

CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF THE IRREFORMABILITY OF DOGMA

The Catholic Church, being committed to the view that Christ provided for an abiding living magisterium to herald in an authoritative way the revelation fully communicated in apostolic times, has throughout its history been obliged to defend its position against two sets of adversaries. On one flank are the archaists, who maintain that the apostolic faith, as set forth in the Bible, admits of no further dogmatic development. On the other flank are the rationalists and modernists who contend that the native ability of the human intelligence to achieve progress in all fields demands that the Church should not commit itself to any past revelation as permanently normative for the present and the future.

In the time of Pius IX the Roman magisterium had to address itself to both these sets of adversaries. In several authoritative documents the Holy See made use of the phrase of Vincent of Lerins that the Church's teaching evolves homogeneously *in eodem scilicet dogmate, eodem sensu, eademque sententia* (DS 3020; cf. DS 3802, 3043). This formula, like the Chalcedonian definition regarding the two natures of Christ, is not so much a solution as an effort to ward off simplistic solutions that would suppress one aspect or the other of the question. Further probing is necessary in order to discern how dogma remains self-identical while evolving.

The term "irreformability," to which I have been asked to address myself, has been familiar to all Catholic theologians since Vatican Council I. In its Constitution on the Church, *Pastor Aeternus*, the Council declared that the definitions of the Roman pontiff are irreformable, not by reason of the consent of the Church, but *ex sese* (DS 3074). In the context, the point of the definition is evidently not to affirm the fact of irreformability but rather to identify its source, namely the infallibility of the pope. Read against the background of the Gallican "Four Articles" of 1682, from which the term comes, "irreformable" may here be taken in a juridical sense as meaning "not subject to review by any higher authority."

In the Modernist crisis at the end of the nineteenth century the question of irreformability became differently focused. Alfred Loisy took the position that truth is perpetually in flux as man and the world progressively evolve. Revelation and dogma, he held, are mutable because all truth is mutable.¹ Loisy's position on this point was explicitly condemned by the Decree of the Holy Office, *Lamentabile sane* (1907) (DS 3458). The anti-Modernist oath, *Sacrorum antistites* (1910), repudiates the view that dogmas evolve by passing from one meaning to another, different from that which the Church previously accepted (DS 3541).

Driven underground but not solved by the anti-Modernist decrees, the problem of dogmatic change surfaced again in the *nouvelle théologie* of the 1940s. In the conclusion of his celebrated study, *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas d'Aquin*, Henri Bouillard attempted to do justice to the necessarily conditioned character of human discourse without falling into a Modernistic relativism. He declared:

Christian truth never subsists in a pure state. By this we do not mean that it must inevitably be presented mingled with error, but that it is always imbedded in contingent notions and schemes which determine its rational structure. It cannot be isolated from these. It can be liberated from one system of notions only by passing into another. . . . Thus the divine truth is never accessible prior to all contingent notions. Such is the law of incarnation.

History does not, however, lead to relativism. It enables one to grasp, in the heart of the theological evolution, an absolute. Not indeed an absolute of representation, but an absolute of affirmation. If the notions, methods, and systems change with time, the affirmations which they contain remain, even though they are expressed in different categories. Yet more, it is the affirmations themselves which, to retain their meaning in a new intellectual universe, determine new notions, methods, and systems in correspondence with this universe.²

Although Bouillard in this study was primarily concerned with theological systems (Augustinianism and Thomism), he applied his

¹ *Autour d'un petit livre* (Paris, 1903), 192, 203.

