

On the Function of Heresy

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One of the things which must count as Catholic doctrine is the affirmation that it is possible to get it seriously wrong. In this article I hope to offer some remarks on the function of heresy in the articulation of the Church's faith. I would like to begin with a question, the possible answers to which have implications: how much do heretics sleep?

By 1843, John Henry Newman had come to believe that heretics were by nature sluggish creatures. In his fourteenth University Sermon, on 'The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine', Newman spoke of the 'ordinary torpor' of heretics from which they 'never wake up ... but to exchange courtesies and meditate coalitions'¹.

That was in its own way a radical answer, a radical break with the age-old view that heretics were ever-active, ever-vigilant. This view had, in particular, been the answer of virtually the whole of that patristic tradition in which Newman's thought had been so largely formed. For Irenaeus, for example, heresies were by nature fissiparous, and heretics were ever shifting their ground.

... Many shoots of many heresies arose, since many, indeed all, of them want to be doctors ...; framing one doctrine from others and one opinion from another, they press on with their novel teaching, proclaiming themselves the discoverers of whatever opinion they have cobbled together.

They wallow in every error, ... holding different views at different times on the same questions and never possessing stable knowledge ...².

The other side of this patristic coin is, of course, the assumption that the Church's faith must be ever one and the same. If heresy is fissiparous, right belief must be monolithic; if heretics are fickle, the orthodox must never change. For Irenaeus

... though there are in the world diverse tongues, yet the force of the tradition is one and the same. And neither do the churches established in Germany believe otherwise or teach otherwise, nor those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those established at the heart of the world. But, as the sun which God made is one and the same in the whole world, thus also the proclamation of the truth shines everywhere and illumines

all men who wish to come to the knowledge of truth.

This is 'the sole true and life-giving faith, which the Church received from the Apostles and consigns to her children'³.

It follows on this scheme of things that the Church is a city under siege, the orthodox an army under attack. In the history of the Church, then, it is the heretics who make all the running. Socrates Scholasticus ends his *Church History* with the pious wish that he and his kind may be put out of business: 'I, making an end of my *History* here, pray that the churches and cities and peoples everywhere may dwell in peace, for when there is peace, those who wish to write history will have no subject matter.'⁴ Were the activity of heretics to cease, the history of dogma would end.

But it will never be so, for new heresies are ever aroused by 'the enemy of the Church of God', the Devil, who has, as Eusebius notes, 'never refrained from any form of plotting against men'⁵. And his vigilance for evil rubs off on his wakeful and watchful servants.

For Newman in 1843 the position is, at least implicitly, reversed. Heretics are now sluggish and torpid because their heresies are dead.

Here, too, is the badge of heresy; its dogmas are unfruitful; it has no theology; so far forth as it is heresy, it has none ... Its formulae end in themselves, without development, because they are words; they are barren, because they are dead.⁶

And it is now the orthodox, or rather orthodoxy itself, which makes the running in the history of dogma. It is, in the case of 'any Catholic dogma',

full of deep interest, to see how the great idea takes hold of a thousand minds by its living force, ... and grows in them, and at length is born through them, perhaps in a long course of years, and even successive generations; so that the doctrine may rather be said to employ the minds of Christians, than to occupy them.⁷

Both pictures are of course highly stylized, and at least since the publication of Walter Bauer's perversely great book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*⁸ Church historians have, or should have, realized that in the real world of time and space it is much more difficult to tell the orthodox from heretics: a look at their sleep patterns is not enough.

But the latter picture—Newman's torpid heretics—still receives a good run for its money, for the sketch which Newman produced in 1843 has grown into the widely-canvassed view that heresy is in essence a case of arrested development, or, in Jaroslav Pelikan's phrase, the conviction that 'heresy may be a result of poor timing'⁹. The developmental bus moves on, and language once acceptable can become unacceptable; archaism can become heresy.

