

Development of Doctrine: Smokescreen or Explanation?¹

by Nicholas Lash

'The problem of orders must be looked at . . . facing squarely the question whether the new situation calls for a new policy in the Catholic Church. This policy would include a careful determination of the arguments behind the Bull *Apostolicae Curae* and a candid judgment whether the development of doctrine has superseded the theological assumptions of 1896.'² That statement was followed, a week later, by a letter in *The Tablet* from Fr Edward Quinn: 'May one express the hope, in good time, that this really will be a candid judgment . . . if a new investigation shows that the assumptions have been superseded, let it also be clearly admitted that the decision was mistaken. Even if the Bull was not infallible, Pope Leo XIII declared in the most forceful terms that Anglican Orders were null and void, and followed this up by a letter stating that the decision was irrevocable. Development of doctrine cannot mean that one statement was true in 1896 and its opposite true in 1980 or whenever we come to revise our former conclusions.'³ The following week, Bishop Clark, Roman Catholic Co-Chairman of the International Commission, wrote: 'Fr Quinn touches the nerve of this discussion when he seeks to clarify the relationship of *Apostolicae Curae* to a development of doctrine. What, however, has guided the thinking of the commission is the principle that any development in doctrine must be consistent with its past.'⁴

In spite of the very general title of this paper, my aim is extremely restricted. I do not propose to discuss past or present theories of doctrinal development, nor the relationship between notions of 'development' and related notions such as 'progress', 'growth' or 'evolution'. Although I shall be obliged to touch on it at one point, I do not propose to discuss in detail the problem of the normative status to be accorded to the New Testament witness and to subsequent moments in the doctrinal history of the Church. So far as possible, I want to stay with the one small, but not I think unimportant, aspect of the problem which is indicated by that correspondence in *The Tablet*.

This aspect of the problem can be provisionally sketched as

¹A paper read to the 'D' Society, Cambridge, 30th October, 1970. Since the purpose of this paper was, and is, to stimulate discussion, no attempt has been made to provide it with detailed references to recent studies of the history of dogma and of the nature of dogmatic statements.

²Extract from the statement issued by the Church of England's Council of Foreign Relations, on the September, 1970, meeting of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. Quoted from *The Tablet*, 3rd October, 1970, p. 966.

³*The Tablet*, 10th October, 1970, pp. 981-982.

⁴*The Tablet*, 17th October, 1970, p. 1006.

follows. Bishop Clark's principle that 'any development in doctrine must be consistent with its past' is presumably grounded in the conviction that our trust in God's providential guidance of his Church enables us derivatively to trust that, at least in those situations in which the Church has, consciously and deliberately, committed itself to a solemn profession of its faith, then the content of that confession of faith is true. True at least in the sense that it is not false, and that, therefore, whatever modification, clarification or peripheral revision it may need to undergo, it may never be formally reversed or retracted.

Fr Quinn's letter, on the other hand, expresses a widespread suspicion that appeals to 'development' of doctrine may sometimes serve as a smokescreen under cover of which significant changes or even reversals of doctrine can take place without loss of face, or apparent loss of consistency with the past.

Bishop Clark is convinced that, at least in so far as important decisions on important issues are concerned, the judgment of the Church can never have been simply wrong. Fr Quinn seems to imply that the Church may well have been wrong, on quite important issues, and that it is high time that we came out into the open and said so.

Irrevocability: a limited claim

Many individuals and most institutions dislike admitting that they have made serious mistakes. I suppose that England is governed as much by civil servants as by politicians. The civil servants can avoid the ignominy of public confession, because the reigning politicians can adopt the convenient device of blaming the crass stupidity, or worse, of the previous government. The government of the Church of Rome has no such convenient device available, because neither the hierarchy nor the Roman Curia are elected at five-year intervals. So, let me—as Newman would say—make 'a large admission' that human pride plays a considerable part in the tendency of Roman Catholic theology to claim that there has been 'development' in many instances where there has in fact, quite obviously, been change. Nevertheless, even the most generous admission of this sort does not cause the problem that I sketched simply to evaporate.

