would have exerted as an embryo. He finds in the Scripture passage of the day references to Christ in the various stages of his pre-born and post-partum existence. In all of these stages Christ is exerting a salvific influence, carrying out his redemptive mission.

Modern readers might object that an embryo does not have a developed brain (and even Teresa of Avila would suggest in *The Interior Castle* that perhaps meditative prayer takes place in the upper part of the body where intelligence is said to be located), but that is to assume that Christ's divine knowledge resided in and was processed by his bodily organs, when in fact we do not even know if such an assumption is entirely true about ordinary human beings.

Thomas Aquinas addressed the problem of associating Christ's divine power with his size in the *Summa*, a work that was read in the curriculum at

³ Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum* ad Marcellinum I.66, trans. by Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series I, vol. 5, pp. 195-96.

⁴ Lancelot Andrewes, "A Sermon Preached before the King's Majesty at Whitehall, on Sunday the twenty-fifth of December A.D. MDCXIV, Being Christmas-Day," *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity* (London UK: Griffith, Farran, Okeden and Walsh, 1850), pp. 137-38.

Oxford and Cambridge in the days of Andrewes and Donne. Aquinas underscores Christ's full divinity in his infancy:

As Augustine replies (*Ep. ad Volusian*, 137): "The Christian doctrine nowhere holds that God was so joined to human flesh as either to desert or lose, or to transfer and as it were, contract within this frail body, the care of governing the universe. This is the thought of men unable to see anything but corporeal things.... God is great not in mass, but in might [*Deus autem non mole, sed virtute magnus est*]. Hence the greatness of His might feels no straits in narrow surroundings.⁵

Although Aquinas elsewhere holds that human ensoulment takes place after a certain amount of development, he does not take that route in discussing Jesus's incarnation: "God is great not in mass, but in might."

Andrewes too does not believe Christ loses his divine power by becoming a pre-born infant, in spite of the phrase "in his full Christendom":

This sure is matter of love; but came there any good to us by it? There did. For our conception being the root as it were, the very groundsill of our nature; that He might go to the root and repair of our nature from the very foundation, thither He went; that what had been there defiled and decayed by the first Adam, might by the Second be cleansed and set right again. That had our conception been stained, by Him therefore, *primum ante omnia*, to be restored again. He was not idle all the time He was an embryo—all the nine months He was in the womb; but then and there He even ate out the core of corruption that cleft to our nature and us, and made both us and it an displeasing object in the sight of God.

Andrewes attributes to the Son the intention to work from the ground up in his redemption of man: first and foremost, he must cleanse the root of our nature, which is our conception as human beings. "Thither he went," into the very first moments of existence; the Second Adam purifies the moment of human conception by being conceived in his mother's womb. If Dante imagines Satan as a worm eating out the core of an apple, stuck in the center of the earth, Andrewes imagines Jesus as going to the core of our humanity, the moment when we become human beings, to counteract the evil. Original Sin is cleaving to our nature, so human nature must be

⁵ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 1, art. 1, ad 4.

renewed by an even more powerful cleaving and unifying. The embryonic Christ is a medicine at the heart of human nature, the world seemingly symbolized by the womb of his mother.

Thus Andrewes also attributes to Christ activity on behalf of our salvation while in the womb. He is redeeming human nature as well as individual human beings by participating in fetal existence; this is not a passive undergoing of physical development but a salvific humiliation: "He was not idle all the time he was an embryo."⁶

That Andrewes would hold that Jesus was active during this period was not surprising to Andrewes's audience, who in the main would have believed that at Jesus's conception in Mary's womb: "Thy *almighty word leapt down from heaven* from thy royal throne, as a fierce conqueror into the midst of the land of destruction. With a sharp sword carrying thy unfeigned commandment..." (Wisdom 8:15). As Jacqueline Tasioulas has shown, Christ was often imagined as entering the womb of the Virgin fully formed, bypassing the embryonic stage entirely and merely growing in size as Mary carried him.⁷ It is not clear that Andrewes means this, but he certainly conforms to Augustine's dictum, repeated in Thomas's *Summa*, that in becoming incarnate, Christ put on humanity, but he did not put off any of his divinity.⁸ That is, after his conception, Jesus is always the Second

⁶ See Augustine, *De trinitate*, I.14, trans. Arthur West Hadden, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 3. Ed. by Philip Schaff (Buffalo NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887). Here Augustine cites Philippians 3:12, discussing the way Christ's flesh redeems the human body: "For it was the resurrection of the body to which this place refers, on account of which he also says, Who has changed our vile body, that it may be fashioned like His glorious body. The one death therefore of our Saviour brought salvation to our double death, and His one resurrection wrought for us two resurrections; since His body in both cases, that is, both in His death and in His resurrection, was ministered to us by a kind of healing suitableness, both as a mystery of the inner man, and as a type of the outer."