Now these two contrasting pictures, of wakeful and of torpid

heretics, of heresy as innovation and of heresy as stagnation, actually have much in common. Both, in a sense, privilege the notion of heresy over that of orthodoxy: both, as it were, start by defining heresy and assuming that orthodoxy is simply its obverse. And that mistake, I would like to suggest, lies at the root of two common models of development.

If heresy is essentially an attack from outside and development a response to it, the theological task will be seen as the steering of a steady course. The ship sails on—the faith is unfolded in new contexts—but the course is in the main set by the dangers to be avoided. This is the Scylla and Charybdis model of development.

If, on the other hand, heresy is essentially stunted growth, its obverse will display the regularity of normal natural process. Doctrine will grow as children become men or as seeds turn into plants. This is the acorn and oak model of development.

Now, each of these models seems to apply quite well to one of the classic instances of developmental process. Thus, the Arian crisis can be read as a case of acorns and oaks. The Church's implicit belief in the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father came to fruition in the course of the fourth century. The Logos theologies of the second and third centuries had tried to relate God to the created order through a mediatorial Word. Such a scheme inevitably subordinated the Son to the Father. This subordinationism had somehow been acceptable in a Justin or an Origen, but the flow of the theological tide made it unacceptable in an Arius or a Eusebius.

As Arianism can be seen as exemplifying acorns and oaks, so the Christological controversies of the fifth century can be seen as exemplifying Scylla and Charybdis. On one side of the channel lay the Nestorian danger of an overly divisive Christology which kept the divine and the human in Christ so far apart as to end up with two Sons. On the other side lay the Eutychian danger of so merging the divine and the human in Christ as to efface their distinction. The right course, it would be then be said, lay between the two, and this the Church triumphantly found at Chalcedon.

The trouble with both these readings of the past is precisely the fact that they are readings *of the past*. Both are retrospective, though in a sense they pretend not to be.

There are clearly lines of continuity between the Logos theologies of the third century and the Arianism—or the Arianisms—of the fourth, but there are also lines of discontinuity. No less doughty a champion of emergent Nicene orthodoxy than Alexander of Alexandria had, after all, at the beginning of the controversy made the mistake of thinking that Arius and his friends did not take seriously enough the position of the Logos as a 'mediating nature' between the 'ingenerate Father and the things created by Him out of nothing'¹⁰. It is only when measured against the same standard—belief in the consubstantiality of the Son—that the

similarity between the Logos theologies of the third century and the Arianism of the fourth becomes so apparent. It is only in looking back that the lines of continuity stand out.

There is a similar problem with the Scylla and Charybdis view of the Christological controversies. In dealing with any complex doctrinal problem it will make some sense to speak of opposing dangers. And from the vantage point of Chalcedonian orthodoxy it makes some sense to contrast a Nestorian right with a Eutychian or Monophysite left. But it is only from such a previously chosen position that they can be seen as *balanced* extremes. If we were, however, operating from the standpoint of Severan Monophysitism, it would make just as good sense to speak of steering a middle course, only it would now be a middle course between radical Monophysites on the one side and diphysites on the other—between, say, heretical Julianists on the left and heretical Chalcedonians on the right. The extremes between which the dogmatic ship must sail are never clear, only the extremes between which it is in fact sailing.

And yet both the Scylla and Charybdis model and the acorn and oak model would appear to *claim* to have some predictive power. Both present themselves not just as descriptions of what has happened to transpire in the past but as at least partial analyses of the course of doctrinal development. They appear to be able to declare ahead of time who is right and who is wrong. They masquerade as general maxims, like ‘fast bowlers win Test matches’ or ‘horses for courses’, maxims which should, if we could apply them correctly, enable us to predict cricket results and keep in the black at the bookie’s. But in fact these models have no predictive power at all. If you had been at Nicaea in 325, knowledge of the acorn and oak theory would not have helped you get it right. If you had been at Chalcedon in 451, knowledge of the Scylla and Charybdis theory would not have helped you steer.

By the crucial year of 1845 Newman had come to reject all theories of development which claimed to have predictive power. In the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* there is room neither for acorns and oaks nor for Scylla and Charybdis.

