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**Is Doctrinal Development New Revelation?  
An Analysis of Owen Chadwick's *From Bossuet to Newman***

**Introduction**

On All Saints Day 1945, former Anglican clergyman John Henry Newman was received into the Catholic Church. Before the end of November, he published *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* which described his theory of doctrinal development, which addressed his former intellectual problems with the Catholic Church and facilitated his conversion.

Owen Chadwick in his book, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development*, documents the changes in the attitude of the Catholic Church regarding the history of Christian doctrine beginning in the seventeenth century and leading up to the publishing of Newman's *Essay*. Chadwick begins by describing the static view of the history of doctrine used by Jacques-Benigne Bossuet in his arguments against Protestantism. He goes on to describe the various interpretations of the history of doctrine and other relevant ideas that existed in the two centuries leading up to Newman. These include the logical theory of the Spanish Jesuits, the rise of historical criticism, the English Latitudinarian theory of theological progress, and the evolutionary ideas coming out of the University of Tübingen. Chadwick then describes the process of Newman's conversion to Catholicism and the writing of his essay, followed by the

period of controversy resulting from his essay, not only among Protestants, but also in the Catholic Church.

Since Chadwick is an Anglican, and a professor at Cambridge University, I was expecting this book to be more of a critique of Newman's theory. Instead, it is really a work of theological history, and for the most part is very supportive of Newman, defending him from many of the criticisms that others made of him. There are only a handful of negative things said about Newman in this book, and most of those have to do with his personality or style of argument, but they are not critical of the substance of his argument. However, at the end of the book, in the last paragraph, after stating how important a contribution Newman made to Catholic theology, Chadwick asks the following: assuming revelation ended with the death of the last apostle, in what sense may it be asserted that these new doctrines which have developed are not new revelation?<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will provide a summary of the views of doctrinal history that preceded Newman's theory, followed by a summary Newman's theory and a description of how it was received in the Catholic Church. Finally, I will attempt to address Chadwick's question of how the development of doctrine is not new revelation. I will do this by looking at what seems to be Chadwick's conception of revelation and compare it to what Newman says in the *Essay*, as well as to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

### **Earlier Views of Doctrinal History**

Bossuet had two major works that were important weapons in Counter-Reformation apologetics. The *Exposition of the Catholic Doctrine* demonstrated how Catholic doctrine had

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1. Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman, The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), 195.

remained unchanged since the time of the Fathers. In contrast, his *History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches* documented all of the ways the Protestant churches had experienced variations of doctrine. Bossuet claimed that variation in doctrine was always a sign of error, and that the true Church had maintained unchanged the deposit of truth given it by the Apostles.<sup>2</sup> Bossuet lived at the time that critical historical scholars such as Mabillon of St. Maur were beginning to cast doubt upon traditional historical assumptions<sup>3</sup>, but Bossuet only made use of such critical techniques in his history of the Protestants because he was looking for variations to demonstrate heresy. In his history of the Catholic Church, “he was so much on the watch for unvariations that history was lost in dogmatic interpretation and a pattern was imposed.”<sup>4</sup> Bossuet’s explanation of the process of dogmatic definition was that the Church is clarifying a doctrine that it already knew. It is a process of stating doctrine in such a way that heresy is opposed.<sup>5</sup>

In Spain, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Jesuit neo-Thomist theologians had a different view, which was a logical explanation of the history of doctrine. New doctrines or dogmatic definitions could be developed by means of logical deduction from already established premises. This theory was non-controversial in the case when both premises in a syllogism were revealed truths. In this case, the conclusion would also be a revealed truth. What was a problem was the case when one premise was revealed, and the other was not revealed, but only known with moral certainty. There was disagreement among theologians whether the conclusion was *de fide* (the opinion of Gabriel Vasquez), or was only known with moral certainty (the opinion of Molina). Suarez held that the conclusion was only known with moral certainty, but if the Church

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2. Ibid., 5.