² *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1944), 220.

conclusions also to Conciliar definitions.³ Councils, he asserted, have often used contingent technical notions in their propositions, but they have not intended to consecrate these terms as linked with the philosophical system from which they are taken. Since truth resides not in the concept but in the judgment, Bouillard contended, the Councils do not sanction notions, but propositions.⁴

How did Bouillard safeguard the immutable truth of the affirmation while allowing for the contingency of the notions? Every notion, he argued, has its meaning in the context of other notions. When an old truth is inserted into a new system, it cannot be affirmed by means of the old concept, but must be conceived in a way proportioned to the new framework. "When the mind evolves, an immutable truth maintains itself only thanks to a simultaneous and correlative evolution of all the notions, maintaining an identical relationship among them. A theology which was not up to date [*actuelle*] would be a false theology."⁵

As is well known, the proposals of Bouillard were unfavorably received in conservative Scholastic circles. M.-J. Garrigou-Lagrange and others accused Bouillard and his supporters of falling into relativism, of compromising the irreformable teachings of the magisterium, and of reviving the errors of Modernism. Among Bouillard's opponents, M.-M. Labourdette and M.-J. Nicolas contended that the God who had revealed himself in human language has likewise guaranteed the relationship between the concepts of faith and the salvific realities to which they refer. They held therefore that the concepts and even the terminology of the Conciliar definitions are irreplaceable.⁶

In response to this controversy, the magisterium once more intervened. Pius XII's encyclical *Humani generis* (1950), without singling out any particular theologians for condemnation, rejected the view of those who "contend that the mysteries of faith can never be signified by adequately true notions, but only by what they call

³ *Ibid.*, 221-2.

⁴ H. Bouillard, "Notions conciliaires et analogie de la vérité," *Recherches de science religieuse* 35 (1948), 251-71, esp. 258-63.

⁵ *Conversion et grâce*, 219.

⁶ The views of these authors are summarized by E. Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology* 2 (New York, 1968), 14.

'approximative' and always mutable notions, by which the truth is in some measure manifested but is necessarily also deformed" (DS 3882). Whatever some other theologians might have said, Bouillard had not stated that the notions inevitably deform the truth, nor had he said that all theological notions were mutable; but he would hardly have admitted that the notions used in definitions of faith are "adequately true."

In the following paragraph *Humani generis* went on to deplore the "dogmatic relativism" of those who would hold that the same divine truth may be expressed on the human side by concepts which, even though mutually opposed, signify the same divine reality. In opposition to this, *Humani generis* taught that the theological notions in the Catholic tradition are based on a true knowledge of created things, and that some of these notions, moreover, have been used and even hallowed by Ecumenical Councils, so that it would be wrong (*nefas*) to depart from them (DS 3883). True, the terms and concepts of the Scholastic and dogmatic tradition could always be further perfected and polished; but to treat them with disrespect would inevitably undermine the vigor of speculative theology (DS 3883-84).

Fifteen years after *Humani generis*, and just before the close of Vatican Council II, Paul VI reiterated substantially the same doctrine, in very similar words. In his encyclical on the Eucharist (*Mysterium fidei*, Sept. 1965)⁷ he taught that the formulas used by Trent to express the Church's eucharistic faith, "like the others which the Church uses to propose the dogmas of the faith, express concepts which are not tied to a certain definite form of human culture, or to a certain stage of scientific progress, or to one theological school or another, but exhibit that which the human mind, in its universal and necessary experience of reality, perceives. . . . Hence they are suited to men of all times and places." Although these formulas "can be more clearly and evidently explained," they can and should be retained in their original meaning.⁸

From the documents thus far cited, it would seem that the magisterium since Vatican I has continued to insist on the irreformability

⁷ AAS 57 (1965), 753-74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 758. cf. Paulist Press edition (Glen Rock, N.J., 1966), nos. 24-5, pp. 34-35.

of dogma, and has interpreted this as signifying not merely that the affirmations must be retained, but that the very concepts and even the terms, when endorsed by the highest authority, are to remain in force. The only admissible type of development would be a further refinement of what is in the original teaching. A discontinuous shift into a different thought-system, such as Bouillard was describing, does not appear to be countenanced.