⁷ Jacqueline Tasioulas, "Heaven and Earth in Little Space: The Foetal Existence of Christ in Medieval Literature and Thought," *Medium Aevum* 76 (2007): 24-48.

⁸ Citing Augustine, Thomas Aquinas underscores Christ's full divinity in his infancy. See footnote 4. "... the greatness of His might feels no straits in narrow surroundings. Nor, if the passing word of a man is heard at once by many, and

Person of the Trinity without diminution or weakening. He is never anything but omniscient and omnipotent, even during his gestation.

The embryo Christ takes the part of the believing parent in Andrewes's comparison of his sanctifying presence in the womb to the sanctification of a child of two parents, one a believer and one an unbeliever. Our fleshly parents are configured as the unbelieving parent whose unsanctified bodies are made pure and holy by the presence of the believer. As a side note, one should observe how carefully Andrewes avoids discussion of the Virgin Mary's body and her spiritual state; her womb has been replaced, quietly, by human nature as the thing Christ is dwelling in:

Nay farther, given this privilege to the children of such as are in Him, though but of one parent believing, that they are not as the seed of two infidels, but "are in a degree holy," *eo ipso*; and have a farther right to "the laver of regeneration," to sanctify them throughout by "the renewing of the Holy Ghost." This honor is to us by the dishonor of Him; this the good by Christ an embryo. [That is to say, we gain this honor by Christ's enduring the dishonor of being in the flesh as a babe in the womb.]

Andrewes attributes our reception of the saving "laver [bath] of regeneration" to Christ's "dishonor": that is, his humiliation and degradation in taking on flesh. To be reduced to an embryo is part of Christ's salvific work for man, in particular for unbaptized children or children who have an unbelieving parent. As John Saward says, "In his astounding love for us, the Son of God becomes an embryo in order to renew our nature at its deepest root."⁹ Saward also notes that Andrewes is himself quoting Pope Leo the Great when he connects Christ's taking on flesh as an infant with the way he makes grace available to man in the sacraments. However, Andrewes's thoughts on the relationship between the presence of Christ in the womb and the Eucharist are beyond the scope of this essay.

wholly by each, is it incredible that the abiding Word of God should be everywhere at once? Hence nothing unfitting arises from God becoming incarnate." *Summa theologiae* III q. 1, art. 1 ad 4.

⁹ John Saward, *Redeemer in the Womb: Jesus Living in Mary* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2015), p. 99.

Andrewes's attitude toward Christ's work in the womb was not isolated or idiosyncratic. We find a similar approach in John Donne's description of Christ's time in the womb in his *La Corona* Sonnets. Notably, Donne was not influenced by Andrewes when he wrote these poems. It is true that he was in London in 1614 as a Member of Parliament, so he might have been in the congregation at Whitehall when this sermon was preached before King James. He was to be ordained priest the following year and made Royal Chaplain, so the king's focus on him this year also make it possible. However, although Donne would have been familiar with Andrewes at this point in his career, he had in fact already written the *La Corona* sonnets, perhaps when he was still Roman Catholic. I belabor the point a little to emphasize that English churchmen of the early seventeenth century would have assumed that the Christ Child in the womb was in full possession of his divinity and thus all his divine attributes. As I pointed out above, both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, in works generally read by university graduates in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, had spoken of Christ's full possession of divinity in his infancy. Thus, when we encounter the first quatrain of Donne's sonnet on the Nativity, a close reading will reveal the influence on Donne's Christology of traditional thought on Christ in the womb:

Immensitie cloysterd in thy deare wombe,¹⁰
 Now leaves his welbelov'd imprisonment.
 There he hath made himselfe to his intent
 Weake enough, now into our world to come;
 But Oh, for thee, for him, hath th'Inne no roome?
 Yet lay him in this stall, and from the Orient,
 Starres, and wisemen will travell to prevent
 Th'effect of *Herods* jealous generall doome.
 Seest thou, my Soule, with thy faiths eyes, how he

¹⁰ "The Virgin's womb as cloister is an ancient image, used at least as early as Pope St. Gregory the Great's Easter homily of 591 AD. Homily 26 on the Gospels. This homily has been included in the Roman Breviary at least since the Council of Trent." Note by Dom David Hurst in his edition of Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies* (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), pp. 200-11.

