

THE AUTHORITY OF DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT¹

HENRY ST JOHN, O.P.

I

DURING the past half century, throughout the Christian world both Catholic and Protestant, great progress has been made in the scientific and critical study of the biblical text, more particularly of the New Testament documents, and, in continuation of this, of the history of Christian origins. The Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*² of the present Pope bears witness to the multiple sources of progress in biblical studies and gives directives concerning it which envisage and prepare for still greater progress to come by Catholic scholars in this field. The appearance two years ago of *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, to cite only the most comprehensive instance amongst much other evidence, is witness also to the fact that in England Catholics are taking a share, fuller than hitherto, in this general movement of Christian scholarship, and that in doing so they are able gratefully to acknowledge and make use of the fruits of much of its labours.

One of the most striking effects of progress in biblical scholarship and the study of Christian origins has been a deeper realization of the fact and extent of doctrinal development down the centuries, and its bearing upon our conception of the nature and function of that Tradition by which such development has been brought about. The view one takes of the nature and function of Tradition in the development of doctrine is inevitably bound up with one's view of the nature and function of the Church, as the receptacle, so to say, and guardian and interpreter of God's revelation concerning his means and method of redeeming mankind. The impact of the results of critical scholarship upon our knowledge of the process of doctrinal development may perhaps be leading the theologians to modify in certain respects the notion

¹ *The Pattern of Christian Truth*. A Study in the relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church. The Bampton Lectures 1954 by H. E. W. Turner, Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham. (A. R. Mowbray, 1954.)

² *Stand by the Bible*. English Translation (C.T.S. 1945).

of Tradition, as currently held, in an area not touched by the Church's defined teaching, and in consequence also their conception of the way the teaching magisterium functions within the Church. It cannot alter, so we hold, the essential nature of the Church itself as Catholics conceive it. But upon the beliefs of non-Catholics, who hold the divisibility of the Church as axiomatic, and who reject any idea of a teaching authority within it here and now immune from error, the impact of the results of critical scholarship may have a wider and more far-reaching effect. The purpose of what follows is to suggest, first, some possible modifications that these results may be making in the conception of the relation between Scripture and Tradition in Catholic theology. Secondly, to estimate the impact of critical conclusions judged acceptable by Catholics because capable of being incorporated into that theology, upon ideas of the Church and its authority entertained by non-Catholics engaged in ecumenical discussion. The particular focus will be upon ideas to be found within the Church of England which, in this respect, is a convenient microcosm of the ecumenical dialogue as a whole.

In his Bampton Lectures of 1954 Professor Turner has discussed in detail, and with his accustomed care and erudition, the interrelation of orthodoxy and heresy in the working out of doctrinal development during the early centuries. In doing so he has put students of Christian origins in his debt by his judicious and balanced treatment of this subject; and the more so, in the regard of Catholics, because he draws to a considerable extent upon the work of continental Catholic scholarship. His standpoint is that of central Anglicanism, as he himself describes it; neither uncritically conservative nor uncompromisingly liberal, and the basis of his approach is the classical appeal to authority in the Church of England; a combination of Scripture, Tradition and Reason in which it is never irrefragably clear which of the three is ultimately decisive of belief, and in what sense it is so. Professor Turner's thesis may be summarized in his own words: 'The classical theory of the relation between orthodoxy and heresy, though strongly supported in antiquity, seemed to imply a higher degree of fixity than the facts warranted. Yet the modern alternatives, whether expounded from the point of view of Church history or the history of Christian Doctrine, erred in the opposite direction of fluidity and flexibility. . . . The authority of orthodoxy rests ulti-

mately upon the authoritativeness of the Christian facts. Yet if the pattern of God's saving action enshrined within the biblical data is basic and unrepeatable, this does not exclude their continuation in the same sense in the experience of the individual Christian and the corporate life of the People of God. The biblical data are constitutive as well as regulative for the life of the Church. . . . Thus [they] are mediated through the *lex orandi* of the Church. All the major doctrines of orthodoxy were lived devotionally, as part of the corporate experience of the Church, before their theological development became a matter of urgent necessity.'³