The documents of Vatican II, however, seem to take a more liberal approach. This is notably true of the Decree on Ecumenism and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

The Decree on Ecumenism includes a very interesting analysis of the diversity between the styles of thought and expression in the East and West. "The heritage handed down by the apostles," it affirms, "was received in different forms and ways, so that from the very beginning of the Church it has had a varied development in various places, thanks to a similar variety of natural gifts and conditions of life."⁹ Renouncing any pretension of the West to impose its own thought-forms on the East, the Decree finds positive value in the diversity of traditions. "It is hardly surprising if sometimes one tradition has come nearer than the other to an apt appreciation of certain aspects of a revealed mystery, or has expressed them in a clearer manner. As a result, these various theological formulations are often to be considered complementary rather than conflicting" (n. 17, p. 360). In these sentences the Council seems to imply that the formulas of proclamation and theology in the East and West are, at least in some instances, culturally conditioned, and hence not suited to all times and places.

The temporal aspects of doctrinal adaptation are more explicitly dealt with in the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes*. In its Introductory Statement this document points out the necessity of familiarizing oneself with the contemporary mentality in order to be able to speak to men's questions "in language intelligible to each generation" (n. 4, p. 202). Man, explains the Constitution, is undergoing a spiritual revolution which has vast repercussions in the religious area. In particular, "the human race has passed from a rather static

⁹ Art. 14, pp. 357-58. Page references to *The Documents of Vatican II* are here given according to the edition of W. M. Abbott (New York, 1966).

concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one" (n. 5, p. 204). In subsequent paragraphs, *Gaudium et spes* encourages theologians to work out new ways of presenting the faith to men of today (n. 62, p. 268). Here *Gaudium et spes* adds, practically quoting Pope John XXIII, "The deposit of faith or revealed truths are one thing; the manner in which they are formulated without violence to their meaning and significance is another" (pp. 268-69). This process of reformulation, according to the Council, is no novelty, "for from the beginning of her history she [the Church] has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various peoples and has tried to clarify it with the wisdom of the philosophers, too. . . . Thus each nation develops the ability to express Christ's message in its own way" (n. 44, p. 246; cf. n.58, p. 264).

Thus there seems to be, *prima facie*, a difference in emphasis if not in teaching between two sets of documents. Some documents, such as *Humani generis* and *Mysterium fidei*, accent the universal and timeless value of the Church's concepts and formulas. Others, such as *Unitatis redintegratio* and *Gaudium et spes*, allow for, and even encourage, a variety of formulations in accordance with the mentality and traditions of different peoples and ages.

Since Vatican Council II the question of the irreformability of dogma has become acute throughout the Church. In its effort to break out of the narrow mold of the Neo-Scholasticism, Catholic theology has been seeking to enter into fruitful contact with other traditions of thought, such as Pragmatism, Existentialism, and Process Theology. Under such circumstances many of the ancient doctrines of the Church seem to demand translation into new terms and concepts if they are to retain their intelligibility. In the present turmoil the guarded statements of Bouillard seem prudent and moderate.

Schematically it seems possible to distinguish three main positions in contemporary theology. On the right are those who see no reason for modifying the positions taken by Garrigou-Lagrange and the conservative Scholastics in the 1940s. On the left are theologians who maintain that doctrine is reformable because the Church, in all its declarations, is fallible. In the center are those who accept the infallibility of the Church in its official teaching, but wish to make room for some kind of reformability in dogma. I shall give particular

attention to theologians of this mediating tendency, because I feel that they have the most light to shed on the problem of this paper. I shall present three European authors (Schillebeeckx, Rahner, and Kasper), two North American authors (Dewart and Atkins), and then draw some conclusions.

