

The History of Doctrine

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Some of you may remember those morning inspections in the army which were so rigorous that the soldiers would on the night before have the bedclothes perfectly folded, their equipment perfectly laid out, and then sleep on the floor. We are familiar with systems of dogmatic theology rather like this—perfectly arranged, logically coherent, and in the last resort separate from life and useless to men, indeed harmful to them in that men are deprived in their attempt to lead a Christian life of precisely that help which Christian doctrine ought to give: just as the purpose of inspection is efficiency, and efficiency is frustrated if inspection results in a soldier's missing a good night's sleep. A dogmatic theology such as this treats Christian doctrines as so many bricks of ascertainable and unalterable value, which, in the construction of a building, can serve both as a layer superimposed on a previous course, and then as the foundation of a further layer to be superimposed in its turn. Whereas Christian doctrines, like ideas in other fields, are (as I hope to show) by their nature incapable of being used in this way, and cannot readily be understood apart from their particular historical context. One obvious result of such a view of dogmatics is that defensive orthodoxy, which in French is called an *intégriste* position in theology, and which cannot afford to allow any brick in the structure to be removed (even if there is the promise of replacement), as this would endanger the fabric of the faith as a whole. The anger of conservatives in this matter, like most anger, has its roots in anxiety.

The late Mgr Ronald Knox in one of his sermons has another analogy for Christian doctrine. He pictured himself, while reciting the Creed at Mass, as swaying from side to side like a good rugby footballer, who, having got away with the ball, runs for the touch line 'swaying from this side to that so as to make it more difficult for people to tackle him; fending people off first on this side then on that, when they try to interfere with him'.¹ This analogy is a better one for our purpose for it allows a place for history in the understanding of doctrine, allows doctrines to be seen in the context of their first formulation. For it is axiomatic for us today that for the better understanding of men and insti-

¹*The Mass in Slow Motion*, London 1949, p. 50.

tutions we must know their history; and it is coming to be accepted (certainly in America and on the Continent of Europe, if rather belatedly here) that this is true also of ideas—that a history of ideas is a proper undertaking, though of course not independently from the societies in which they flourished. And so Christian doctrine, as the title you have given me for this paper implies, is rightly so studied.

But here important distinctions must be drawn, for the notion of history itself has undergone, is still undergoing, radical change. Our present understanding of history differs both from that of the ancients, in which history and myth are indistinguishable, and from that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the attempt was made to study history on the analogy of the natural sciences; when it was thought that it was in principle possible to recover so-called objective historical facts, free of any bias of interpretation; and this was true whether or not the interaction of these facts was explained by some philosophy of history such as Hegel's or that of Marx. The view generally accepted among us today in a sense combines elements of both these understandings. On the one hand we try to maintain with our immediate predecessors that vigorously critical historical sense or imagination which attempts to see particular past events in their contemporary context. This historical sense is a necessary product of that same fundamental change in the philosophical climate of Europe that led also to the scientific and industrial revolutions.

On the other hand we recognize that the very process of historical thinking and writing necessarily involves attaching significance to past facts and events, involves indeed selecting facts and events for their apparent significance; and that so-called objective uninterpreted facts are strictly insignificant. And this in a real sense is a rediscovery of the nature of the role of myth in history. In the study of history there cannot but be an involvement of the historian in his subject matter: it is only meaningful if there is. If this be so, it follows that the study of the history of Christian doctrine must be undertaken nowadays in a rather different spirit from that in which it was done in the universities a generation and more ago. Then the study of Christian dogmatics was undertaken historically as a reaction to that theology of conclusions which I outlined at the outset, because it was hoped that the passions of controversy could be by-passed if attention was paid to the scientific objective facts of the matter. The history of doctrine so taught is not only dull, it has lost all point, for it avoids the principal purpose of the study of the history of ideas, namely the consideration whether and to what extent the ideas

are true. We may learn what Augustine taught about the nature of the Church, but we shall not *understand* what he taught unless we are ourselves involved in trying to grasp what the Church is.