According to Professor Maurice Wiles: 'The most obvious of all divisions concerning the notion of doctrinal development in the life of the Church lies between those who consider all such development as has received the accredited sanction of the Church to be wholly true and those who believe it to include an element of error.'¹ That statement simply will not do. In the first place, the phrase 'accredited sanction of the Church' is far too imprecise to be

¹Wiles, M., *The Making of Christian Doctrine: a Study in the principles of early Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 2.

illuminating. In the second place, traditional Roman Catholic theology has never claimed that even credal formulae or dogmatic definitions are 'wholly true', but simply that they are true—that is: not false. This is the significance, for instance, of the insistence, in modern times, that it is the negatively formulated canons attached to conciliar definitions to which infallibility is ascribed, rather than to the positive formulations of the conciliar decrees themselves. As Bishop Butler has put it: '. . . the only thing—on Roman Catholic principles—that we can be quite sure of is that God will not allow the Church to make an irreparable, catastrophic mistake . . . the only thing we can be quite sure about with regard to an ecumenical council is that it will not issue a definition of doctrine that is false. Short of that, any council can be a most appalling disaster in the life of the Church.'¹

It would be a mistake to isolate too sharply credal formulae or dogmatic definitions from the wider circle of teaching, theology, worship and practice in the Church. Nevertheless, they do represent, as it were, the focus of that circle. My reason for restricting my remarks, from now on, to such formulae or definitions is that in respect of them alone does Roman Catholic theology seem to be committed, in principle, to the use of such terms as 'irrevocable', 'irreformable', and so on.²

The Creed and the New Testament

I said at the beginning that I was not going to concentrate on the problem of the extent to which the attribution of permanent normative significance to the New Testament witness is compatible with the claim that some subsequent affirmations of faith in the history of the Church are also, in some sense, permanently normative for theology and for belief. It is, however, necessary to indicate those features of this problem which bear most directly on the problem of dogmatic statements.

Whatever normative significance is to be attributed to credal or dogmatic statements, such statements are, I take it, regarded as subordinate to the New Testament witness. They do not *add* to that witness, much less *replace* it. Therefore it seems to me clear that they are to be interpreted in the light of the New Testament, and that they may, if you like, be questioned in the name of the New Testament. Now, this relationship of subordination is sometimes expressed by saying that creeds and dogmas are to be seen as authoritative interpretations of the New Testament. This way of putting things has much to commend it but, simply as a matter of history, it seems to be highly metaphorical and ambiguous. So far as I know, the

¹Butler, B. C., *Vatican II: an interfaith appraisal*, ed. John H. Miller (Notre Dame, 1966), p. 91.

²By thus restricting the concerns of the paper, nothing that follows is *directly* relevant to the problems of Anglican *Orders* with which, as a topical illustration of the wider problem, it began. Even the most enthusiastic defenders of *Apostolicae Curae* have not usually maintained that it constitutes a dogmatic definition or an article of the creed.

Fathers of Nicaea did not regard themselves primarily as exegetes, as literary critics interpreting a text, nor does Pius XII seem to have so regarded himself when he issued the dogmatic definition of the Assumption. It would seem to be more correct to say that Church Councils or Popes, in drawing up credal or dogmatic statements, saw their function as that of articulating, in their day, in a manner appropriate to the cultural and linguistic context in which they lived, that faith to which the New Testament writings are the privileged, because original, witness.

I say 'privileged, because original' simply in order to suggest that, however much we insist on the subordinate status of credal and dogmatic statements in respect of the New Testament, the problem of canonicity is not a problem of the past. However unique and irreplaceable the original witness, *because original*, the line of demarcation between 'inspired writing' and subsequent Christian confession is slightly fuzzy.

My reason for making this point is that it does seem that there are certain features common to whatever degree of irreformability and irrevocability we wish to ascribe to credal and dogmatic statements, on the one hand, and whatever degree of irreformability and irrevocability we wish to ascribe to the New Testament, on the other.

History of creed and dogma

That was something of a detour. Now let me return to the main road by asking the question: is not the ascription of irrevocability to credal and dogmatic formulae a despairing attempt to immunize certain human statements from the corrosive influence of cultural change and historical relativity? Adequately to answer that question would take far more time than I have at my disposal. In the remainder of this paper, I simply want to indicate what seem to me to be some of the factors which would need to be taken into consideration before it could be adequately answered.

I have consistently used the phrase 'credal and dogmatic formulae' because the two terms 'credal' and 'dogmatic' indicate two quite distinct sets of criteria according to which doctrinal propositions have been held to be of enduring significance. (This is not to say that they necessarily refer to two distinct sets of propositions.) At this point I would like, very briefly, to indicate the historical reasons why I believe this to be the case.

In the patristic period creeds served a variety of functions: liturgical (that is, doxological); didactic, and—increasingly—interpretative (in reaction against heresy).

In the Middle Ages, the creed could be referred to as the 'article' or 'joint' of faith (and, eventually, the individual propositions of the creed came to be referred to as 'articles', in the plural) because to it, as to a centre or lynch-pin, all other Church teaching was to be referred. In other words, the 'articles of faith' were distinguished

from other doctrinal statements according to the centrality of their content in the Christian mystery as a whole.

