

## **Development of doctrine**

Newman tried to show that there was a logic to the way Roman doctrine had developed, and that as a consequence those who did not take part in that development (Orthodox and protestants, including Anglicans) were at best sterile. He wrote before the Vatican 1 declaration of papal infallibility but made few changes as a result of it – for he saw infallibility (as actually then defined) as continuing to be a “remora” - a checking system and not a source of new ideas.

His argument, good or bad, seems now to be used by various “progressives” to legitimise any change by calling it a development. That was certainly not Newman's intention.

We should recognise that Newman was to this extent right – there had been development. He was also right to attempt to find criteria for valid development, which he calls “notes”. See later.

Newman was criticised by various writers. Many Roman authors denied that there had been any development – that in matters of doctrine nothing had changed since the Apostles. Mozley had several destructive criticisms. Newman had given wholly inadequate consideration to the problem of corruption; after a time, legitimate development often turns into error. Some of the developments were absurd. Newman suggested that the Arian attribution of all but divine honours to the Son had demonstrated a space for the attribution of such honours to Mary. Mozley countered that the Arians were simply wrong and their contrivance led nowhere. It was simply false to say that the Orthodox were sterile without the papacy; their missionary success, and their many saints which Rome had accepted as such at the Council of Florence, proved this (whatever might be said about Anglicanism). Mozley is also able to quote the Roman criticisms, which served the useful polemical point that if the papacy was defended in two incompatible ways, both of the ways could not be true and this confusion served to weaken papal claims. Moreover, both ways devalued historical evidence. Mozley challenged the role of logic in these matters. Every early heretic was a logician, and a case based on logic requires first perfect premises and second perfect logicians, neither of which is available. How did an “idea” (which Newman did not expound) turn into an institution? Mozley showed sufficient defects in Newman's case to dissuade most from going over to Rome.

Yet a theory of development there must be. Not least because the promise is that the Spirit will guide the Church into all truth, which suggests a process over time rather than an instant gift.

Now the starting point is this. “Who do you say that I am?” Peter did not and could not have answered by reciting the Chalcedonian Definition (to use that as a convenient summary of the developed doctrine of the Incarnation). If he had, he could not have understood what he said, and, be it said with due reverence, neither could Christ in his perfectly human nature have understood it. Both of them had the mental equipment of Galilean Jews, not late Greek philosopher-theologians who treated the entire New Testament corpus as authoritative. Peter's actual answer was true (as near as he could get it) and accordingly accepted, albeit given greater precision, by Christ.

I am not aware that prophecy generated doctrine at any stage in the early Church. Hermas claims to be a prophet; the core of the prophecy is a new last chance for repentance, which is hardly a new teaching. Tertullian believes that prophecy is a reality in his congregation (as well as among the Phrygian Montanists) but does not claim prophetic authority for his teaching. I am not aware that any orthodox teachers claimed that they ought to be believed because they were guided by the Spirit in some way different from the whole body of Christians, individually or, more importantly, collectively. Such claims are more typical of false teachers such as the gnostics.

What is the actual process of doctrinal formation in the early church? Remember that for some time the New Testament books either did not exist or were not given the same authority as the Septuagint version of the Jewish books (the Hebrew text was little known or respected in the Church). The process might be characterised as repeated periods of exploration (with regard to such writings as were accepted) followed by critical reflection. As a result of the reflection, many books of the Fathers came to be retained but read with a degree of caution and awareness of subsequent criticism. It was not until a late period that “heresy” was made retroactive, Christians who had died in the peace of the church were condemned and their books suppressed (with more or less success).

This pattern of exploration and reflection, if well carried out, leads to increasing precision and so decreasing scope for genuinely new insights within the area of doctrine or discipline concerned. We might call it development in recognition of doctrine. This assumes that no wholly new topic arises.

But it is now highly unlikely that any concerning matter has not been so explored already. No new revelation was needed to confront slavery or apartheid, only the recovery of well-established teaching. There is ample past doctrine concerning our duties towards the environment, or the limits of sexual conduct; that some dislike the latter proves nothing. It is well established that women can be martyrs, mystics, doctors of the Church or spiritual guides; even Tertullian, widely thought a misogynist, accepted they could baptise and did in some instances prophecy; but it was never imagined that the threefold ministry was open to them. (That said, we may accept that the matter was often treated as so obvious that it was badly argued.)

There is no easily detected point at which we can declare the delivery and recognition of doctrine is finished. The Spirit did not make a declaration that “all truth” had now been delivered. What we can say is that the law of diminishing returns applies, and so developments become less significant. The work of the Spirit in recalling the Church to all truth never ceases, however. The Spirit is sovereign, and the problems faced by the Church do change. So we cannot preclude a wholly new topic. But God is self-consistent and does not change his mind, so very often the new problem can be tackled by analogy rather than by revelation. The bar for a wholly new revelation is set very high.

