

AlbertMohler.com

## Born of A Virgin? An Episcopal Priest Shares Her Doubts

Saturday, December 24, 2005

Chloe Breyer serves an Episcopal priest at St. Mary's Manhattanville Church in West Harlem, New York. She is the daughter of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer and author of *The Close*, a reflection on her first year at General Theological Seminary in New York City. She is urbane, witty, and articulate. What she is *not*, however, is theologically orthodox — a point she makes painfully clear in "[The Earthly Father—What if Mary Wasn't a Virgin?](#)," published December 22, 2005 at the on-line magazine, *Slate*.

"At Christmas, Christians celebrate the birth of God's only son," Ms. Breyer notes. "Some believers, however, wonder if Jesus Christ is God's son *only*. The ancient "illegitimacy tradition" and its modern proponents propose that Jesus may have had a human father. That idea upsets one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith—the virgin conception. But it's entirely in keeping with more essential tenets: Jesus' role as the Messiah, and God's love for the poor and downtrodden."

In other words, the belief in the illegitimacy of Jesus is "entirely in keeping" with her worldview and belief system — a belief system that is profoundly *not* based in the authority of the Bible.

Ms. Breyer admits that the Gospel tradition as revealed in Matthew and Luke "sounds pretty clear." But, that doesn't mean that the virginal conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit is safe from the cleverness of the clever, however.

Consider this: *So far, the Scripture sounds pretty clear. But the infancy narratives from Matthew and Luke must be squared with some startling silences, alternative Greek translations, and a couple of snide comments from Jesus' hometown critics. Paul never mentions the virgin conception and in Galatians describes Christ as "born of a woman." John's Gospel says nothing on the subject of Jesus' conception. And Mark describes the shocked response of the synagogue-goers of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth when Jesus as an adult returns to preach and teach as God's chosen one. The Nazareth Jews presumably would have known better than anyone about the irregular timing of Jesus' birth. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" his parents' neighbors ask one another. Since Jewish men of the time were identified in relationship to their father, Schaberg and other scholars take this remark as an insinuation about Jesus' parentage—one that was so offensive that the later Evangelists Luke, Matthew, and John changed it.*

In other, less evasive words, they lied. Ms. Breyer goes on to cite the work of Jane Schaberg, who offers a feminist reading of the virgin birth — a reading that denies the virgin birth out of hand but cites the story as evidence that Mary had been sexually assaulted, and is thus the patron saint for assaulted women everywhere.

Note carefully her next paragraph: *Admittedly, Schaberg's conjecture that the Gospel writers were obliquely conveying an illegitimacy tradition—one in which Mary was the victim of rape or seduction—is just that: conjecture. It lacks positive corroboration within the Gospels or other Christian writings. Schaberg acknowledges that she cannot prove that early Christians read the infancy narratives in the way she proposes. Still, if the Gospel writers did assume that their readers knew of an illegitimacy tradition, their words could support a figurative, rather than literal, reading of the angel's annunciation. It seems rash to rule out that historical possibility when theologically it works so well.*

What? It would be "rash" to rule out the possibility that the Gospel writers mean the opposite of what their words mean because "theologically it works so well?" This is theological insanity, but it is indicative of what has become of "mainstream" biblical scholarship in the liberal academy. Schaberg argues — and Ms. Breyer affirms — that Matthew and Luke (or whoever wrote those two gospels, she would argue) wrote in their gospels that Jesus was born of a virgin so

that their readers would understand that they really meant that Jesus was *not* born of a virgin at all. Still following?

When Ms. Breyer argues that such an interpretation, completely based in contemporary conjecture, “theologically works so well,” she means that it affirms her social reading of Christianity. There is precious little theology in her theological argument.

This is consistent with her presentation of Christianity in *The Close*. The most striking aspect of this book is the fact that Ms. Breyer seems to have a very weak grasp on Christianity, and fairly little interest. She is very interested in intellectual questions and social action, but there is little theology in her reflection on theological education.