SCHILLEBEECKX

Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., announces as his intention to work out a *via media* between the Modernists and the Neo-Scholastics. In his 1954 essay, "The Concept of Truth,"¹⁰ he repudiates the positions of Tyrrell on the left and of the Neo-Scholastics on the right. For Tyrrell, he declares, revelation consists in a mystical contact with God, and theological concepts have merely pragmatic value as symbolic representations. Being determined by socio-cultural conditions, concepts are radically changeable. The Neo-Scholastics, on the other hand, hold that the concepts of faith are immutable because they grasp the revealed realities and exactly correspond to them. To sacrifice the concept would be to sacrifice the truth itself. In contradistinction to both these positions, Schillebeeckx opts for a "perspectival" view of truth, according to which the concepts do attain the divine and the absolute, but only from a particular point of view. While they fall short of representing the divine truth, they objectively refer to it, and thus make it possible for our minds, through them, to encounter the saving reality from some particular angle.

In a 1962 addition to the essay just referred to Schillebeeckx goes on to consider the reinterpretation of dogma.¹¹ The dogmas of the Church, he asserts, include concepts which refer to the saving realities, but this strictly conceptual and sharply defined aspect is always associated with a wider background or context which is conditioned by the socio-cultural situation. This context is not in fact part of the definition, though it may often be confused with it. Thus for the early Christians the doctrine of Christ's Ascension was thought of as an upward movement toward heaven, in accordance with the view of the

¹⁰ Reprinted with some additions in *Revelation and Theology 2 (op. cit.)*, 5-29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23-9.

universe then popularly accepted. Theology must continually strive to purify the dogmas of the faith from representational elements which are historically conditioned and obsolete. It must also seek to enrich and nuance the concepts from the vantage point of a more sophisticated world view.

In this article Schillebeeckx seems to be trying to mediate between the views of Bouillard and those of Bouillard's critics. He wants to remain within the limits of *Humani generis* and still make room for demythologization. While one may respect these intentions, Schillebeeckx allows himself to be forced into an extraordinarily subtle, if not inconsistent, position. Bouillard was at least consistent in including concepts within the mutable ingredient. Once one admits that man's grasp of truth is perspectival, it seems to follow inevitably that concepts are forged in accordance with the perspective one adopts. As often as the perspective changes, new concepts have to be forged. When councils of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries refer to "substantial form" or "transubstantiation," these terms have to be understood in the light of the perspectives and categories afforded by the prevalent philosophies of that time. If process theology or existential phenomenology is a legitimate framework for theologizing, different concepts have to be forged as equivalents for the medieval ones. The latter cannot be incorporated as they stand into a new and different system.

In his writing since Vatican II, Schillebeeckx is less insistent on the permanence of concepts. In a recent essay, "Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics"¹² he denies the identity of the content of faith with the concepts by which faith is expressed, and consequently allows for the mutability of the concepts. He writes:

In their explicitly conceptual content, the dynamics of our understanding of faith are therefore essentially active both in a demythologizing and in a "mythologizing" way, on the one hand demolishing earlier representations of the truths of faith and on the other constructing new concepts. The vital core of our knowledge in faith is never what is capable of being *fixed* conceptually, but our concepts are assuredly subject to its normative influence. The conceptuality which belongs to our

¹² *God the Future of Man* (New York, 1968), 3-49.

thinking, and hence to our understanding of the faith, is subject to our situation in history. The real content of human knowing and believing is the ever present *mystery* of promise—the mystery which is not uttered, which is everywhere reaching towards expression but in itself is never thought.¹³

Schillebeeckx's present position, as I understand it, would require him to say that dogmas are irreformable insofar as the truth which came to expression in them at the time they were formulated must not be allowed to perish, but must be made to live again in the context of a contemporary view of the world. This can only be done, however, if we have the courage to re-conceptualize the truth in categories appropriate to our day. In situating the heart of faith in a preconceptual grasp of the "mystery of promise" rather than in the concepts or statements of faith, Schillebeeckx relativizes both the importance and the permanence of dogma, in the sense of propositional formulation. For a fuller discussion of a view of dogma that might be compatible with Schillebeeckx's present position, we may now turn to two German theologians, Rahner and Kasper.