Professor Turner then goes on to show the lines upon which this theological development and its consequent formulation proceeded. Its beginnings are seen in the Rule of Faith closely dependent upon Scripture and the *lex orandi*, consisting of spare credal outlines arranged in simple itemized forms; an intellectual formulation far from adequate to the rich and many-sided character of the experience of the Church. As its life expanded local Tradition-lines, associated with the main centres of theological study converged, in Trinitarian and Christological thought, to make the final and authoritative formulation of doctrine, no single line being in itself adequate to express the Church's experience as a whole. "These Tradition-lines", writes Professor Turner, 'appear to have evolved at their own speed and in their own way. The sole theological criterion by which they were to be judged was their adequacy to express in all its fullness the religious Tradition to which the Church was heir.'⁴ It would seem then that on this view a single tradition-line in isolation was likely to be potentially heretical, and that the maintenance of orthodoxy depended upon the convergence in formulation of two or more traditions, each acting as a counter-check upon the other, and thereby keeping the balance of emphasis which preserved the wholeness of the Tradition. To quote Professor Turner once more: 'One of the chief results that has emerged from our enquiry is the essential autonomy of orthodoxy. As the life of the Church was exposed to the full effect of human sin, so evolving orthodoxy was not supernaturally shielded from infiltration from without or distortion from within. It has already been shown that orthodoxy and heresy did not evolve in watertight compartments. Both possessed

³ Turner, *op. cit.*, page 473.

⁴ *op. cit.*, page 476.

a common starting-point, the biblical data and the Christian religious Tradition, though there can be no doubt as to which represented the true line of advance.⁵

The thesis we have here summarized, with a necessary brevity which in some respects has entailed a necessary inadequacy, is one which embodies an Anglican view of the conclusions of critical scholarship. The substance of this view can however be accepted, with qualifications that will appear later, by Catholics. The principles it involves can be seen at work throughout the whole of the history of the development of dogma from the first Pentecost to the present day. That great Dominican teacher Father Vincent McNabb used to be fond of saying that heresy is dogma *in fieri*, and he would instance the way in which Gallicanism and near-Gallicanism played a vital part, during a long period preceding the Vatican Council, and in the deliberations of the Council itself, in the preparation of the moderate *via media* definition of Papal Infallibility that was ultimately worked out by it. Professor Turner ends his book by giving his conclusions upon the principal sources of orthodoxy to which his previous three lectures are devoted: Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Yet nowhere does he show which of these three elements is in his view finally determinative of what is to be held as certainly true, nor how, if all three converge to this end, 'to speak of infallibility would probably be a misuse of categories' and yet 'there can be no doubt (as between orthodoxy and heresy) which represents the true line of advance'⁶ in doctrinal development.

The incorporation into Catholic theology of the substance of a view such as that we are considering, qualified by the determinative part played by the teaching magisterium of the Church in the formation of Tradition, and its infallibility in *de fide* definition, would involve modifications in the idea of Tradition itself, but in an area of theology not touched, as we have said, by what is of faith. The Council of Trent defined that the saving truth communicated by Christ to his Apostles, or brought to their minds by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, is contained in the Scriptures and in unwritten traditions and that equal reverence is to be given to both.⁷ The interpretation of this commonly cur-

⁵ *op. cit.*, page 478.

⁶ *op. cit.*, page 498.

⁷ *Enchiridion*, Denzinger-Bannwart, 783.

rent in post-Tridentine theology is that there exists an original, continuous authentic oral tradition from which can be supplemented the data provided by the Bible, and which is itself independent of the Bible, a body of doctrine, that is, not contained in any way in Scripture but handed down orally side by side with the truths later embodied in the New Testament. It is doubtful, however, how far such a view can be maintained in the light of the findings of modern research into Christian origins by scholars Catholic and non-Catholic of which Professor Turner's Bampton Lectures give an account. The words of the Tridentine Decree might equally well fit not a separate body of doctrine handed down orally, but a traditional way of interpreting the Apostolic preaching and explaining the nature of Dominical institutions, derived from the Apostles and continuously applied to the written Scriptures upon which that preaching was based and in which it was subsequently incorporated.