Which fills all place, yet none holds him, doth lye?
 Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high,
 That would have need to be pittied by thee?
 Kisse him, and with him into Egypt goe,
 With his kinde Mother, who partakes thy woe.¹¹

Donne's entire poem is about the Christ Child as God as well as about his incarnation. He asks his soul to see with the eyes of faith something that is essentially unseeable: the divine motive of God that led him to be a Child in the manger. The "immensitie" of the first line is a spatial title for the Child who cannot be contained by the limits of the flesh. He is something enormous that has been "cloister'd" and "imprisoned." However, Donne is thinking about what Christ might be thinking about—must be thinking about—in choosing this path. The imprisonment is "welbelov'd," and the womb in which God finds himself constricted is "dear."¹² Among the most important words in this quatrain is "intent." While we normally think of the child's gestation in the womb as a time of growth and maturation, Donne sees what is going on with the embryonic Christ as a purposeful weakening of his almighty self. The metaphysical conceit only makes sense if the reader is meant to see the Son of God at work constantly through all his months in the womb, or perhaps actually reversing the normal human concept of gestational development. As his body dwells in Mary's womb, Christ is working hard at diminishing his own power so he will be ready to enter the world. After nine months, the infant is "Weake enough, now into our world to come." Only when his intention to become weak is fulfilled will the Christ Child choose to leave the womb to see the light of day. The modern reader, used to thinking of the fetus as completely passive before

¹¹ John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford UK: The Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 3.

¹² Felecia Wright McDuffie comments on this image and its association with Platonic sources, but she points out that "because Mary and Jesus are without sin, their bodies are not evil but simply weak.... Donne describes the 'imprisonment' of Mary's womb in a positive way." McDuffie, "*To Our Bodies Turn We Then*": *Body as Word and Sacrament in the Works of John Donne* (New York NY: Continuum, 2005), pp. 35-36. See also Anthony Bale, "God's Cell: Christ as Prisoner and Pilgrimage to the Prison of Christ," *Speculum* 91 (2016): 1-35.

birth, probably does not even notice this infant is active, not passive, intelligent, not mindless, and fully divine as he clothes himself with flesh.

Donne's opening lines are also remarkable for the way he conceives of the intimate link between Christ and the Virgin Mary. While he is in the womb, Christ is not just anticipating his exit from it but he is loving his imprisonment, loving the home the Virgin has provided him in her body. Thus, Donne does not depict the birth of Christ as an anxious exit from a captivity that restricted him in any way that he did not wish and choose. Donne focuses our attention on the Christ Child's "intent." That intent includes both his choice of captivity and his knowledge of the right time to leave. Donne indicates the difference between an ordinary child's involuntary participation in the act of birth and the fetal Christ's determination of his *Kairos*. The fact that the poem is addressed to Mary, though it is not a prayer, shows the speaker acknowledges her as the object of Christ's ongoing love and attention now conveyed through his own realization of Christ's attitude toward his enclosure and his fear for the Holy Family as they journey to Bethlehem and then flee Herod's soldiers.

The Virgin's womb as cloister is an ancient image, used at least as early as Pope Gregory the Great:

How was it that the Body of the Risen Lord was a real Body, if It was able to pass through closed doors into the assembly of His disciples? ... Those very works of our Redeemer which are in themselves impossible to be understood, must be thought over in connection with other of His works, that we may be led to believe in things wonderful, by mean of things more wonderful still. That Body of the Lord, Which came into the assembly of the disciples through closed doors, was the Same, Which at Its birth, had become manifest to the eyes of men by passing out of the cloister of the Virgin's womb without breaking the seal thereof. What wonder is it if that Body Which had come out of the Virgin's womb, without opening the matrix, albeit It was then on Its way to die, now that It was risen again from the dead and instinct for ever with undying life, what wonder is it, I say, if that Body passed through closed doors?"¹³

Donne is clearly thinking about the Virgin birth in the tradition of Ambrose and Augustine, who had interpreted it via the vision of Ezekiel. Ezekiel

¹³ St. Gregory the Great, cited in n7.