RAHNER

Karl Rahner approaches the problem of dogma and its "irreformability" from the standpoint of the "transcendental Thomism" set forth in his philosophical works. For him revelation consists essentially and primarily in an ineffable presence of the God of grace in the human spirit, enlightening it and drawing it toward himself. The objective formulas of revelation (predicamental revelation) have to be interpreted against this unthematic background. If interpreted in any other framework, the analogous language of dogmatic speech would inevitably be misunderstood.

From this position, Rahner was able to say in his 1954 paper on Chalcedon that every dogma is a beginning as well as an end.¹⁴ Once the definition has been made, the process of its assimilation and interpretation is ready to begin. The mind, stimulated by the presence

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40 (italics in original).

¹⁴ "Chalkedon—End oder Anfang?" in A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht, *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart* 3 (Würzburg, 1954), 3-49. Cf. *Theol. Investigations* 1 (Baltimore, 1961), 149-200.

of the "ever greater" truth which is God himself, moves forward through the formula towards a more vivid apprehension of the divine mystery. In its effort to penetrate more deeply the true significance of the accepted formulas, theology reaches out constantly for new images, new analogies, new terms and concepts.

In his important essay, "What is a Dogmatic Statement?"¹⁵ Rahner gives his fullest explanation of the relationship between dogmatic speech and the saving mysteries to which they refer. Dogmas, he says, refer not simply to direct objects of sense experience, but to mysteries realized in the spiritual experience of man under grace. Thus there is a peculiar tension between what is said (in terms of the representational value of the concepts) and what is meant (the non-objective, preconceptual salvific reality). A unique analogy is at work here: the terms must be "demythologized" with reference to an experienced reality which cannot be adequately put into words. No terminology of itself can be adequate to communicate the infinitely full and incalculably rich reality of God who communicates himself in love. Dogmatic statements therefore have a special type of truth: they become true insofar as they lead us into the reality of the mystery itself.¹⁶ The terms are mystagogical: they conjure up the experience of the absolute mystery which communicates itself to us in the grace of Jesus Christ. The experience of this grace gives a light which makes it possible for us to purify the concepts by a way of negation and eminence.

Since Vatican II Rahner has several times discussed the "irreformability" of dogmatic statements with reference to the pilgrim situation of the Church. In his commentary on *Lumen gentium* he writes: "The 'irreformable' nature of dogma clearly excludes only error in faith. It does not affirm that the dogmatic definition is necessarily opportune in all respects, or that it corresponds fully to the justifiable demands of the mentality of a given age, or that it may not be replaced later by a better formulation. The development of dogma doesn't blot out the past history of the faith of the Church, and yet it is never simply closed. In this sense it is always 'reformable'."¹⁷

¹⁵ *Theol. Investigations* 5 (Baltimore, 1966) 42-66.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁷ In H. Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* 1 (New York, 1967) 213.

Similar in tendency is Rahner's article on "The Church and the Parousia of Christ."¹⁸ Here Rahner accounts for both the reformability and the irreformability of dogmatic statements in terms of the paradoxical situation of the Church as an eschatological reality within history. Because the Church is eschatological it pertains already to the last times; it is the definitive community of salvation. The Church is indefectible because it represents (as a real symbol) God's definitive "yes" to man uttered in Jesus Christ. It must remain in history as a faithful witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. If the Church, by a definitive and irreversible act, were to contradict Christ's truth, the total Church would be brought into clear contradiction with Christ, which is impossible in view of the nature of the Christian revelation itself. Therefore, Rahner concludes, the supreme commitments of the highest doctrinal office in the Church are to be accepted as guaranteed by Christ himself.