Can we define a finishing point even though the Spirit has not done so? This was one of Newman's more telling points: we do not know when to stop so are driven to accept development even now.

Let us consider some possibilities. We cannot succeed in being pre-Pauline Christians, because we do not know enough. Or Pauline Christians (and Paul would dissuade us!) I doubt anybody wants to be part of a congregation based solely on the Didache, which might seem a comprehensive manual. If we try to be “New Testament Christians”, we have in effect committed ourselves to being fourth century Christians, since they were the first to accept the corpus of books as a totality and to use it systematically in doctrinal argument, and, to some extent, as a regulatory authority. But if so, then we must also accept such other developments as the monarchical episcopate, the cult of martyrs, and the possibility of forgiving all sins, even the gravest. And possibly some role of the State in church matters. The Church of the fourth century is also the earliest period for which we have enough evidence for an approximate reconstruction. But by then the Church had lost its first love. In practice, many Anglicans and Orthodox go even later, until the close (itself variously defined) of the period of the Ecumenical Councils. This is to entrench the role of the State even further.

The reformation is not on the whole a matter of new doctrine or discipline. To study Anglican sources: the 39 Articles affirm the Trinity and Incarnation in conventional terms; on justification and election they are Augustinian, so recursive but hardly innovative (and recent scholarship has found little difference in this area between the Council of Trent and various Protestant confessions); the vernacular liturgy and communion in both kinds are indeed a return to ancient practice; the Romish innovations denounced are simply that. “Sola scriptura” is more a slogan which many parroted than a policy which anybody was able to bring into practice (and the various attempts were inconsistent). If there is new doctrine in the “reformed” Church of England, it is the absolute royal supremacy over both church and state, which nobody outside England (and few in it) now believes.

We stop, in practice, because the facts stop. Recognition is complete. We find change reducing to ever more minute analysis of existing doctrinal texts, or, mainly in the West, we encounter entirely fresh ideas with no ancient pedigree. The Anglican appeal to history against purgatory and the treasury of merits, against Aristotelian transubstantiation, against papal infallibility, and against the enforcing of new Marian dogma is simply true. Some aspects of some of these topics may be innocent speculations, but they are not to be enforced as the doctrine of the Church.

The better aspects of the Roman changes of the last century were attempts (not always well founded) to return to the earlier Church. To that extent, these were not innovation. But such a programme implies that beliefs and practices of the antecedent period were, to say the least, unbalanced. If so, then it is implied that doctrine (or practice) had developed in a somewhat

corrupted manner. If the guidance of the Spirit is claimed for the correction, then it has to be asked whether the Spirit had previously been negligent (which is obviously unacceptable), or the Church mistaken. Neither explanation fits well with Newman's implied theory of development as a mono-directional improvement. Note that changes began long before Vatican 2, and the changes after it were often not mandated by it; a special guidance of the Spirit for large-scale (but not ecumenical!) councils, even if there were evidence for it, is not enough to justify what actually happened.

Newman allowed that there might be corruptions (but said little about them), and offered seven “notes” of genuine development. I attach his list with very brief comments, for this is not a review of Newman but an attempt to understand where we are as Christians..

1. Preservation of type. We should accept this.
2. Continuity of principles. We should accept this, but I add cautions below.
3. Power of Assimilation. Very dubious. Easily lets error enter.
4. Logical sequence. Mozley's critique (above) applies – we do not have the tools.
5. Anticipation of its future. But what when that future is corruption?
6. Conservative action upon its past. Harmless – but Newman only sketched it anyway.
7. Chronic vigour. Implausible – apply the test to vigorous decline after Vatican 2!

It should be recognised that in admitting development we agree (in some cases only) with Newman “that, from the first age of Christianity. Its teaching looked forward towards those ecclesiastical dogmas, afterwards recognized and defined, with (as time went on) more or less determinate advance in their direction” (Chapter 4.1.1). Indeed, the quotation goes on to talk of the “teaching which had so terminated” as if development had (on that topic) ceased. This is perhaps inconsistent with his view that development is still open, and also with his later verbal acceptance, not in the Essay itself, of the normal Roman posture that there had been no development since the Apostles.

Newman also made a shrewd point that “no doctrine is defined until it is violated” (Chapter 4.3.4). It is fair to say that much was taken for granted in the early Church, and so we do not hear about it. But the reaction when we do hear about it is sometimes telling!