This conclusion raises two practical questions which must be briefly discussed before we can turn to its implications for the study of Christian doctrine. The first is this: 'Can Christian doctrine be studied by others than Christians?' This is obviously a vital question if theology is to be a recognized department of study in a secular university. Some fine words by Fr Charles Davis in his contribution to *Theology and the University* might at first sight be taken to indicate a negative answer. 'The Christian thing he (a theologian) studies is a present reality, even though it joins him to the past as well. Faith is not the acceptance of what has long ceased to be, but surrender to the divine reality here and now acting upon us. And theology arises from faith: creative theology from present faith not past faith' (p. 109). 'Theology arises from faith': can theology be meaningfully studied without faith? (Though, of course, most theology students are in fact likely to be Christians.) I think it can: not indeed (as I have indicated) as an uninvolved quasi-scientific historical discipline, but on the analogy with other fields of study in the history of ideas. For that element of faith, which asks the question: 'Is it true?' is a sufficient involvement in the historical study of theology, and this is the same question that is asked in other university disciplines. The answer to the question can, strictly, be left open, without a Christian's having to deny that he believes there to be right and wrong answers. Beliefs about the rightness and wrongness of answers in general are not in any case notably confined to Christians in our universities!

It is worth noting a secondary implication here. In a university context right answers to doctrinal questions will not do in themselves. It is an understanding of the issues involved that matters, and which alone is examinable. No marks for piety!

The second practical question, that arises from an understanding of the nature of the history of doctrine such as I have outlined, is this: 'Can doctrine so conceived be taught in an ecumenical context?' It might be thought that only when history was conceived of as a complex of indisputable facts, was it possible for teachers of differing ecclesiastical allegiance to work in the same theology faculty. On the contrary, we would agree that the presence in one faculty of theologians and students of differing traditions is all the more valuable when, from initially separate standpoints, they are wrestling with the understanding of the same subject. On the condition, as Fr Laurence Bright wrote in the

symposium mentioned, that each realizes 'that no man, no church, possesses the fullness of theological truth or ever will: that fullness resides in the mind of Christ who is Lord of all, and in this life our share of it is only partial, until we know as we are known. But each Christian community bears witness to important truths which in other communities are neglected and obscured, and so each must learn from dialogue with the others. Each must remain completely faithful to its own traditions, but each must seek to renew its thought and bring it closer to the mind of Christ with the help of others, thereby naturally growing towards that unity which all recognise as the will of God . . . We want each man to teach what he sincerely believes; but a man teaching as a Catholic, for instance, must then show why an Anglican or a Presbyterian would disagree with him. This ought not to turn into the presentation of a set of opinions, leaving the student bewildered, wondering which to choose; properly done, it will leave the student who is, say, an Anglican, more deeply committed to his own tradition because now more aware of how it stands in relation to others. Openness and commitment are correlative, not contradictory; a man who believes deeply and personally can afford to be sensitive to the deeply held personal beliefs of others'.²

Here is the context which will most favour that theological self-examination which is imposed on Christians of all traditions by the realization that the Church is once again in a missionary situation, both in Europe and in a europeanized world. The first fruits of this theological self-examination are manifest already and have had an immense influence on the understanding of Christian doctrine as a whole. I mean the recognition by Catholics and Protestants alike that many of the doctrines of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation were developed in a negative spirit, formulated *against* the other side; together made up what has been called a 'fortress theology', a theology that turns out to be largely useless when it comes to trying to present Christianity positively to a pagan world.

This recognition, as I have said, has already influenced the understanding of the nature of Christian doctrine itself. We have come to realize, at any rate more clearly than before, that as Prof. H. Küng wrote, 'Every dogma of the Church expresses at the same time both the irreformable divine revelation and what is human and reformable'.³ We recognise that revealed truth has always of necessity been expressed in

²p. 274 f.