Although any Christian creed includes an element of straightforward historical description (e.g. 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'), most of the statements in the creed include an element of religious description or interpretation (e.g. 'who for us men and for our salvation . . .'). Moreover, the creed is a liturgical formula and, in the early Church, its dominant function was confessional and doxological. Description (both anamnetic and prophetic) was at the service of confession: of the praise of God. In the Middle Ages, the emphasis shifted. The doxological nature of the creed was more or less lost sight of, and attention was focussed on its descriptive function. So much so that one recent Roman Catholic writer can say that Luther 'rediscovered the confessional and doxological function of the creed'.¹

I shall return later to the distinction between 'doxology' and 'description'. For the moment, it is sufficient to point out that some theological statements, when used in a context of religious praise and worship, are 'interpersonal' statements, even though 'Neither the "I" of the worshipper nor his act of worshipping is explicitly mentioned in the words of the doxology'.² On the other hand, many of these same statements may also be used 'in the third person', simply as 'impersonal' claims concerning what is the case about God, man, and history.

Alongside the shift from the primarily doxological to the primarily descriptive went an increasing tendency to multiply interpretative statements in reaction against heresy. The outcome of this process was that whereas, in the Middle Ages, to say that a proposition was 'de fide' was to say that it expressed a central feature of the Christian mystery as understood in the Church, by the post-Reformation period the qualification 'de fide' referred, in the Roman Catholic tradition, not to the centrality of the content, but to the degree of solemnity, authority or certainty with which a proposition had been proposed for belief by the appropriate authority.

Finally, to round off this new chapter of '1066 and All That', the notion of 'dogma . . . in its present meaning only dates from the end of the eighteenth century'³ and, as late as 1856, Pius IX was still using it to refer, very broadly, to religious and philosophical opinion.⁴

Dogmatic statements: doxology or description?

The position, therefore, seems to be something like this. Roman

¹Concilium General Secretariat (eds), 'The Creed in the Melting-Pot', *Concilium*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (January, 1970), p. 137.

²Schlink, E., 'The Structure of Dogmatic Statements as an Ecumenical Problem', *The Coming Christ and the Coming Church* (London, 1967), p. 22.

³Kasper, W., 'The Relationship between Gospel and Dogma: an historical approach', *Concilium*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (January, 1967), p. 74.

⁴Cf. McGrath, M. G., *The Vatican Council's Teaching on the Evolution of Dogma* (Rome, 1953), p. 79.

Catholic theology ascribes irrevocability, irreformability, to dogmatic statements. It is a commonplace in contemporary theology to point out that this ascription is not intended as the canonization of terms or statements, but as an affirmation of the enduring significance and subordinately normative status of certain propositions. Which propositions, and what sort of propositions are they?

The first question—which propositions?—cannot be answered until Catholic theology makes up its mind whether its criterion for classifying a given proposition as a ‘dogmatic statement’ is its centrality in the Christian mystery as a whole (as Vatican II’s use of the notion of a ‘hierarchy of truths’ would seem to indicate), or whether that criterion is the authoritativeness with which a particular proposition has been proposed for belief. Underlying that dilemma would seem to be the further question: is it possible to ascribe to ‘authoritative interpretations’ of doctrine (however appropriate or necessary they may have been in a particular situation) the qualities of permanence and enduring significance in the same sense in which those qualities were, for many centuries, primarily ascribed to the credal articulation of the central features of Christian belief?

By asking the second question—what *sort* of propositions could be candidates for irrevocability and irreformability?—I mean to point to the problem of the relationship between the different forms of credal or dogmatic propositions, and the concept or concepts of truth severally appropriate to such propositions. For instance, even if it were agreed that some credal statements are ‘poetic’ or ‘mythical’ in character, others undoubtedly embody historical claims of a fairly straightforward kind. I do not see how any affirmation by the Church concerning historical facts can be immune from testing according to accepted principles of historiography. (That statement is too crude. The problem of assessing the evidence for historical facts of religious significance is notoriously complex. But I shall have to let it pass.) Some doctrines for which dogmatic status is claimed by Roman Catholics do seem, at first sight, to embody indefensible historical claims. As Austin Farrer put it, in a characteristically lively essay, in the two decrees which dogmatized the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption ‘we have the alarming appearance of an infallible fact-factory going full blast’.¹

I suggest, however, that the history of doctrine forces us to distinguish, on the one hand, between the doxological and descriptive functions of dogmatic statements and, on the other hand, between straightforward historical claims and logically more complex eschatological affirmations. By doing so, it forces us to ask certain questions about the sense of each individual claimant to dogmatic status. For example, if Pope Pius XII had defined that ‘Mary, the

¹Farrer, A., ‘Infallibility and Historical Revelation’, *Infallibility in the Church: an Anglican-Catholic dialogue* (London, 1968), p. 23.