This modification of current theological teaching is not indeed an innovation so much as a return to a pre-Tridentine tradition in classical theology, which is more in accord with Patristic thought and of which St Thomas Aquinas is the chief representative. St Thomas holds that revelation is indeed the Word of God, and is to be found in Scripture; but an article of our belief is essentially the word of man, responding in faith to the Word of God. The articles of our belief are precisely what their name signifies—they are articles of *faith*, not immediately articles of revelation. The article of faith is of course an infallible expression of revelation, but it is not itself inspired or revealed. It is uttered, as St Thomas says, *quasi ex persona totius ecclesiae*: in the person of the whole divinely guided Believing Community; for the Believing Community utters its belief in that which is revealed authoritatively, by a teaching magisterium divinely guided, the final determinant of which is the voice of the Apostolic See. For St Thomas the whole purpose of the *articuli fidei* lies in the fact that 'The truth of the Faith is contained in Scripture in a scattered manner and in widely differing fashions, and in some of these ways obscurely. To draw out the truth of faith from the Scriptures requires long study and labour which cannot be undertaken by many, for whom knowledge of the truth is necessary, because they are too busy or else incapable of such study. And so it was necessary that clear summaries (creeds and definitions) should be

compiled which set before all compendiously the things to be believed; these are not something added to Sacred Scripture but rather are taken from it'.⁸

No one has ever been more vigorous than St Thomas in vindicating the function of reason in theology, in disclosing the logical coherence of one article of faith with another, but never as an end in itself, never with the idea that scientific rational theology can be a substitute for, let alone an improvement upon, the original revelation on which it is based and which it is its purpose to clarify to the human understanding, though it cannot do this exhaustively. We should not forget that in St Thomas' view the whole business of the employment and application of reason to articles of faith and revealed data, its whole effort at rational clarification of the content of revelation by means of logical method and philosophy, is essentially a concession to our mental feebleness; it is not on account of the divine teaching itself, but on account of the deep mysteries with which it deals; we have to be schooled to a knowledge of divine things by first grasping it in terms of natural reasoning.⁹

Readers of Newman's *Difficulties of Anglicans* will remember that in his answer to Pusey's *Eirenicon* he gives the same teaching as St Thomas and maintains that between Catholics and Anglicans there is merely a verbal difference as to whether the whole faith is or is not contained in Scripture. 'We mean that not every article of faith is so contained there that it may thence be logically proved, *independently* of the teaching and authority of Tradition; but Anglicans mean that every article of faith is so contained there, that it may thence be proved, *provided* there be added the illustrations and compensations supplied by the Tradition. And it is in this latter sense that the Fathers also speak in the passages which you quote from them. I am sure at least that St Athanasius frequently adduces passages in proof of points in controversy, which no one would see to be proofs, unless Apostolical Tradition were taken into account, first as suggesting, then as authoritatively ruling, their meaning. Thus *you* do not say that the whole revelation is in Scripture in such sense that pure unaided logic can draw it from the Sacred text; nor do *we* say, that it is not in Scripture,

⁸ *Summa Theologica* IIa IIae, 1, 9 ad 3 and 10 ad 1.