³*The Council and Reunion*, Eng. Transl., London 1961, p. 167.

particular languages and systems of thought, and that, while the truth is immutable, the language or system of thought is not. Thus at the Council of Ephesus in 431 the Church expresses its knowledge of the mystery of the incarnate Word by speaking of 'one nature'. Only twenty years later at Chalcedon in 451 a different use of words resulted in the same mystery being expressed by 'two natures in one person'. We can envisage the probability that differing Christian traditions, as they have grown up in long separation, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, may have come to apply different categories to the same truth. We can even recognise the possibility, at least in theory, that the Church's understanding of revealed truth could be expressed in a system of thought, it might be Indian or Chinese, to which our present Greek and Latin categories are quite foreign. In our historical study of Christian doctrine, therefore, we shall understand that the theologians we are studying, of whatever century, are grappling with the same truth as are we ourselves, and in their efforts to express it are subject to like conditions and pressures.

These conditions and pressures that underly the formulation of Christian doctrine must now be examined in more detail.

1. There are firstly the requirements of converts to Christianity in each age for instruction in faith and morals. The person, work and teaching of Jesus Christ are presented in the categories that have meaning for the hearers, and what has previously been taken for granted by Christians may have to be put into words for the first time. To give three examples, all from the New Testament.

(a) The Fourth Gospel transposes into the language of light, life and truth (for whose benefit need not concern us here) the gospel message of the coming kingdom, of judgment, and the need for repentance.

(b) The influx of gentiles into the Church necessitated the introduction of a Trinitarian confession of faith at baptism (Matthew 28. 19); whereas for a Jew, whose belief in what then came to be called God the Father and God the Holy Spirit could be taken for granted, the confession that Jesus was the messiah had sufficed.

(c) Again particularly for the gentiles it was necessary for St Paul to draw out the moral implications of adherence by faith to the new covenant in Christ. For a Jew the moral implications of his covenant relationship to God were nothing new.

2. A second influence on the formulation of Christian doctrine is the requirement of apologetic to outsiders. This can take the form either of

pressing the analogy between Christianity and the beliefs and practices that are familiar to the hearer; or of emphasizing the differences, where Christianity can be shown to imply higher values—for instance a deeper respect for humanity that allows men to be freer, to be more mature. Thus for example we may find in early apologetic, depending on the audience, at the same time a claim that in a sense Christianity is a religion like others, though a higher one ('Christians too have their priesthood and their sacrifices'); and also a repudiation of such accepted religious practices as being primitive superstitions now superseded by the coming of Jesus Christ.

Both these pressures on the development of doctrine involve as a matter of course reference to categories not necessarily essential to Christianity itself. This is the substance of the question asked by some today whether Christianity need be thought of as a religion at all. If the epoch of the incarnation of the Word had been other, would the work of Christ have been expressed in terms of atoning sacrifice and the forgiveness of sins? The crux of the matter of course lies in the conditional, 'If the epoch of the incarnation of the Word had been other'. Is this a meaningful supposition? The whole traditional belief in a historical and prophetic preparation for the gospel, the belief that led the Church to include an Old Testament in its canon, would seem to indicate otherwise.

Nevertheless it is true that reference to beliefs and practices outside Christianity, whether this be for the instruction of converts or for apologetic purposes, means that Christian doctrine has made considerable use of metaphor. And here, as in the history of ideas generally (as for instance in politics), metaphors easily acquire a life of their own; they begin to influence the further development of doctrine in their own right, and can seriously distort it, the more so that their original nature as metaphors is unperceived. Here are three examples:

(i) St Paul, with immense rabbinical subtlety, makes use of the Old Testament in the catechesis of his converts; but we can see how the use of Old Testament metaphors gradually coarsens after his time, until, for example, we find a Cyprian cheerfully transposing Old Testament ordinances for the levitical priesthood to the apostolic ministry of the new Israel.

(ii) Mark records Jesus himself as speaking of his death as a 'ransom for many': and then we find the Cappadocian Fathers debating to whom the ransom was paid—to the Father, or to the Devil?

(iii) In fairly recent times a whole theology of the Church has been built, rather precariously surely, on Paul's image of the Church as the

body of Christ. Similarly I once heard an Anglican theologian defending the branch theory of the Church by pointing out that the vine, the image used by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, has no trunk but is entirely made up of branches.