Rod Dreher, reviewing *The Close* for *Touchstone Magazine*, noted: “*The Close* is less a spiritual autobiography, of which there seems pitifully little for her to say, than an account of life in a professional school. It is full of the details of seminary life, and the personal challenges she met in learning the ropes that first year. There is very little discussion of her prayer life or her sense of a personal relationship with God and what that means to her.”

In *The Close*, Ms. Breyer reveals her approach to Scripture in rather candid language. She boasts that she is “not one of the people whom Committees on Ministry warn about — someone whose faith crumbles upon learning that Moses, if he existed, probably did not write the first five books of the Bible.” On the contrary, she finds the idea positively exhilarating. Her day is “brightened” when she concludes that the Apostle Paul might not have written the pastoral epistles.

“Like many people of my age and gender,” she writes, “I put most of St. Paul’s writings in the category of things *despite which* I call myself Christian.” Well, she sure knows how to put the Apostle in his place. She continued: “That Paul had never meant his letters to become part of scripture was, to me, no excuse for the suffering caused in his name. Paul had a lot to answer for, I felt.”

Nevertheless, Ms. Breyer and her fellow humble seminarians are willing to offer their opinion that Paul, if given the opportunity, would repent of his prejudices and join their crusade for liberal social action: “By noting the number of reversals in the text and the considerable time he spends with outsiders such as women and gentiles, we determine that Paul, had he lived today, would have advocated forms of civil disobedience and supported the rights of gay men and women. Paul, after all, carries out his mission by aligning himself and other Christians with the marginalized, the ritually unclean, and the dispossessed.” Give these enlightened seminarians enough time and they will enlighten Paul and the rest of the human authors of Scripture.

When — in a supreme demonstration of irony — she finds herself charged with preaching a seminary vesper service on John 14:6, she simply argues *against* the text. She “dislike[s] the implications of this passage.”

Here is Rod Dreher’s take: *Clearly—and I mean this with all charity—Chloe Breyer is a nitwit. And a snob. She is depressed by news that graduating seniors are being called to minister at obscure small-town parishes. Her willingness to serve God’s people is conditional on their being where she wants to serve. In a telling comment, she writes, “I still prefer to read The New Yorker, not Episcopal Life.”*

*What she is getting at here is the painful process of dying to oneself that every Christian, particularly those who choose to serve in the ministry, must endure. Any reader would sympathize, but over and over, her problem is not that she has these all-too-human feelings, but that she assumes that because she has them, they are valid.*

*The New Yorker line might be a small thing, but it reveals something essential: she is a spoiled little rich girl. When the seminarians are told to find a local parish in which to serve a kind of internship, she can’t make up her mind. Finally a mid-sized Manhattan church makes her a generous offer, which she accepts.*

The sad case of Chloe Breyer draws attention to what is really going on in liberal seminaries, liberal theology, and liberal churches. The very existence of women priests points to an approach to the Bible that is elastic at best. Words must be twisted to mean what they do not mean and authorities like the Apostle Paul have to be “corrected” according to the dictates of the contemporary. [See my essay, "[Biblical Pattern of Male Leadership Limits Pastorate to Men.](#)"]

Sarah E. Hinlicky, who argues for the ordination of women, by the way, expressed her frustration in a review

published in *Books & Culture*: *If, 500 years from now, the ordination of women has come and gone, and it is viewed by some scholar as a historical curiosity worth his further investigation, he will find in The Close a revealing hint or two as to why it failed. The book is a key piece of evidence about the minds of so many young women entering the ordained ministry at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Were it not for the fact that I know plenty of women who contradict the stereotype that this book unwittingly reinforces, I would consign the whole project to despair and transfer into a profession that earns more money.*

FOR A DEFENSE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH: My articles, "[Must We Believe in the Virgin Birth?](#)," "[The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth Under Attack—Again](#)," "[Can a Christian Deny the Virgin Birth?](#)."

---

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.