

IS NEWMAN'S *ESSAY ON THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN  
DOCTRINE*  
A THEORY OF THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF DOGMA?  
SUGGESTIONS FOR AN  
ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

• Martin Brüske •

“[A]t the heart of Newman's *Essay* is a discovery of the historicity of faith that avoids at every turn the temptation both of an idealistic philosophy of history and of a relativist historicism . . . while holding fast to the historicity of faith.”

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The aim of this essay is very straightforward. It intends no more—but certainly no less—than to urge the reading of Newman's book. I hope to spell out why a careful, penetrating study of this work is now more than ever worthwhile for each of us; *emphatically for each of us*, and particularly for the so-called “theological layman” as well. This is meant precisely in the sense of Newman's major concern for the formation of theological competency and sound theological judgment. Over and above mere encouragement, the present essay intends to provide an introduction to, and guidance

toward, independent reading. Encouragement and guidance, however, will be given under a certain light, within a certain framing of the question, which is meant to help to unlock Newman's essay. This light is the question of the historicity of the Christian faith; more concretely, it is the question of Newman's proposal for resolving the problem of faith and historical reason, which is grounded ultimately in the uniqueness of the Christian faith itself, finds its root in humanism and the Reformation, and has been in a state of acute crisis since the European Enlightenment.

Let me say from the outset that the solution that Newman provides to this problem in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* makes this book one of the greatest theological achievements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We would have to look to Möhler's *Einheit in der Kirche* or his *Symbolik*, to Rosmini's *Five Wounds*, to Drey's *Apologetik* or to his *Enzyklopädie* of 1819, to Scheeben's *Mysterien*, but also, in spite of its opposing point of view, to David Frederick Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu. Kritisch bearbeitet* of 1835 or—precisely—to Ferdinand Christian Baur's *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, to find a comparable breadth and depth of presentation, or a similarly creative power of integration, resolution and synthesis.

But does this not lead us far, much too far, into highly specialized theological questions, into a realm of scholarly theology thickly hedged about with historical minutiae, intended for the members of the inner circle of specialized debates on the complicated problem of the development of Christian dogma? The answer is negative, and that for two reasons, which I will briefly examine in the first two parts of my presentation.

First, the existential-biographical background of Newman's essay is quite different from that of a merely erudite theology, however considerable and intense Newman's intellectual and scholarly work—or precisely for that reason.

Second, every thoughtful Christian must confront, “one way or another, the fundamental question that Newman examines; the ability of thoughtful Christians to form independent judgments in the question regarding the historicity of the Christian faith is a major challenge for the future of Christianity at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The following remarks flow, not so much from expert Newman-scholarship as from long wrestling with the question of the relationship between faith and historical reason with respect to the development of the issue of the “historical Jesus” and its

consequences for Christology. The perspectives that arose from these efforts come together to form the light in which the following reflection presents Newman's essay.

*The biographical existential background*

This background is quickly sketched in a single sentence: Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* represents the clarification of his own position on his way to the Catholic Church. It must be noted that the not-so-slender volume emerged from a period of tremendous exertion—so characteristic of Newman—in the short months between February and October of 1845. Even before the work was completed he arrived at the final definitive, spiritual-existential certainty—and crossed immediately from truth in thought to truth in deed. On October 9, 1845 he finally completed the journey that had led him ever closer to the Catholic Church. The great intellectual efforts of the previous months became a living reality. This much is clear: For Newman, the task of theological investigation, pursued without “ifs, ands, or buts,” was a deeply existential one, which entailed an ultimate responsibility before his conscience and its conviction of truth and, at the same time, and not least, for the people around him in Littlemore, in the Oxford Movement, and throughout England who looked to him as a spiritual and intellectual guide. And so at the beginning of 1845 Newman faced the necessity of clarifying definitively his relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. The theological question that he had to answer for himself was this: Has the Roman Church remained identical with the origin, or, through subsequent doctrinal additions that must be considered corruptions, has it lost its identity with the apostolic founding?

We will examine exactly what lies behind this question more closely at a later point. Let us stress, for the time being, that Newman's position at the central turning point in his life—which, however, cannot by any means be understood as a “break,” as we will soon see—was the result of a long development, a development of impressive consistency and unity and, as Günter Biemer has said, of great beauty; a development that begins with a fundamental conversion—in 1816—and includes a fundamental turning point—1845—but no real “break.” Even the conversion of 1816 was in the end more of an awakening than a “break” in the strict sense.