The rejection of organic models is explicit. Vincent of Lerins, on whom the Anglican Newman had pinned such hopes, had himself appealed to the analogy of bodily growth.

Great is the difference between the flower of boyhood and the fulness of old age, but those who become old men are the same as those who had been youths ... The limbs of suckling children are small, those of young men are large, and yet they are the same.”

Newman cites a part of this passage in an important section of the *Essay*. Just before he introduces his seven tests of a true development, Newman concedes that ‘the most ready test is suggested by the analogy of physical growth’—the model of ‘unity in type’ which Vincent had in mind. But

examples from nature and from history suggest that in fact such a picture cannot account for the complexities of growth and change in an individual or in a group. 'Natural then as it is at first sight to suppose that an idea will always be the exact image of itself in all stages of its history, experience does not bear out the anticipation.'¹²

If there is no room in Newman's thought for acorns and oaks, there is in effect no room for Scylla and Charybdis either. But the problem did not present itself in quite those terms. And here we must go back to Vincent of Lerins.

The Vincentian Canon had been central to the theological structures which Newman and his Tractarian friends had hoped to erect. Thus the *Lectures on the Prophetical Office* of 1837 enthusiastically endorse the Rule or Canon ... expressed in the words of Vincentius, of Lerins, in his celebrated treatise upon the Tests of Heresy and Error; viz., that that is to be received as Apostolic which has been taught 'always, everywhere, and by all'.¹³

It is no accident that here, as so often, Newman misquotes Vincent, who actually urged that 'we hold that which has been believed *everywhere*, that which has been believed *always*, that which has been believed by all'¹⁴. Newman's version is a reflection of that privileging of antiquity—of the patristic past—which so strongly marked the evolution of his thought.

The works of the Fathers, then, comprised an authoritative, closed, and self-explanatory canon. It was this vision which inspired the *Library of the Fathers*. The first volume to appear in the series was Augustine's *Confessions* with a Preface by Pusey dated 24 August 1838. In it he appeals to 'Vincentius' invaluable rule' and is quite sanguine as to the feasibility of its application:

We have not received (as many now seem to think) a confused heap of opinions, expositions, doctrines, errors, which we are to unravel as we may, but a well-ordered body of truths, digested into its several compartments, and arranged, what was accepted, what undecided, what rejected, for those who wish to see ... They who will, will have no difficulty in ascertaining what Catholic Truth is. It is plain, well-defined, uniform, consistent.¹⁵

The second volume to appear was Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*. Its Preface, by Newman, was written only four weeks after Pusey's and is dated 21 September 1838. In it Newman is clearly troubled. The year before, in the *Prophetical Office*, he had conceded that the Vincentian Canon 'admits of easy evasion' by those who 'determine to be captious and take exceptions', for it 'is not of a mathematical or demonstrative character, but moral, and requires practical judgment and good sense to apply it'.¹⁶ But Cyril of Jerusalem was bound to be difficult for a man of Newman's Athanasian temper:

here was a Father whose work was of no little liturgical and apologetic importance to Newman and his friends but who did not actually say what on the theory he was meant to say.

And so Newman apologizes for the 'great practical inconveniences' to which his scheme for using the Fathers is exposed. No one of them is by himself infallible. The editors cannot publish them all at once, and the reader cannot read them all at once. In the interim, the editors of the series are in the uncomfortable position of being held responsible for every loose remark of every Father 'before it is known whether it will be, as it were, hidden by others, or completed, or explained, or modified, or unanimously attested'. All he can do is urge 'patience' and remind the reader in his 'perplexity'

of his duty to take his own Church for the present as his guide, and her decisions as a key and final arbiter, as regards the particular statements of the separate Fathers, which he may meet with; being fully confident, that her judgment which he begins by taking as a touchstone of each, will in the event be found to be really formed, as it ought to be, on a view of the testimony of all.¹⁷

'In the event' the theory itself was to fall apart. Early in the *Essay* Newman returns to Vincent's Canon. He now concludes that the Vincentian simply does not work: the actual historical data are too complex. When applied to the doctrines of purgatory and original sin, for example, it 'admits both or excludes both, according as it is or is not rigidly taken'.