describes a closed door through which only the Holy One of Israel could pass. To the Church Fathers, this reference seemed to prefigure the intact body of the Virgin Mary, as well as the miraculous powers of the Christ Child's body. Ambrose asserted: "Bona porta Maria, quae clausus erat, et non aperiebatur. Transivit per eam Christus, sed non aperuit."¹⁴ Richard of St. Victor also refers to this image, as Miri Rubin points out in *Mother of God*.¹⁵ After Andrewes and Donne, John Pearson, the famously learned Archbishop of Chester, in 1676 noted this source among others in his widely known *Expositions of the Creed*.¹⁶ The image of Mary's closed womb persisted well after the reformation in England. Perhaps more importantly, Sedulius's early fifth century "A solis ortus cardine," the hymn that is in a way the grandfather of all the Nativity lyrics, and well known to all the metaphysical poets and their contemporaries, uses this image, drawn directly from Ambrose: "Clausae puellae viscera / Caelestis intrat gratia: / Venter puellae baiulat / Secreta quae non noverat."¹⁷

¹⁴ Ezekiel 44:2 and Ambrose, Epist. 42 ad Siricum Ambrose contra Jovinian. See Brother Anthony Josemaria, *The Blessed Virgin Mary in England: A Mary Catechism with Pilgrimage to Her Holy Shrines*, Vol. 2 (New York NY: iUniverse, 2009), 33. As Brother Anthony Josemaria points out, the tenth-century homilist Aelfric cites the same passage in reference to Mary's perpetual virginity. Richard of St. Victor also refers to this image, as Miri Rubin discusses in *Mother of God* (New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2009), 179. It is clearly well known to many of the authors of the patristic period and the Middle Ages whom Andrewes and Donne would have read.

¹⁵ Miri Rubin, *Mother of God* (New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2009), p. 179.

¹⁶ John Pearson, Archbishop of Chester, *Expositions of the Creed* (London: John Williams, 1676), p. 173.

¹⁷ Frederick Brittain, *Medieval Latin and Romance Lyric* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951), p. 74. Via multitudinous translations and paraphrases, even by Martin Luther, and above all through its inclusion in the Christmas Liturgy of the Hours, Sedulius's hymn remained a potent influence through the Renaissance and beyond. See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Third Period: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh UK: T & T Clark, 1884), p. 417, n1. For a brief history of the hymn's reliance on Ambrose and its later partitioning in the liturgy, see also Brian P. Dunkle, S.J., "Ambrosian Imitation in Sedulius and Prudentius" in his *Enchantment and Creed in the Hymns of Ambrose of Milan* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 186-213.

However, although Sedulius says that the Virgin “non noverat”—or did not know—the mystery she was carrying, Jan M. Kozłowski has argued, in support of a thesis of René Laurentin, that “the author of the Third Gospel wanted us to see the embryo in Mary’s womb, in the scene of the Visitation, as YHWH in the fullness of his holiness, and hence Mary as θεόφορος.”¹⁸ Donne is presenting Mary to the reader in this sonnet in just this way. The reader understands the unspoken reference to Simeon’s words at the Presentation underlie the representation of Mary: “Your own heart a sword will pierce, that the thoughts of many may be laid bare.” At the beginning of the sonnet, Donne shifts the focus from a Mary who meditates on the visit of the angel and then the words of Simeon, as we see her in Luke’s Gospel, and to her unborn child’s reaction to his enclosure in his mother. Donne is interested in Christ’s love of Mary: in focusing on the fact that the infant loves being imprisoned by her, Donne not only emphasizes the knowledge Christ had as an embryo, but also his love for his creation and for his plan of redemption, for his creature who has become his mother. As Andrewes says, “This sure is matter of love; but came there any good to us by it? There did. For our conception being the root as it were, the very ground sill of our nature; that He might go to the root and repair of our nature from the very foundation, thither He went.” Christ as embryo is not just the wisdom and power of God. He is also love.

¹⁸ Jan M. Kozłowski, “Mary as the Ark of the Covenant in the Scene of the Visitation (Luke 1:39-56) Reconsidered,” *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne* 31 (2018): 109-16 at 112. See also René Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I-II* (Paris: Gabalda, 1957) and Jan M. Kozłowski, “‘The Fruit of Your Womb’ (Luke 1:42) as ‘The Lord God, Creator of Heaven and Earth’ (Judith 13:18): An Intertextual Analysis,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 93 (2017): 339-42.