⁹ I am indebted for the substance of the above paragraphs on St Thomas' teaching to Father Victor White's paper in *Dominican Studies*, Jan., 1948, 'St Thomas' Conception of Revelation'.

in an improper sense, in the sense that the *Tradition* of the Church is able to recognize it there.'¹⁰

It is clear that, from the first, long before the completion of the New Testament Canon, the tradition of the Apostolic *kerygma* grew by continuous theological interpretation of Christ's original teaching, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit indwelling the Church. This development can be traced within the pages of the New Testament itself, and it is one of the principal tasks of contemporary biblical studies to elucidate it further. After the death of the last Apostle, though no new revelation could be added to it, the interpretation of the deposit of faith continued, and truth latent in Scripture was drawn out, in course of time and made explicit, by the Spirit-guided mind of the Church. From thenceforward this would be handed down as traditional, and its authoritative formulation regarded as the interpretation of the Apostolic mind treated with a reverence equal to that accorded to truth explicit in the Scriptures from the first. As the oral tradition was gradually given permanent form in inspired writings, emphasis came to be laid increasingly upon the Scriptures as the sole source of revelation: in Origen, for example, as against his former teacher Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus in an earlier generation. Indeed it is historically doubtful how far any independent oral tradition of doctrine did in fact escape incorporation, at least implicit, into the written tradition of Scripture.¹¹ Even the doctrine of our Lady as the second Eve, found in Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian, which Newman claims as of Apostolic origin and which may well have been so, is only a making explicit of what was seen to be implicit in the Scriptural doctrine of our Lord as the second Adam.¹²

The Rule of Faith was simply the Church's interpretation of Scripture, as it appeared in the contemporary Church teaching and preaching in continuity with the Apostles. The Patristic view of Tradition has been described as 'the interpretation of the Bible by the main body of Christian thought and practice as it has always been interpreted, an interpretation that was certainly from

¹⁰ *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching considered*. Vol. II (London, 1892), page 12.

¹¹ A fuller discussion of this subject will be found in *Eastern Churches Quarterly*, Supplementary issue, Vol. VII, 'Tradition and Scripture'. See also the comment of the Abbot of Downside in a review of *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* by R. P. C. Hanson: *Downside Review*, Summer 1954, page 312.

¹² Newman, *op. cit.*, pages 31-61.

“within a tradition” and in accordance with a continuous current of meditation and devotion not owing its origin to any source of doctrine deriving independently of the Bible from our Lord or his Apostles, but to the Holy Spirit acting upon the minds of men and upon situations, intellectual, political, economic and psychological in which the Church from age to age has found itself.¹³ Newman would have accepted this description as the Patristic view of Tradition but with the qualification, indicated by his words already quoted, that Apostolic Tradition involves a two-fold element; it first *suggests* the meaning of God’s revelation in Scripture and then *authoritatively rules* whether that meaning is to be accepted as true; in other words, before it becomes a fixed and ultimate criterion of faith it passes through a fluid and uncertain stage.

This distinction between the Rule of Faith as a process of attaining to truth and as a final criterion of what is known to be irreversibly true, should never be lost sight of. The mind of the Church during its long history has continuously pondered over the deposit of faith and currently taught the result of its meditation. In consequence of this process the teaching of the Faith has become more and more articulated, and has been given increasingly defined authoritative standards. In course of time creeds were compiled from lists of these authoritatively formulated articles (dogmata). The Rule of Faith included both process and definitive formulation, these being respectively equivalent, in modern terms, to commonly accepted teaching and *de fide* definition. Then as now the latter could only be contravened under pain of heresy and excommunication; the former could, and still can, be prudently questioned by the theologian.¹⁴ It is certainly an inescapable fact of history that the Church, however that term may be understood, has continuously from the beginning drawn conclusions as to the content of the deposit of faith, or the original revelation of God’s redemptive activity, not only by processes of

¹³ *Theology*, Jan. 1955, page 24. The whole of this discussion of the meaning of Tradition is based upon a correspondence arising out of an article *A modern defence of Infallibility* by R. P. C. Hanson in *Theology*, Oct. 1954, Jan. 1955 and March 1955. I have adopted one or two quotations from this source for my own definitions or descriptions for the sake of clear elucidation and without further explicit acknowledgment.