As way-stations along this journey we should certainly include his discovery of the high-church, Anglo-Catholic tradition while still in his 20s—in 1828 (for instance, Newman began his continuous chronological reading of the Church Fathers); the battle surrounding the independence of the episcopally-structured church with the beginning of the Oxford Movement in 1833; the first misgivings, in 1839, about the legitimacy of the Anglican Church, and at the same time, about his previous assessment of the Church of Rome thanks to his study of the fifth-century Monophysite controversy ; *Tract 90* with the Catholic interpretation of the 39 Articles and the ensuing disappointment over the most far-reaching rejection since 1841; finally, the *Retractions* of statements concerning the Catholic Church and the resignation of his Holy Orders in the Anglican Church in 1843. The subject matter of Newman's essay also has roots reaching far into his past. Here I will name only two texts, which Newman refers to repeatedly with extensive citations in the essay: his final, one and a half hour-long *Fifteenth Oxford University Sermon* (February 2, 1843), which he himself called "Theory of Development of Religious Doctrine," and his *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church*, given between 1836–37.

Newman's path itself may thus portray a "development" in his own sense of the word—and, indeed, of a legitimate, not corrupting, development. One may cautiously assert that Newman's biography and theology correspond in an astounding, moving manner. It is tempting to apply Newman's criteria for a legitimate development to himself: preservation of type, continuity of principles, power of assimilation, logical sequence, anticipation of the future, conservative action upon the past, and chronic vigor. Just so, his evangelical conversion (with its discovery and love of Scripture, and its decisive ethical and religious existence) is integrated into each later phase; equally enduring were the discoveries of the Church Fathers and of the episcopally structured, independent church. As a Catholic, Newman retained the whole of these things. Newman's way was not primarily the way of a "no" (even though decisiveness also draws limits), but rather the way of an ever-widening "yes" that led him in the end to the Catholic Church. His conversion was, then, not a "break," but rather the following through of a path. In the integration of the "evangelical" phase and the phase of the episcopal church of the Fathers, Newman is truly a deeply ecumenical figure.

To sum up: the biographical, existential background of Newman's *Essay* presents us with a theological issue *as* an existential issue. In the next step I hope to show, however, that this issue, in its essentials, is still a matter of concern for us today. However, in Newman we encounter a figure whose manifest honesty, combined with the utmost theological competence, invites us to entrust ourselves to him as our teacher.

*The unanswered question of history and faith*

The modern discipline of history has a twofold origin that combines continuity and discontinuity. The first origin is the long, modern prelude to today's historical science. This preliminary stage begins in the European movement of humanism and encompasses the Reformation and the Baroque period. The second origin is also located in a European-wide movement: the Enlightenment.

The continuity and discontinuity are seen in a radicalization, which, however, ultimately led to a qualitative leap that immediately paved the way for the establishment of the modern discipline of history and, without a break, for historicism as the basic form of historical scholarship in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Newman himself was involved in the world of the historical science of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; just as he was well-versed in the authors of the establishment era of the 18<sup>th</sup>. I mention in passing, Newman's assessment of Gibbon and Niebuhr.

What authorizes our speaking of a double origin of history as a discipline? What is the (decisive) difference between the "humanistic" figure of historical science and its "Enlightenment" and, with qualifications, "historicist," form?

Insofar as it concerns our theme, it can be summed up in a very concise formula: "humanistic" history, armed with the critical tools of the philological method and increasingly of ancillary historical sciences, seeks the true, authentic, fundamental form of tradition. This tradition is to be uncovered with the help of an ever more refined critical method. In this context, tradition retains a normative character. The application of the critical method establishes norms precisely through uncovering authentic tradition, freeing it from all corrupting distortion.

The relation of the basic form of the "Enlightenment" sense of history to the phenomenon of tradition is precisely *not* the search

for the true, authentic, original tradition, but much more—to use another concise form—emancipation *from all* tradition in favor of the autonomy of the subject. By “tradition” or, as the sociologists put it, “traditionality,” I do not mean, for the moment, a particular content but rather the most foundational and primary means by which man relates to the past; that is, in the form of the immediate presence of the past as something passed down without critical distancing that claims normative authority and validity. In short: “traditionality” is the anthropologically most basic way in which man relates to the past. Please note—this does not, of course, yet constitute a theological understanding of tradition.