3. A third influence on the formulation of Christian doctrine is the familiar need to define orthodox faith against heretics. Here let me merely remind you that the definition of doctrine in this case is generally agreed to be a *painful* necessity. And this not primarily because of the inevitable hardening of positions in the course of controversy, and the subsequent loss to the Church of unity and the faith of many: but because the result of such definition seems often to have been a narrowing, and indeed, it can be argued, a distortion of the truth. An important example is the virtual abandonment by most of the Church, after the Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the first five centuries had been settled, of lively theological understanding of the mystery of God the Holy Trinity. Most Christians pray simply, 'Glory be to the Father, *and* to the Son, *and* to the Holy Ghost'; a whole theology of prepositions (*through* the Son, *in* the Spirit) is neglected; and Christian life suffers as a consequence. This is particularly evident in the distortions in the liturgy once its Trinitarian basis was forgotten.

4. A fourth influence on the formulation of Christian doctrine can be seen in the way in which theology frequently follows practice. The Church does something, usually in its liturgy; theological explanation follows. Two samples must suffice:

(i) The classic example is St Paul's theology of baptism. Christian baptism is the unpremeditated continuation in the true Israel, the Church, of proselyte and other baptisms in Jewry—a rite of initiation employing symbols common to the conscious and unconscious mind of man. St Paul, as I said, was concerned to draw out for his converts the moral implications of adherence by faith to the new covenant in Christ. So when the candidate for baptism is stripped of his clothes, Paul describes him as 'discarding the old nature with its deeds' (Col. 3. 9); naked he steps down into the water, Paul speaks of being buried with Christ (Rom. 6. 2); he comes up and Paul speaks of being 'raised in union with Christ' (Eph. 2. 6); then, as always after a bath, he is rubbed with oil: Paul speaks of being 'christened' (2 Cor. I. 21-22), anointed by the same Spirit who descended on Jesus after his own baptism in Jordan, anointing him as messiah. To the catechumen the voice from heaven also speaks, 'Thou art my Son' (Mark I. 11). 'Ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba,

Father' (Rom. 8. 15). Nestorius pressed the analogy too far and saw in Jesus' baptism also, his adoption as Son of God. Then the catechumen puts on new clothes, Paul speaks of 'putting on the new nature which shows itself in a just and devout life' (Eph. 4. 24), or simply of 'putting on Christ' (Gal. 3. 27).

It is interesting that this particular theology of baptism does not re-appear for three centuries and more until Cyril of Jerusalem is baptising in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and can point, 'over there', to Christ's actual tomb.

(ii) A second example is that whole medieval theology of the eucharist, which regards the liturgical action as essentially a drama. Remarkably, this has survived into modern times both among Catholics and Protestants. Its origins can be traced to the failure of the Western Church in the early middle ages to translate the lections at mass into the vernacular, and to the decline of the liturgical sermon, combined with the obscuring of the meaning of sacramental *action* by the Christian assembly. Whereas classically the first part of the liturgy had been a setting forth of God's acts, of the gospel; the second, the response of the assembled community in sacramental self-oblation to the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit; now the whole liturgy came to be regarded as the representation of the gospel, as a sort of drama, at which the people (as it were at Calvary) are merely spectators. You will remember commentaries where, for example, the movement of the priest from the epistle to the gospel corner of the altar is likened to Christ being sent by Pilate to Herod. And so the response of the people becomes a matter of *individual* piety, and is not *liturgically* expressed. The eucharistic theology of the Reformers is profoundly influenced by this. For them the breaking of the bread is a dramatic proclamation of Calvary, parallel to the preaching of the Word, and likewise aimed at rousing the faith of those who see and hear. Some then invent a parallel ceremony of pouring the wine (from the flagon into the chalice), while the extremists practically abandon the eucharist altogether as it only duplicates the *verbal* preaching of the gospel.