3. Ibid., 62.

4. Ibid., 9.

5. Ibid., 19-20.

made a dogmatic definition of the conclusion, it was raised to the level of *de fide*. Such certainty is not available to the theologian making the same deduction before the Church makes her definition.<sup>6</sup> Problems with the logical explanation began to emerge later in the seventeenth century. For example, theologians often worked with syllogisms with one revealed and one unrevealed premise, and the frequently disagree. Also, there were cases of doctrinal developments that did not fit into the form of a logical syllogism, resulting in the concept of logical development being stretched so much that the word “logical” ceased to be meaningful.<sup>7</sup>

In the eighteenth century, an Anglican party known as “Latitudinarians” arose that questioned any form of tradition or authority except for the Bible.<sup>8</sup> The “Age of Reason” and the corresponding progress in science led to the idea among English theologians that progress in theology was possible. However, the progress was expected to come from advancements in scientific methods in scholarship, similar to the progress observed in the field of natural science.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that while this theory of theological progress was popular in Newman’s day, he was not influenced by it. As was said before, the Latitudinarians rejected all tradition and authority outside of the Bible, but Newman as a Tractarian opposed the Latitudinarians, and placed importance on tradition and authority in the Church.<sup>10</sup> One of the great works coming out of this school of thought was John Butler’s *Analogy*.<sup>11</sup> Butler’s work was well known, and Newman quotes it more than once. However he clearly departs from Butler on two points. First of all, Butler’s source of revelation was the Bible alone, but Newman looked to the Bible as

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6. Ibid., 32-33.

7. Ibid., 46-47.

8. Ibid., 77.

9. Ibid., 82.

10. Ibid., 87.

11. Ibid., 78.

understood by the ancient Church. Secondly, the agent of theological change for Butler was scholarly reason, but for Newman it was reason plus the conscience or moral insight.<sup>12</sup>

In 1817, a Catholic faculty of Theology was incorporated at the University of Tübingen alongside the existing Protestant Theology faculty. These young Catholic professors were forced to present their faith in terms which the Protestants could respect, needing to reconcile Catholic dogma with a theory of historical movement.<sup>13</sup> One of these professors was Johann Adam Möhler, and in 1825 he published *Unity in the Church*, which portrayed the Church as an organism of which the Holy Spirit is the principle of life. This principle of life creates faith, and is the source of truth. Dogma is an exterior manifestation of the interior faith of the Church, and may change due to changing external circumstances, while the interior life force remains unchanging. It is not clear how Möhler's theory fit in with the development of doctrine because it remained abstract. He never applied it to concrete historical occasions. In later years, Möhler became more conservative, especially after Protestant colleagues accused him of being influenced by Scheiermacher. In 1832 he published *Symbolik*, which was more traditional and placed greater importance on external dogma. He was careful that his theory did not imply that truth was becoming known through some kind of Hegelian process.<sup>14</sup> Möhler was read by some of the Tractarians, but not by Newman, who did not tend to keep up with contemporary theological works. Newman was only indirectly aware of Möhler's work.<sup>15</sup>

### **Newman's Theory of Development**

Newman, as a leader of the Tractarian movement, tried to justify Anglicanism by the test of Catholicity known as the canon of St. Vincent of Lérins: *quod ubique quod semper quod ab*

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12. Ibid., 89.

13. Ibid., 103.

14. Ibid., 109-111.

15. Ibid., 118-119.

*omnibus*—that which is believed in all places, in all times, by all peoples.<sup>16</sup> However, between 1843 and 1845, due to a number of circumstances, Newman had lost confidence in the Catholicity of the Church of England. The more he tried to get Anglicanism to conform to the Vincentian Canon, the more his efforts stirred up controversy and met with resistance from other Anglicans. Newman's principles led him to look to the Catholic Church as the only remaining candidate, but it also failed to live up to the Vincentian Canon.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Newman develops a theory of doctrinal development which explains how the Catholic Church of his day was connected with the ancient Church, even though she held doctrines that could not be found in the ancient Church. He believed this theory to be in continuity with his earlier Tractarian principles, though he could not trace the path through logical argument.<sup>18</sup>