Turning now to Newman’s *Essay*, one can easily identify the “humanist” and “Enlightenment” models of historical reason—which in fact, appear as two confessional types. To the “humanistic” type of historical reason corresponds a high-church, perhaps Anglo-Catholic or tractarian, Anglicanism, which considers itself in possession of an authentic, original and unadulterated tradition, and in the end understands itself as a rebirth of the early Church.

On the other side looms the image of a Protestantism that in Newman’s view is, by historical necessity, headed toward a religion of “private judgment” and that, in the form of “theological liberalism,” almost completely jettisons the factuality and reality of Christianity as a historical, temporal force confronting me with objective claims to validity as tradition. This perception of Protestantism doubtless pertains to a certain time and needs to be sorted out, but it does hit right on the mark certain actual tendencies in the development of Protestantism from around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century—that is, from the dissolution and replacement of the old Protestant orthodoxy by Enlightenment theology—and in neo-Protestantism, which also centers on liberation *from history with help* from scholarly critical historicism.

Newman refers to both of these types of historical reason in his essay, but attempts, from various points of view, to propose an alternative. It is precisely not that he undermines the critical potential of the historical sense; rather, he radicalizes the question of the historicity of the faith even further, grasps its innermost center in a truly historical manner, and shows that in both confessional types of historical reason there is a failure to think consistently historically enough. To sum up by way of anticipation Newman’s stance at this point, he avoids—like the Catholic Tübingen

School—the temptation to hack through the “Gordian knot” of history with an idealistic philosophy of history, which regards the process of history from a quasi-divine point of view and declares it absolutely and completely rational and measurable; he also escapes the danger of drowning relativistically in the bad infinity of the historical object.

We have reached rather far ahead in order to establish a context for Newman's *Essay*. Now we must justify our anticipatory leap step by step. We must first ascertain the way in which the “humanistic” and the “Enlightenment” or “historicist” types of historical reason have affected the Christian faith's self-understanding on the level of theology.

We have seen that “humanist” historical reason asks, “What is the authentic tradition?” and it is easy to guess that this question will be sharpened in inter-confessional theological controversy in the context of the Reformation. Historical means were used to show that one side was in possession of the unbroken tradition or, alternatively, had re-instituted the authentic tradition of the Gospel or of the early Church through a return “*ad fontes*,” while the other side, in contrast, had corrupted this tradition, for example, through the medieval papacy, and fallen away from it. Following Nietzsche's first work, one may speak of a ‘Birth of Church history from the spirit of a controversial theology.’ This kind of writing of Church history for purposes of controversial theology plays, as indicated, a significant role in Newman's *Essay*, particularly as the backdrop of the Anglican self-conception.

The “Enlightenment” type of historical reason, by contrast, tends toward freedom from every tradition. What this means theologically is best expressed by a remark found in a book by D. F. Strauss that is a close contemporary of Newman's *Essay*. This is Strauss' *Glaubenslehre*, his dogmatics, which appeared in 1840–41. The sentence I have in mind is as clear as it is succinct: “The history of dogma is the critique of dogma.” With this statement, Strauss stands in a tradition whose origin is in the Enlightenment and in which historical reason is assigned primarily a critical-emancipatory role in theology—albeit in a left-Hegelian form in Strauss. To use an immediately clear metaphor from Albert Schweitzer: “It helps us escape from the gold ground of dogma.” There is a second pillar of the theological use of critical-emancipatory historical reason. After Reimarus and, in decisive respects, Strauss, the question of the “historical Jesus” to which Schweitzer's metaphor originally referred,

emerges next to the critical historiography of dogma. Newman did not confront this issue in his essay, and legitimately so, because for his work he could presuppose the canonical validity of the New Testament. However, I believe that the perspectives he developed in the area of the history of dogma could, with modifications, be very fruitfully applied to the theological questions raised by New Testament studies.

With the establishment of critical-historical reason in modernity, the question of Christianity has reached a new level of complexity. This level, however, proves to be a great challenge, because the Christian faith is inextricably bound to its historical origin, to the event of Christ, which does not embody an abstract idea, but rather *as* event (to be exact, as the event of the divine condescension in Jesus Christ, as God's act in him and through him) is, as said, inextricably and in the most concrete sense "historical." The proclamation and enduring reality of this event is, therefore, bound to the process of transmission, or in the theological sense, to "tradition," which must keep the original events present. Critical-emancipatory historical reason, however, has never ceased to question, ever more radically, this identity of Christianity and of Christian faith with the origin. This is in some sense appropriate, for the Christian faith is not based upon a form of mythical narration "that never was and always is," but rather upon the claim that the Word became flesh and thereby is radically historical. Indeed, in the end, the development of historical reason in the modern sense of the word is a result of precisely these historical hard edges of the basic reality of the Christian faith.

