

IS DEBATE OVER DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

A DEAD DUCK?

H. F. WOODHOUSE

In this article I return to a theme on which I wrote almost a decade ago in an essay entitled 'The Holy Spirit, Authority and Doctrinal Development'.¹ Later on I shall refer to points in the essay to illustrate my two main points in this article, (i) that doctrinal development is less a controversial matter than it was, (ii) that we can, I believe, bypass it if we pay proper heed to the more basic issues of pneumatology and of authority.

So to my title. Those who like duck to eat are constantly disappointed for there is little meat on a duck. So it will be with this article but I hope the meat there is will be nourishing. I am rather concerned that the bones should be prominent.

The first reason I would suggest that the development of doctrine is becoming, if it has not already become, a dead duck is that the debate is not being carried forward much. After I had written the article to which I have referred I did a good bit of research on the situation and I found it was almost impossible to continue writing in any profitable way upon the topic. (I have seen little fresh or additional up to the present.) If I had written further over the last few years I would be repeating myself. Secondly, the most essential factor in development of doctrine, namely, the operation of the Holy Spirit, seems very difficult to discern. Criteria about development and how we could know that it was the Spirit who was acting and also for deciding on satisfactory tests of right and lawful development were varied. There was extreme difficulty in getting areas of agreement. This point has been brought out in my earlier essay and in some of Rahner's essays to which I referred there.²

Another reason I would advance for the diminishing controversy over development is that the situation is changing. I can expand this along a number of lines. First, Protestants are more ready to admit that there has been development. For example, Professor Wiles has strongly stressed that the extent of develop-

¹ See *Directions* ed. J. Hartin, K. Milne and H. F. Woodhouse. A.P.C.K. Dublin 1970. pp. 41-66.

² *Theological Investigations* vol I p. 41

ment has not been realised.³ But the realisation of development goes back further. G. D. Salmon, in the unabridged edition of 'The Infallibility of the Church' (1888) mentioned that when this specific idea of development had first been put forward by Protestants, Roman Catholics had lifted their hands in holy, or unholy horror.

Also, I think it has been realised that the concept of doctrine of development has had inherent limitations. For proof, I may refer to the writings of Nicholas Lash, who gives instances, illustrations and analogies. Development can only be an aid to historical understanding, not providing scientific theories capable of systematic and detailed application.⁴ If we accept this then the usefulness of a doctrine of development becomes more limited than was thought previously.

The next factor I would mention is the growth of pluralism in theological formulations.⁵ One general effect of this has been to seek the possibility of more comprehensiveness rather than to pursue a particular viewpoint in a controversial manner. We prefer to include material within a framework rather than to insist it pursue a dead straight narrow path. Lash describes this process as the 'collapse' of the 'assumption of cultural homogeneity'. (p. 133) I had mentioned earlier in my own essay that "Anglicans would accept a wide range of comprehensiveness with few obligatory doctrines and a great number of 'optional opinions' on theological matters. (p. 63) I need not expand the theme of pluralism further.

Rather I turn to the stress laid on the realisation of the historical circumstances influencing development. To realise this is to realise the full extent, variety and complexity of historical change! We shall also realise how historically conditioned all truth, even religious truth, is in actual fact.⁶

Another reason for the imminent if not the actual death of this doctrine is the idea of 'hierarchy of truths'. I do not feel that this has been adequately worked out yet but it is an important factor, some implications of it I had mentioned. (p. 65) I posed questions such as 'What doctrines do Christian bodies accept as legitimate or illegitimate developments? What about the implications of adjectives used in this connection?' How far were the causes non-theological factors?

Furthermore, difficulties concerning matters about development, namely, the role of authority of the magisterium and in-

³ *The Making of Doctrine* O.U.P. 1967 passim

⁴ e.g. *Change in Focus* Sheed & Ward 1973 pp. 144 ff

⁵ e.g. D. Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order*. N. Lash *Change in Focus* op. cit. pp. 133 and 136 chap. 14 passim. F. Schillebeeckx *The Understanding of Faith*.

⁶ Lash op. cit. pp. 59-64 passim and p. 67. J. Mackey *Tradition and Change in the Church* Gill 1968 p. 52 and B. Lonergan *Method in Theology* Darton 1971 pp. 305, 329.

fallibility loom large. In addition, can we decide what are essential doctrines and what are optional ones and by what criteria are we to be guided? It can be seen, I think, that many would be inclined to stress non-theological factors and an attitude of pluralism concerning questions in the last sentence so that it would be legitimate to speak of "the development of the doctrine of development". The changing environment and the change in our understanding of truth, brought out in Schillebeeckx's book I have mentioned, are potent factors. (Lash *op. cit.* p. 11 ff)

I may add some more reasons for the decreased importance of the controversy over development in doctrine. We are more aware of the difficulties of defining what we mean by development of doctrine, and also of suitable adjectives or analogies that we can use. Rahner and Walgrave's writings may be cited in this regard.⁷ I append one question. Hammans and Rahner both say that we cannot formulate a theory. That will only be possible 'when the development of dogma is completed and that means in full for us, never.'