These considerations lead us to ask the question, 'What criteria are to be adopted for the exercise of a critical judgment in the study of Christian dogmatics?' And here a note about the limits of critical scholarship is in place. To quote Fr Benedict Green, C.R., in a recent article:⁴ 'In matters

⁴ *Apostolic Succession and the Anglican Appeal to History*, Church Quarterly Review, July-September, 1962, pp. 294-6.

of faith Christians cannot be finally accountable to the professors. If a man, on the authority of that body in which he has found the *Unita Sancta*, has accepted a doctrine, institution, or practice as belonging to its essence, a challenge to the latter on critico-historical grounds can be sufficiently met by a demonstration that its originality in some sense is not impossible. If he has never so accepted it, there will be nothing to determine him in its favour, and nothing short of conclusive historical demonstration, of a kind rarely provided in these questions, will serve to convince him. A historical defence of what one has is very different from a historical argument for what one has not'. He illustrates this, for example, by the stalemate between Rome and other communions on the necessity of the papacy. 'At the same time', he writes, 'critical scholarship has an autonomy of its own; it is not possible to ignore its established results and still retain intellectual integrity. Scholarship cannot lay down what is to be believed, but it can compel us to restate what we do believe in a more flexible and defensible form, and to re-examine the reasons we commonly give for believing it. . . It is possible for increased knowledge of history or a changed perspective to alter the Church's account of what it continues to believe and practise.'

It will clearly assist us to find criteria for the evaluating of Christian doctrines if these latter can be situated in their context in the history of ideas as a whole, for use can then be made of considerable developments in various other disciplines in recent times. Here is a prime value of studying theology in the context of a university.

(i) A clear gain in the present century has been a clearer delineation of the various modes of knowledge. I will return to this theme in a moment when I come to consider the matter of analogical thinking in theology in a little more detail; but let me mention now the way in which the Darwinian controversy of the last century (in retrospect we can see that the Copernican controversy earlier also had its influence) has helped the Church to a better understanding of the nature and processes of divine revelation in scripture. It is easy for us to see now how particular cosmological or anthropological views, especially if they are held unconsciously, will influence the form of Christian doctrines. Indeed we are tempted to smile, for example, at a sixteenth century denial of Christ's real presence in the eucharist, because 'his body is in heaven and not here'; and yet such views had tragic results on Christian faith. Similarly it will be a long time before the disastrous effects of the Churches' absolute opposition to the theory of evolution have been dissipated.

(ii) The historical study of philosophy can likewise help towards a better understanding of Christian doctrine. The attempt has been made, for example, to explain Luther's theology on the basis of the nominalism that is said to underly his thinking. Again it seems probable that the various answers given at different times to the problems posed by the development of doctrine could be illuminated in this way. More generally, the philosophical foundations of sacramental theology need to be examined. This has already been instanced by my example from the medieval doctrine of the eucharist. Another example is the way in which, once the sacraments had become a category in their own right, baptism came to be regarded by some theologians as the *typical* sacrament, with dire consequences for the eucharistic theology of some Protestants.

(iii) Sociological and psychological criteria are also relevant. An example of the former is the understanding of Anselm's doctrine of the atonement gained by an elucidation of the legal categories of his time. The whole medieval doctrine of merit, with all its ineluctible and yet to modern man unconvincing logic, lends itself to similar analysis. Both sociology and psychology in their turn can further assist us in drawing that difficult frontier between Christian certitude in divine truth, thought to be self-authenticating, and the certitude that springs from unconscious presuppositions such as we have considered.

I want to conclude with some suggestions of how the nature of analogical thinking in theology might be elucidated for the student of Christian dogmatics.

Charles Williams, the poet, novelist, and theologian, had a prayer which many have found a useful touchstone to lead them to a deeper understanding of the nature of Christian doctrine. He thought he had found it somewhere in St Augustine, but was never later able to trace the exact source, and came to the conclusion that he must have invented it himself. The prayer went thus: face to face with the revelation of God, in nature, in art, in scripture even, he would say, 'This also is Thou: neither is this Thou'—so holding together both the illumination of analogy and analogy's final inadequacy. 'This also is Thou: neither is this Thou.'