Where, then, to return once more to the question, does the unavoidable challenge of historical reason for the Christian faith reside? In short: the emancipation, through the establishment of critical-historical reason, from the immediate validity of tradition necessarily makes Christianity's identity with its origin questionable—in the oscillating double meaning of being "questionable." [Frag-Würdig, meaning dubious *and* worthy of being asked about.] This opening up of the question is legitimate. And it has remained a challenge to this day, a challenge that is still unresolved, and not solely or even primarily in theology as such—because through much struggle the great theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries developed perspectives which one may both live out and believe—but rather, above all, among the faithful! I will mention a single example: Consider how undigested are the results



of the historical-critical method in the issue of the "historical Jesus." What would it mean if in all probability Jesus did not claim titles for himself like "Son of God" and "Messiah"? How would one honestly come to terms with a difference between Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom before his passion and the Pauline teaching on salvation? These are perennial challenges for every thoughtful and discerning Christian, challenges that may be ignored only at the very high price of ignoring the problem out of lack of interest, knowledge and so forth. But this dodge finally begets only a pernicious latency of the problem, which refuses to go away. When, however, some encounter or reading raises the problem, then one either succumbs to the virulent "fundamentalist" temptation of a flat denial or sinks under the weight of the question of faith's identity with its origin. The final result is either a loss of faith altogether or the adoption of a surrogate belief, either in resignation or in some critical-emancipatory posturing.

In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, John Henry Newman confronts the issue of the Christian faith's identity with its origin with utmost sincerity, making him even today the patron of honest faith. And so we turn directly to his great work.

*The objective, issues and development of Newman's Essay*

In the following part which, again cannot be any more than an outline, I intend to propose, in light of what we have covered so far, an interpretation of Newman's *Essay* that diverges somewhat from the usual textbook interpretation.

Newman's book is generally taken to be a contribution to a theology of tradition and/or a theory of the development of doctrine. This reading is undoubtedly valid as well as fruitful, and in no way do I wish to dispute that Newman's work reflects both of these closely-related themes. The point is simply that this classification does not do complete justice to Newman's evident intention. When one considers earlier or more recent treatises on doctrinal development, or the contributions of the theologians of the Tübingen School on the theology of tradition, one discovers on the one hand considerable overlap, and on the other hand, not only originality and autonomy on Newman's part, but also a singularity which goes beyond the thematic scope of the theology of tradition and the development of doctrine. This has already been remarked

upon; e.g., Karl Lehman and Karl Rahner note, in their excellent article on the development of doctrine in *Mysterium Salutis I*, that Newman's novel theory is hard to interpret, but ascribe this to its essay-form. I would like to suggest that the difficulty does not lie in the form of the work, but rather in the insufficient terms of its interpretation.

What is entailed by my proposal for a somewhat different reading, however, would offer nothing more than a possible approach. I suggest that Newman's *Essay* is a fundamental theologian's hermeneutics of historical reason—a "historics" (by analogy to an "ethics")—as it applies to the phenomenon of the history of Christian dogma. At its heart is the working out of a concept of a truly *historical* identity.

This occurs, however, above all through the working-out of a viable set of criteria, with which this truly historical identity may be concretely uncovered and grasped. This takes place in turn within the horizon of two background theories that play a heuristic-hypothetical role. The first outlines a non-idealistic (in the sense of German Idealism's philosophy of history) theory of *ideas in historical process*; the second applies this theory hypothetically to the idea of Revelation, with the intent of proving the *a limine* probability and "expectability" of developments of doctrine. Here we see Revelation and development of doctrine brought together in an analogous relationship: the structure of Revelation makes development to be expected. Here, above all, are the elements of a theology of tradition and a theory of doctrinal development. Almost every part of this thesis needs to be clarified.