Lastly I think it is being realised that we may err concerning how the Holy Spirit works and in our assertions that He has operated in certain decisions and actions. Newman had omitted this whole area in his famous 'Essay on Development'. Now it seems to me that there is more general acceptance of this possibility. 'There might be too luxuriant growth'.⁸ I repeat as a summary a quotation I have already used in my article:

The development of doctrine requires on the part of theologians abundant and fresh study of Holy Scripture in every generation; openness of mind to all new scientific knowledge that can be employed either to illustrate divine operations or to convey in intelligible terms the contents of supernatural revelation; careful study of the forms of thought and language which are developed by philosophers, in order that they may be enlisted in a more precise exhibition of theological truth; and a correct and appreciative understanding of the practical conditions, sociological problems, and ideals of the time, in order to be able effectively to teach living men in fundamental truth."⁹

In my article I have given more detail concerning our difficulty in framing suitable criteria and for deciding what are right developments, indeed, even the exact meaning of the word 'development'. I may cite, concerning some of the difficulties, an analogy used by the late A. M. Farrer concerning gospel criticism. I paraphrase

⁷ See Lash *op. cit.* who discusses this in various contexts and refers, amongst others to Rahner *op. cit.* and J. H. Walgrave *Unfolding Revelation*.

⁸ For expansion see Lash *op. cit.* pp. 145 ff.

⁹ F. J. Hall quoted in *Directions op. cit.* p. 64.

what he said to apply to development; certain questions were so interrelated that they reminded him of a group of tipsy revellers who were taking both sides of the street and were really supported because they lurched against each other, so that, if one collapsed, the whole group was in danger of collapse.

Today, in considering this whole issue of development, we have agreement on the fact of development, on its causes and methods but not on who or what decides what are correct and legitimate developments in doctrines.

Also today it may be said that disputed doctrinal issues now centre upon authority and infallibility rather than development. In this dispute we find one area where discussion occurs is within the Roman Church itself, a fact which may be hopeful in an era of pluralism. "Infallibility language" as Lash has said has 'got out of focus'. (p. 76) Thus mistakes in the past are now admitted by many theologians and it is realised that dogmatic statements need adjustment, explanations or interpretation or all of these things. (pp. 50, 95)

Lash seeks to be constructive in this situation. 'In order to indicate that approach to the problem of organising our Christian historical experience which is displacing a dominantly evolutionary view of doctrinal history, we have so far made use of such concepts as 'development by pruning' (Bevenot), 'multiple structurations' (Jossua). Gregory Baum prefers to speak of a 're-focusing of the Gospel'. (*op. cit.* p. 152)³ These changes Lash describes by the words 'change in perspective' and later considers different answers to the question 'What is a dogmatic statement?' (pp. 156 ff.)

Again, I quote Lash on the terminology and meanings of these since his words provide a convenient summary of the thrust of my article, the skeleton if you like.

'Not only has the terminology and meaning of dogmatic statements undergone considerable variation in the course of their history, but . . . the concept of 'dogma' itself has been the subject of flux and variation. A statement such as 'dogmas do not change' seems to mean little more than that, from the standpoint of Christian belief and a particular interpretation of the doctrine of divine providence, they remain permanent points of reference for Christian faith and inquiry. At the end of a careful examination of doctrinal development in the patristic period, Maurice Wiles asks: "If the continuity in the development of doctrine is not to be seen in a set of unchanging and unchangeable dogmas, where is it to be located?" A partial answer, at least, might be that it is seen in a continuity of fundamental aims'. (p. 176, quoting Wiles *op. cit.* pp. 171 ff.)

I have indicated, if I may change my metaphor, the state of

play concerning the controversy over the doctrine of development.

On re-reading this article, I find indeed that there is indeed little meat on the duck but that the bones are very obvious. If so, have we reached a stage where we may regard development as a non-issue because the duck is dead?

Readers, if they wish to investigate the references I have given, can check, and then proceed to give their answer to my question. If readers answer 'Yes' where do we go? What are the implications of the fact that the duck is dead? I suggest a re-examination of the nature of the Church's authority, of infallibility and of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

There are two very practical implications we might draw from my suggestions. If theologians agree that we cannot frame a doctrine of development or find criteria to decide what doctrinal developments are legitimate then can we neglect this matter as a divisive issue concerning denominations and concentrate on what I would maintain is the real theological issue dividing Christians—authority and its offspring—infalibility. This will not be a duck with little meat but will provide a feast. Dare I say that we shall enjoy a goose and a fat one!