The theory addresses the conflict between an unchanging body of revelation given by Christ and his Apostles, and the fact of the history of doctrinal development. It is best understood by considering some analogies that Newman uses. The first analogy is that of Christian revelation as an idea.<sup>19</sup> It is known in the corporate mind of the Church, but it is such a great idea that it cannot be grasped or seen all at once. Instead, we look at the idea at various times at different angles, giving us different aspects or views of the idea. We can only make objective, propositional statements about a particular aspect.<sup>20</sup> When the Church confronts heresy, the process of prayerful reflection and deliberation enables the Church, sometimes through much effort, to formulate new propositions that express what was earlier only implicit in the idea.

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16. *Ibid.*, 16.

17. *Ibid.*, 120-121.

18. *Ibid.*, 123.

19. *Ibid.*, 149-150.

20. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), Ch I, §1, no. 2.

The second analogy appears only in passing in the *Essay*, but Newman used it in a sermon in 1843 when he first declared his meditation on the idea of development. He also used this analogy when defending his theory before theologians in Rome. This analogy is between the Church's understanding of her faith, and an individual's understanding of his faith, which at first is seen only in broad outlines, but as the individual encounters the problems of life, he comes to see how the faith works in his life.<sup>21</sup>

It is not surprising that the conversion of Newman and the publishing of his *Essay* stirred up quite a bit of criticism from the Anglican world. What may be surprising is the criticism Newman received from Catholic theologians. He used a historical and philosophical approach, and had an unfavorable attitude towards the scholastic theology that dominated Catholic thought at that time.<sup>22</sup> Roman professor of theology Perrone rejected Newman's analogy between the corporate faith of the Church and the faith of an individual. One example of their disagreement was in how a dogmatic definition is made. "Perrone thought that, when heresy appears, the local bishops resort to Rome and Rome declares a sentence which makes clear the mind of the Church upon the question. ... The Church declares her mind, of which it was fully aware before the heresy arose. Newman thought that, when heresy appears, the mind of the Church has to be *discovered* by meditation, discussion, dialectic, until a definition in accordance with it can be made." Although Newman respected and was friends with Perrone, he did not let their disagreement substantially alter his thesis. Although Perrone was skilled in dogmatics, he was not aware of the problems for his theory raised by modern historical criticism.<sup>23</sup>

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21. Chadwick, *Bossuet*, 151.

22. *Ibid.*, 166-167.

23. *Ibid.*, 182-183.

### Is Development New Revelation?

The last sentence in Chadwick's book is as follows, "The question then for those who think Newman's theology is Catholic, is this: these new doctrines, of which the Church had a feeling or inkling but of which she was not conscious—in what meaningful sense may it be asserted that these new doctrines are not 'new revelation'?"<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, Chadwick does not elaborate on his question, so we must pick it apart ourselves.

One question that comes to mind is what does Chadwick mean by "new revelation". One place to look is his chapter on the logical theory. As was noted before, the logical theory allows for the formulation of new doctrines by means of logical inference. Much of the discussion regarding this theory is whether or not a conclusion of a syllogism is revelation. The following passage is of interest, "How does a man discover that certain propositions are revealed? He needs to make inquiries, he needs to examine whether an alleged revelation may be received as a true revelation."<sup>25</sup> In the first sentence, the object is "propositions" in the plural. In the second sentence, he uses the word "revelation" as the object, appearing to equate a revealed proposition with a revelation. A similar construction is found later in the same chapter, "Can an ignorant believer make an act of *fides infusa* in an article which is in truth not an article of the Catholic faith but is heretical or erroneous though the believer knows it not? For a man to make an act of true faith, the revelation has to be sufficiently proposed to him by human authority..."<sup>26</sup> In the first sentence, the believer would be believing in an "article" of faith, but in the second sentence, he would be believing in a "revelation". It appears that Chadwick would call an article of faith a revelation.

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24. Ibid., 195.