First of all, what is meant in this context by a "historics"? This term simply means the theory of history as a discipline, and indeed a theory of the discipline that intends to clarify the *praxis* of historians and clarify its presuppositions. It is a theory of praxis: it springs from it and returns to it. "Criticism of historical reason in act" or, in the words of the subtitle of Henri Irénée Marrou's hermeneutic, "What is the correct use of reason when it thinks historically?" Such a hermeneutic can take a very general form when involving the basic operations of historical studies, but it may also be very specialized, in regard to the object of examination, whether it be ancient history, contemporary history, music history or the history of medicine. Thus the formulation of such a specific hermeneutic, which is essentially a methodologically considered program of research, is dependent in the first instance upon the

characteristics of the object of study and then upon the foundational perspectives and questions of the historian: How will I do justice to the individuality of my subject, in light of my specific inquiries? In the background of my specific questions and my underlying perspectives, in terms of which I perceive the object, there are always larger, more comprehensive theories which have a hypothetical-heuristic function for the concrete enactment of historical reason. These theories, in turn, combine with certain prima-facie presuppositions that form the starting point of historical work.

Those who are familiar with Newman's *Essay* have probably already noted that all these elements of the development of theories of history, which, when expressly reflected, form a "historics," are in fact found in his text.

Newman approaches his subject with a specific question, which is simultaneously fundamental-theological and existential: Within the existential need to clarify definitively his relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, and in view of the fact of doctrinal development in this Church, and in the entire history of Christianity, Newman inquires into the identity of the Christian faith, in its ecclesial form, with its origin. In this, he is led by two major background theories: A theory of the historical identity of ideas throughout a historical process (chapter 1) and a theory, closely connected with the first, of Judeo-Christian revelation as a historical process and as a historical appropriation of ideas, which, in the form of (a possible) analogy, sets the hypothetical horizon within which the reality of doctrinal development, and at the same time the development of an infallible teaching office, can be expected (chapter 2). These hypothetical-heuristic background theories combine with various prima-facie assumptions about the history of Christianity and the Church of Rome. At first glance, the Catholic Church has the advantage of immediately visible and identifiable continuity with its origin and of coherent unity. This leads Newman to the prima-facie hypothesis that this continuity and unity contain identity with the origin. Immediately, however, the counter-question arises whether, in this continuity, there are not also corruptions, manifest contradictions that render the prima-facie hypothesis void (chapter 3). On the basis of this critical question (which is nothing less than a criterion for falsification), and in conjunction with the above-mentioned background theories and the resulting prima-facie hypothesis, Newman then forms his concrete

plan for an investigation into the history of doctrine in the perspective of fundamental theology. He develops seven criteria for the discovery and perception of truly historical identity: preservation of type, continuity of principles, power of assimilation, logical sequence, anticipation of the future, conservative action upon the past, and chronic vigor (chapter 5). Behind these criteria is the thesis that the “alternatives” that Newman finds in “Anglicanism” and in “liberal Protestantism” (as confessional “types”) in the end examine historical identity naively and therefore fail to do justice to the object and are, finally, unhistorical. This thesis, however, must also be tested against its object. Newman therefore gives an example of how to carry out this program for investigating historical identity (chapters 6–12). Finally, there is an existential certainty, typically, in the sense of converging probabilities: I can trust the Church. I do not have to work through the entirety of the history of doctrine, because, again, the Church’s continuity and unity and its manifest identity with the origin, suffice for assurance that the Catholic Church remains in its entirety in the identity of its origin.

Behind all this, however, there is at the heart of Newman’s *Essay* a discovery of the historicity of faith that avoids at every turn the temptation both of an idealistic philosophy of history and a relativist historicism, a discovery that meets both on their own level while holding fast to the historicity of faith. Indeed, in contrast to the “humanist” and “Enlightenment” types of historical reason—both of which hold to a static, propositionalist understanding of Christian doctrine—it radicalizes the historicity of the faith even more deeply. In this, the propositional element of dogma is in no way devalued. On the contrary: it is located as an essential *aspect* within a broader category. The event of divine revelation manifests itself for Newman in the human spirit as the fullness of an idea, which releases man into a truly historical process of appropriation. This process does not occur naturally or “smoothly,” but rather involves crises, challenges and struggles, even as it is firmly grounded in the history of God’s concern for the safekeeping of his truth.

In Newman’s sermon of Candlemas, 1843, the primary image for this process of historical understanding is the Mother of God: “But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). The truth that she faithfully guarded and treasured opened up even to her over the course of a long process, which certainly did not run smoothly, in a journey through life that was just beginning.

She thus becomes the primary image of the church, which remains identical with [itself] though growing and changing.

This is why the study of Newman's book is a constant exercise in the ability to perceive the identity of the faith in the multiplicity of its historical forms. This is also why it is a book that urgently demands to be read.—*Translated by Emily Rielley* □

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