¹⁴ In comparatively recent times, for example, such commonly accepted teaching as the literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis has been called in question under the impact of various scientific hypotheses and a better understanding of primitive oriental literary habits and idiom. So too, under the influence of a changed world outlook, the accepted relation of the heathen and the good pagan and the unbaptized baby to the unchanging truth, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, has undergone, or is undergoing, modifications in the area of what has been commonly accepted, but not *de fide*, teaching.

logical reasoning but also by intuitive insight into the divine purpose and action. This is not to add new constituent elements to the original revelation, though it may be said that it is to discover them, or to realize their existence in a way they had not been previously realized.

The history of the Judaizing controversy in the pages of the New Testament, the gradual development in articulation of Trinitarian doctrine and the doctrine of Christ's nature and person illustrates this. Every definition made by the Church in the long course of this development of its doctrines was the result of a clearer realization of a constituent element of a truth which had been previously only partially realized or even not realized at all. Christological development was predominantly the fruit of rational deduction, but the elucidations by which the Holy Spirit came to be seen as a divine Person were less a result of logical and discursive thinking than of intuitive insight, sharpened by prayer and worship on the part of the faithful who, as has been said, lived Trinitarianly before the doctrine was thought out conceptually.¹⁵ The inspiration of any particular New Testament document and its consequent reception by the Church into the Scriptural Canon is an instance of a constituent element of revelation not derived from biblical data, but realized solely by the intuitive insight of the common mind of the faithful under divine guidance and thence authoritatively embodied in Tradition by the infallible teaching magisterium. The practice of infant baptism has no direct New Testament sanction, and there is no evidence that the Church had any independent command from our Lord to adopt it. Yet since this sacrament, on scriptural authority, has always been held necessary to salvation the custom of administering it to infants, in very early times, is evidence that the mind of the primitive Church drew the inference, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that it could take effect without the conscious will of its recipient, and that this supremely important fact was thus seen to be a constituent element of revelation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Turner, *op. cit.*, page 474.

¹⁶ It is interesting that the learned New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann, in his study of Baptism especially in its relation to circumcision, concludes as against Karl Barth that infant baptism, though not directly supported by New Testament evidence, is *congruous* with its general doctrine of baptism, by which he implies an argument from fittingness which has an important bearing on the nature of doctrinal development in general. *Baptism in the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology, No. 1, by O. Cullmann. S.C.M., London, 1954.

It is clear that the principles of doctrinal development here outlined are characteristic of the whole history of dogma in the life of the Church from the earliest days to the present; they cover the whole of traditional Mariology, and the cultus of the Saints, in both East and West, the doctrines of grace and original sin, of purgatory, the meaning of the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, and the nature and authority of the Church itself and its sacramental life. It must also appear undeniable that the working out of these principles, so clearly bound up with the very nature and authority of the Church seen historically as it passes down the centuries, must suffer a radical change whenever the Church is conceived of as divisible and divided. Only when the Church is held to be necessarily and always an organic visible body, comparable to a physical organism, can these principles be fully and consistently applicable within it, at every point in its history. A society divinely created and maintained in order to speak God's word, the unity of which, by its very nature, cannot be broken or destroyed, must always speak with a single self-consistent voice. The claim to be divinely constituted as such a society is not confined to the Church which uses the titles 'Catholic' and 'Roman' in an exclusive sense; it is the claim of historic Christendom up to the Reformation period, when the new concept of a Church divided first came into being. It remains to this day the historic claim both of Rome and of the Orthodox East. If any one doubts the exclusiveness of the Orthodox claim, or suspects it of being less dogmatically rigid than that of Rome, let him read that claim officially set out, where we might perhaps have expected to find it stated in the least uncompromising terms, in the ecumenical survey prepared under the auspices of the World Council of the Churches at Evanston.¹⁷

* * *

In a second part of this article, it is hoped to deal with the impact of the results of critical scholarship, in the field of doctrinal development, upon ideas of the Church and its authority entertained by non-Catholics engaged in ecumenical discussion, and in particular upon those held within the Church of England.

¹⁷ *Faith and Order*—'Our Oneness in Christ and Our Disunity as Churches'. S.C.M. Press, 1954.