25. Ibid., 33.

26. Ibid., 36.

When the council of Nicea said that the Son was *homoousios* with the Father, this was a new proposition or article of faith because the word *homoousios* had not been used in the Scriptures or in tradition in this way before that time. It appears that Chadwick might say this Nicean article of faith is new revelation. It is possible that in this case, Chadwick might use Bossuet's theory and say that *homoousios* just expresses more clearly what was already known by the Church. I suspect Chadwick only considers "new" those propositions which he believes Catholics have added to the faith.

Let us consider the implications of equating a proposition with a revelation. When Christians say that there are no new revelations, they usually base this on the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews, "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son..." (Heb. 1:1-2 *RSV-CE*). We say that there is no new revelation because when God sent his Son, he communicated through him and in him his entire being. "For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily," (Col. 2:9) and "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). The Second Vatican Council, in *Dei Verbum*, makes the same connection between God speaking to us by his Son, and "The Christian dispensation, therefore, since it is the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ."<sup>27</sup> The final revelation that God has given us is a person, not a set of propositions.

The other side of Chadwick's critique involves over-emphasizing the non-propositional character of Newman's "idea" analogy by using words such as "feeling" or "inkling". Such an ephemeral description does not sound like the Church has a solid foundation upon which to build

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27. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 4, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P., (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1996).

the dogma according to Newman's theory. Chadwick's language probably reflects his preference for seeing revelation as propositional, but is it a fair characterization of Newman?

The language that Newman uses in his *Essay* is that of great ideas, which are so vast, complex, and extensive in their implications that they cannot be comprehended by a single individual, or even a single generation.<sup>28</sup> Such an idea would be expected from what we saw in the letter to the Hebrews. God spoke to us by a Son. A greater idea than that cannot be imagined. Chadwick might counter that such was the case while Jesus walked this Earth, but the Church does not see his deeds or hear his teaching now except through the Scriptures. He might therefore conclude that the only valid doctrines are those that can be argued solely on the basis of those Scriptures. However, as the Council says, "God graciously arranged that what he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should last for ever in its entirety and be transmitted to all generations."<sup>29</sup> If God were to give so great a revelation, would he not provide a way such that it would be available *in its entirety* to all generations?

How then is the entirety of the revelation transmitted other than through Scripture? The apostles handed on what they received, which "comprises everything that serves to make the people of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith. In this way the church, in its doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that it itself is, all that it believes."<sup>30</sup> When Jesus Christ lived with and ministered to the disciples for three years, God was revealing himself to them, and he radically changed their lives. The revelation was not only in words and deeds that they remembered about Jesus, but his life was transmitted to them. Added to this was the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who "will guide you into all the truth"

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28. Newman, *Essay*, Intro., no. 21.

29. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 7.

30. *Ibid.*, no. 8.

(John 16:13), not by providing new revelation, but as the Lord says, “he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14). It is the work of the Holy Spirit that keeps the memory of the revelation alive in the Church from generation to generation. Newman describes some of the ways this happens in what he calls “Prophetical Tradition, existing primarily in the bosom of the Church itself, and recorded in such measure as Providence has determined in the writings of eminent men.” He says that it is partly written, and partly unwritten, and includes the interpretation and supplementation of Scripture. It exists in sermons, liturgies, customs, and attitudes.<sup>31</sup> It must be admitted that with such a vessel of revelation, it is difficult to know what is revelation, and what is not. Which attitudes, customs, liturgies, and sermons are transmitting revelation, and which ones are the result of human error? This question leads to the need for an infallible ability in the Church to make those decisions.<sup>32</sup>

What we have now is a revelation of unequalled depth and immensity, as well as a means by which it is transmitted to every generation now for almost 2000 years. Such a revelation can be the source of any number of doctrinal propositions, each of which give more insight into this one revelation without themselves being new revelations. Newman’s expression, “doctrinal development” is a good description of what is actually going on. These teachings of the Church develop as she meditates and considers God’s revelation of himself, which he gave through Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

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31. Newman, *Essay*, Ch. II, §2, no. 2.

32. *Ibid.*, Ch. II, §2, no. 4.

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