It does not seem possible, then, to avoid the conclusion that, whatever be the proper key for harmonizing the records and documents of the early and later Church, and true as the dictum of Vincentius must be considered in the abstract, ... it is hardly available now or effective of any satisfactory result.

The solution it offers is as difficult as the original problem.¹⁸

With the fall of the Vincentian Canon, the whole grand scheme for in effect reconstructing a patristic Church from scratch collapsed as well.

There is another conclusion about the Vincentian which Newman offers in this section. He observes that 'the rule is more serviceable in determining what is not, than what is Christianity'¹⁹, which, ironically, had in fact been Vincent's intention all along. But even in this negative form its application would not prove to be easy. Lines of continuity and discontinuity are simply not that clear-cut.

This becomes apparent when, at the conclusion of his long discussion on 'Application of the First Test of Fidelity in Development', Newman turns to the Monophysites. It is for him a sensitive area. He responded warmly, emotionally as well as intellectually, to the great Alexandrian Christological tradition—to the theology of Athanasius and Cyril. And so that radical Alexandrian, the arch-heretic Eutyches, poses

a problem, for Eutyches

appealed for his doctrine to the Fathers generally, 'I have read the blessed Cyril, and the holy Fathers, and the holy Athanasius;' he says at Constantinople ...It is plain, even from what has been said, that there could be no *consensus* against him, as the word is now commonly understood ... Much might be said on the plausibility of the defence, which Eutyches might have made for his doctrine from the history and documents of the Church before his time.²⁰

And everything which could be said on that score was another nail in the coffin of that view of history which Newman had once propped up by appeal to the Vincentian Canon. He had realized that, had he been at the Home Synod of Constantinople in 448, he would have found it very difficult to tell who was right and who was wrong.

But Eutyches the heretic, neatly balanced against Nestorius like matched but opposing book-ends, provides the classic exemplification of the Scylla and Charybdis model. Newman's thought in the *Essay* has no more room for that model than it does for acorns and oaks.

What, then, is left? The *Essay* simply has no model of development. Newman does provide his seven tests, tests 'framed to distinguish between development and corruption'²¹, and their detailed, sometimes laboured, historical application occupies well over half the book. But they are at best gauges and measures of what has in fact happened. They provide no analysis of *how* it happened, no model to explain *why*; nor are they meant to. And in that often neglected fact lies the greatness of a very great book.

The course of the history of dogma cannot be predicted; schemata and models do not work. It is like all history, just one damn thing after another. And yet we, like Newman, are saved from a Henry Ford view of history by the belief that from *this* history truth emerges. Newman had, after all, first seen the 'ghost'—he had first had a vision of what was to come—when he had been so struck in the Long Vac. of 1839 by 'the palmary words of St. Augustine', *securus judicat orbis terrarum*²².

What, in such a world, is the function of heresy? It is of course true that that history which is the locus of truth is comprised by struggle; it just is a network of conflict. In that sense Socrates Scholasticus was right. And therefore the conflict which is always presupposed by appeal to the notion of heresy will not be functionless. But there is more to it than that.

Vincent of Lerins had contrasted 'a heavenly dogma, which it is enough to have revealed once and for all' with 'an earthly teaching, which cannot be perfected otherwise than by continual correction'²³. It would seem not unlikely that Newman had that passage in mind when he said, 'In a higher world it is otherwise; but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often'²⁴.

It is in this lower, changing world that doctrine itself grows and develops and changes. The paradigmatic cases for our two models of development were the Arian and Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. And yet to speak of them as separate controversies, unconnected with one another, is already to impose a false schematization. The two together somehow reflect a great shift in the perception of things, a radical refurbishment of the inner world in which the men and women of Late Antiquity lived. An older classical world of order and harmony had fallen apart, and in its place there emerged a new and more frightening world in which men and women felt lonely and estranged. The Logos theology of the second and third centuries no longer reassured. A new way was needed of speaking of God's presence in the world He had made. Arius and Athanasius, Nestorius and Cyril, Eutyches and Leo were all responding to a new problematic.