'This also is Thou.' Here we are in the great tradition of affirmative theology, in the line of the Fourth Gospel. 'No man has seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, *he* has declared him' (John I. 18). And Jesus' words, 'He who has seen me

has seen the Father' (John 14. 9). It was precisely so that man should truly know him, as Athanasius was later to teach in his *De Incarnatione*, that God revealed himself in becoming *man*. Here faith is in the highest degree reasonable, for the Word 'lights every man that comes into the world' (John 1. 9); faith is not, as for Pascal and his descendants, an irrational existential act, taking hold of something, which, at bottom, does not belong to us. Here faith is the key (as Justin said) which man has always sought to understand the world—as Augustine also said in his *credo ut intelligam*. It is this tradition which terms baptism the Christian's illumination.

'This also is Thou: *neither is this Thou.*' And yet God cannot be comprehended in our human categories. That means no more than that we can only know God as men (at any rate in this life, for St Paul says that 'I shall know even as I am known', 1 Cor. 13. 12). We can only think of the truth, and speak of it, according to our experience of the world and of life which has formed our concepts and our language. So far we must go with Kant. But from the fact that man cannot know God otherwise than as a man it need not follow that our knowledge of God is thereby *falsified*. It is this implication which seems to underlie some kenotic christologies and to be at the root of the pessimism of several modern theologians about the possibility of our own knowledge of the truth. Our knowledge need not be falsified by our limited ability to express it in thoughts and words. Often, especially when it is a matter of knowing another person, knowledge transcends our means of formulating it, but remains none the less true. So it is with our knowledge of God. The fact that we can often speak of God only in paradoxes is an indication in itself that our knowledge can go beyond the categories of our language as of our thought. Without such transcendent knowledge it would not have been possible for Christians to maintain, for example, both the justice and the mercy of God, nor to have formulated the great and necessary paradoxes of trinitarian and christological dogma.

'Neither is this Thou.' In the Eastern Church what we in the West call dogmatic theology on the one hand, and ascetic and moral theology on the other, have never been separated. Together they are called 'mystical theology'. At its heart, keeping the balance with the affirmative tradition, is the other great tradition of apophatic (negative) theology, whose great master was the fifth century anonymous writer who used to be identified with Dionysius the Areopagite. 'The universal cause of all things', he wrote, 'is not soul or mind; nor has he imagination, reason, or understanding nor can he be expressed or conceived, since he is

neither number, nor order; nor greatness, nor smallness; nor equality, nor inequality; nor similarity, nor dissimilarity; neither is he standing, nor moving, nor at rest; neither has he power, nor is power, nor is light; neither does he live, nor is he life; neither is he essence, nor eternity, nor time; nor is he subject to intelligible contact; nor is he science, nor truth, nor kingship, nor wisdom; neither one, nor oneness; nor godhead, nor goodness; nor is he spirit according to our understanding, nor filiation, nor paternity, nor anything else known to us, or to any other beings, of the things that are or the things that are not; neither does anything that is, know him as he is; nor does he know existing things according to existing knowledge; neither can the reason attain to him, nor name him, nor know him; neither is he darkness or light, nor the false, nor the true; nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to him, for although we may affirm or deny the things *below* him, we can neither affirm nor deny *him*, inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of his absolute nature is outside of every negation—free from every limitation and beyond them all.⁵ This way had an immense influence on the doctrine of contemplative prayer in the Latin West. It was represented even in the vernacular; witness the English medieval treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*. But its real influence on dogmatic theology was minimal. Yet it is a way of theology that in the end can revitalize and revalue the images themselves.

I have spoken of the history of doctrine as an academic discipline and I have defended the possibility of studying it as such. It is however, I hope, not improper to conclude by saying that in the last resort a true understanding of doctrine is inseparable from prayer and Christian discipleship. Thus Athanasius ends his treatise *On the Incarnation* with these words:

‘For the searching and right understanding of the scriptures there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word.’

⁵Pseudo-Dionysius *Mystical Theology*, last chapter.