mother of Jesus, died' (a statement, by the way, which was deliberately excluded from the definition), then I should have been clear that the definition embodied, in a straightforward manner, an empirical, historical claim. I am not clear about this, nor—in the light of the first thousand years of Christian doctrinal history—am I clear that the definition of the Assumption, or of papal infallibility, have any title to dogmatic status unless they may be regarded as primarily confessional, doxological statements, expressing the Church's trust in God: that he has not allowed the redemptive work of his Son to be unfruitful, and that he will guide the holders of apostolic office in the Church in their task of preaching the gospel. I am not saying that these, or any other, dogmatic statements may be regarded *simply* as expressions of trust, of attitude, but that they are primarily to be so regarded, and that their descriptive function, however indispensable, is—in an important sense—subordinate.

In pressing this distinction, I do not mean to imply either that the notion of 'description' is simple or unproblematic, or that other ways of making a similar distinction may not have much to commend them. Some people might prefer to distinguish between 'interpersonal' and 'objective' uses of theological statements; but the notion of 'objectivity' seems to me to be almost irretrievably ambiguous. Others, presupposing a distinction between faith as an 'intellectual assent' and faith as a 'principle of action', might prefer to distinguish between the 'speculative' and 'practical' elements in the truth-claims embodied in theological statements; but in order to handle that distinction successfully one would be obliged (because of confusions generated in the Modernist crisis) to expand the discussion well beyond the confines of a short article. I would hope, therefore, that—for all its imperfections—the distinction, in the form in which I have cast it, may serve to highlight the basic point at issue: namely, why is it that the process of modifying, correcting, and terminologically revising certain classes of religious assertions cannot *simply* be described as 'changing' them?

Conclusion

There are many other questions that I would have liked to raise—especially questions concerning the extent to which shifts in Roman Catholic ecclesiology necessitate corresponding shifts in our estimation of such conciliar definitions and dogmatic statements as have been arrived at since the schism between East and West, and since the Reformation. But this paper is long enough already.

To conclude, I would like to tie back the general drift of my remarks concerning dogmatic statements to the problem with which I began. I granted, at the beginning, that the suspicion that the concept of 'development' was sometimes used as a smoke-screen was probably justified. But I said that even such an admission would not cause the problem to evaporate.

When a person makes a straightforward empirical or factual claim, then the emergence of fresh evidence, or the recognition that the evidence has been misinterpreted, may demand the admission: I'm sorry; I was wrong.

I have tried to suggest, however, that there is a good case to be made out for saying that dogmatic statements are not exclusively, or even primarily, factual, empirical assertions. They not only embody more complex descriptive claims, but also they are, fundamentally, acts of praise, of worship, of trust. If this is the situation, then the invitation simply to admit that one was wrong would seem to be an invitation to admit that the trust in question was unfounded. As I suggested earlier, the descriptive function of dogmatic statements—whether it consists of straightforward historical assertion, or of more complex eschatological affirmation—is *at the service* of the confessional, doxological function. Before we can adequately answer the question: 'Is such-and-such a dogmatic statement true?', we need to discover the type of statement, and therefore the type of truth, which is under discussion.¹ Statements of praise, or trust, appeal directly to the truthfulness of the one in whom we trust, and not merely to the truth of claims concerning the ground of that trust.

Dogmatic statements may be inept, misleading, or such as to lead to undesirable practical consequences. In so far as they are judged to be defective in these or similar ways, they need to be changed. But, in so far as they may be regarded as embodying a valuable aspect of the Church's trust in God, an embodiment in the expression of which his providential grace was not inoperative, then, however drastic the terminological or conceptual revision to which they are submitted, the motive for this revision, this change, is not adequately expressed by saying that we now regard them to be false. In the last resort, the notion of truth to which one is appealing when making the claim that dogmatic statements are perennially true is not simply that notion correlative to their descriptive function, but also, and more fundamentally, the truthfulness, the fidelity of God. And this is not so very odd, because I take it that something similar is the case when we appeal to the perennial truth of the New Testament.

¹On 25th March, 1905, Von Hügel wrote to Blondel: 'Certainly if it is a matter of defined doctrines, never could they cease to be true for the believer in a very real sense of the word. But in the history of dogma we see modifications in the interpretation of the category to which such and such a doctrine belongs. This truly seems to lead to the conclusion that while it is impossible for *all* the "facts" of Christianity not at all to be also facts of a full and ordinary historicity, *one or another*, may in time be discovered to be *not less true than formerly but of another type of truth*'. It may be worth pointing out that two of the doctrines which Von Hügel had in mind were the Resurrection and the Virgin Birth. Cf. Heaney, J. J., *The Modernist Crisis: von Hügel* (Washington, 1968), p. 106.