But the task was not easy. The Newman of 1843 had been inclined to think that the work of development was not in principle complex.

... Revelation itself has provided in Scripture the main outlines and also large details of the dogmatic system.

Inspiration has superseded the exercise of human Reason in great measure, and left it but the comparatively easy task of finishing the sacred work.²⁵

The Newman of the *Essay*, so preoccupied with the complexity of historical process, no longer exudes such facile optimism.

There is an apophaticism in all theology. Our words can only reach out to that which they seek, and we must ever make clear what we do not mean in order to glimpse that which we do mean.

There is also an apophaticism in all dogmatic development. Councils and the magisterium affirm by rejecting. What they affirm in positive terms can never exhaust what can appropriately be said.

The Chalcedonian Definition is true: that affirmation is one of the things which must count as Catholic teaching. But a Catholic is not obliged to *use* the Chalcedonian language of two natures and one person: those terms may in another culture be meaningless or misleading. What a Catholic is obliged to do is to confess that that language is appropriate as used by the Council. And what they meant is only made clear by what they rejected.

Nicaea affirmed that the Son is 'begotten, not made'. The phrase could be (and of course was) understood in different senses. So its meaning is cashed by the appended anathemas: what it *cannot* mean is that 'He came to be from that which is not' or that 'He is from another hypostasis or substance'.

In the nature of the theological task, it must be by indirection that we find direction out. In that complex web of conflict which is the historical life of the Church, the running is made by those who care and those who see—those who can read the signs of the times—, men like

Arius and Athanasius, Nestorius and Cyril, Eutyches and Leo. And in that web of conflict, the heretics are those who lose. Indeed, the function of heresy is to lose. The function, the vocation, of heretics is to suffer defeat, that, through the failure of their attempts to speak, the words of others might find meaning. And if a significant heresy is never really silenced, but rather cries out again and again in the course of the Church's history, that is simply a confirmation of the fact that the theological task, like any game worth playing, never really ends. Socrates Scholasticus will never get his wish.

- 1 John Henry Newman, *Sermons, Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief, Preached before the University of Oxford* (London, 1843), p. 327.
- 2 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I. xxviii. 1 (= I, 219 Harvey) and III. xxiv. 2 (= II, 1 Harvey).
- 3 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I. x. 2 (= I, 92–94 Harvey) and III. Praef. (= II, 1 Harvey).
- 4 Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VII. 48 (= P.G. 67, 841).
- 5 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V. 14 (the particular reference here is to Montanism).
- 6 Newman, (*University*) *Sermons*, pp. 318–319.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 316.
- 8 Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. tr. Robert A. Kraft et al. (London, 1972). The first German edition appeared in 1934.
- 9 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*. Vol I, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago, 1971), p. 70.
- 10 Letter of Alexander of Alexandria to Alexander of Byzantium 44 (= *Urkunde* 14 Opitz). Williams must be right in dating this document early in the dispute—that is, around 321/2—rather than to 324 as Opitz does: see Rowan Williams, *Arius, Heresy and Tradition* (London, 1987), p. 58.
- 11 Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* xxiii (29).
- 12 John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1845), pp. 58, 62.
- 13 John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church, Viewed Relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism* (London, 1837), p. 63.
- 14 Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* ii (3); note also the order in xxvii (38).
- 15 *The Confessions of S. Augustine*, ed. from a former translation by E.B. Pusey, *Library of Fathers* I (Oxford, 1838), pp. viii, xiii.
- 16 Newman, *Prophetic Office*, pp. 68, 69.
- 17 *The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem, Library of Fathers* II, pp. x — xi.
- 18 Newman, *Essay on Development*, pp. 17, 24.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 22 John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua, Being a History of His Religious Opinions*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford, 1967), pp. 110–111.
- 23 Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* xxi (26).
- 24 Newman, *Essay on Development*, p. 39.
- 25 Newman, (*University*) *Sermons*, p. 336.