Part of the problem with Newman, particularly in relation to the papacy, is his belief in “a monarchical principle in the Divine Scheme” (Chapter 4.3.7). We are indeed at hazard of underrating the Kingship of God; but it is not easily shown that therefore only absolute monarchy (not “parliamentary sovereignty”) is the proper earthly structure, both in state and church!

The difficulty with “continuity of principles” is that, in Newman's terms, these are less clear cut than doctrines. It is hard to legitimise a development by an appeal to what is more obscure.

In so far as doctrine has been tested, and has become established, we don't need papal infallibility to decide the matter (though a papal confirmation that this had happened would obviously be harmless and might reassure some people). It is enough to study the facts (the basis, the arguments, the practical recognition in the Church). We should notice that various matters have become definite in different ways. The canon of the New Testament was accepted informally (and over a long time). Similarly the threefold ministry (much more quickly). The date of Easter had in the end a conciliar decision according to Athanasius, but is still not in practice agreed between East and West. The great doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation were beliefs of the Church given formulation in councils later called ecumenical (but most councils of the conciliar period erred!). Liturgy was not anciently written by any central authority, though it came to be regulated (at patriarchal level).

Given this diversity, the frequent Anglican appeal to “quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus” has some force, but Newman was right to point out that it is not a total solution. While this test often gives clear results (positive or negative), it sometimes does not. For instance, Augustine's own doctrine of the Trinity, let alone of predestination, does not pass the test. Should this be concerning? We do not always need to know the answers! Indeed, Newman pointed out that a doctrine might be disputed for centuries before a papal decision, so even his version of the development of doctrine does not promise to validate everything at once. A topic may remain doubtful for centuries.

Anglicans also recognise, from Bishop Butler, that “probability is the guide of life”. God will not punish us for following in good faith doctrine or practice for which there is a solid case, even if ultimately it is probably wrong. As to whether there is a case, this is why historical research is an honourable vocation; few of us have the time or skill to do it for ourselves, but we can honestly take on trust what has been published and has survived criticism. While a disputed topic is actively being tested, then authority in the church might well need to regulate the process. But not to reach a premature conclusion, still less to make itself a judge (or creator!) of historical fact.

Anglican argumentation after Mozley tended to continue the anti-Roman themes (with reason). So there is less positive material in Gore than one might expect. He has of course to counter the nonsense which equates development with evolution and evolution with progress. In “Roman Catholic Claims” he makes a positive case for the historic “via media”, and Anglicanism as he sees it, as an approach of “the way of combination, the way of comprehension and synthesis”, rather than the easy simplifications (of both Rome and protestantism). The holding of truths together in the Athanasian Creed is an example of this approach. There is also a section in the “Reconstruction of Belief”. Gore's posture is that Christianity as Christ gave it to us is a Way; doctrine there must be and he accepts the classical doctrines (with some idiosyncrasy concerning Christ's self-emptying). But doctrine was not primary and its multiplication is not the purpose of Christianity. The early Church had room for speculation and disagreement (within limits). Gore asserts that “any development in the doctrine or practice of the Church which narrows it, so that it is no longer a home for men of goodwill who in its earlier days would readily have found a home in it, is thereby marked as a spurious development.” Gore rightly warns that development (which constantly happens anyway) does not necessarily mean progress; but given the fact of a changing world, the Church “must ask for the maximum of positive mobility that is compatible with real continuity”. This is not achieved (he is thinking particularly in a missionary context) by accumulating “infallible” and so irreformable doctrines and disciplines. The essential restraint on development is the test that “what it asserts shall be really found implicit at least in Scripture – especially of course in the New Testament.” This is obviously consistent with Article 20 and so authentically Anglican.

(I make my usual protest against “real” and “really” used without a precisely stated antithesis. But Gore antedates the philosophy of language.)

While it is a lesser error to make out that Christianity came into the world as a Way, as Gore does, (not an “Idea” as in Newman), surely the point of both covenants is that they came into the world as neither Way nor Idea, but as Event. An event cannot develop after it has happened, though its understanding can. The important truth of the events of both covenants is that they carry with them both ways of life and meanings. These have to be recognised, which takes time, but if the idea of diminishing returns has any validity then substantial completion has long ago been achieved. It remains to apply these insights in changing circumstances, avoiding corruptions.

The basic fault in Newman is the belief that God must make certainty available at all times on all topics. Since only Rome claims to have access to that certainty, there is no available alternative (other than despair). So he made his submission (and in consequence never properly completed the Essay). What was less than plausible in 1845 is, given present discontents in Rome, incredible now. The better posture is that it is wrong to tell God what he must have done or, worse, what he ought to have done; God gives us enough; faith is with reason, indeed, but is not logical certainty. Better revert to “Lead, kindly light”.