On the other hand, Rahner observes, the Church is still in a pilgrim situation. It must laboriously wend its way through the darkness of this aeon. We cannot distinguish with absolute clarity where infallibility begins and ends. Even an infallible definition may be one-sided, inopportune, poorly expressed. A definition may *de facto* be accompanied by interpretations, representational schemata, and practical results which do not enjoy the privilege of infallibility. Perhaps only later can these concomitants be clearly and reflexly distinguished from the definition itself. Infallibility, then, is not meant to bring the believer or the Church as yet into that perfect light and clarity which is promised in the final vision of God.¹⁹

In several recent papers Rahner has expatiated on the difficulty of distinguishing between the absolutely binding kernel of a dogmatic definition and the chaff of misunderstanding by which it may be surrounded, even in the minds of those who impose the definition.²⁰ The terms used in a definition are never fixed and final, pure and unquestionable. These concepts come into theology from the usage of a

¹⁸ *Theol. Investigations* 6 (Baltimore, 1969) 295-312.

¹⁹ For some similar reflections on the value and limits of ecclesiastical formulations, see Rahner's "A Small Fragment 'On the Collective Finding of Truth,'" *Theol. Investigations* 6, pp. 82-8.

²⁰ In this and the following paragraphs I shall follow closely the argument of Rahner's address, "The Historical Dimensions of Theology," *Theology Digest* (1968) (supplement), 30-42.

given culture, and even after they are taken into theology, they continue to have a history both within the Church and outside it. It is therefore impossible to say at any given moment just what pertains to the essence of the concept. For example, when we speak of "original sin," how precisely does the notion of sin differ from that which is meant when we speak of personal sin? When the Church says that original sin is transmitted by "generation," exactly what does the term "generation" mean? Often in the minds of the bishops or popes responsible for the definition the true doctrine may have been accompanied with misunderstandings due in part to an imperfect conceptual model. For example, Augustine thought that original sin was transmitted by carnal concupiscence; those who introduced "transubstantiation" into the definitions of the Church's eucharistic faith thought that there was such a thing as the "substance of the bread." No one can easily decide how much of these associated ideas can be trimmed away without infringing on the dogmatic core of the definition.

It would be a false tutorialism to imagine that the safer course were to cling to the understanding in the minds of the first framers of the definition. This policy would be highly detrimental to the faith, for it would commit the Church, in some measure, to the mentality of a dying age, and to that extent diminish the power of the gospel. Theology must constantly labor to keep the understanding of dogma abreast of the times, and in this way contribute to the Church's task of preaching to the contemporary world.²¹

Where is the continuity in the understanding of dogma? Rahner does not hold that the concepts must be retained, even in a "polished" form. If we falsely attribute perennial value to the concepts of an earlier time, the dogmatic formulas gradually become unintelligible and opaque. In order to explain these supposedly "perennial" concepts we have to use other concepts which reflect the stream of ongoing human thought. Why then should one not form new concepts out of this historical and ongoing process of explanation—concepts which retain what is valid in the earlier expressions?²²

Before Chalcedon Eastern Christology had to explain what we

²¹ "Historical Dimensions," 35; cf. K. Rahner, *Belief Today* (New York, 1967), 51-53.

²² "Historical Dimensions," 34.

call the "hypostatic union" without using this technical expression. The Church since Chalcedon has had to explain the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria in terms of concepts which do not appear in Cyril.²³ This process of reconceptualization continues. There is an underlying identity in the divinely revealed truth, but we do not possess this in perennial concepts or terms. We possess the divine truth only from within history, and hence we must entrust ourselves to the continuation of the historical process. Since faith is an ultimate and total interpretation of human existence, it can never be satisfied with un-historical, abstract statements, assuming that such statements are even possible. Statements of the faith must remain in close contact with the actual historical situation. It is only in that situation that the Spirit leads the Church again and again to encounter the truth she has always had.

Like Schillebeeckx in his recent work, Rahner locates revelation primarily in the depths of the human spirit as it encounters the mystery of the self-revealing God. In terms of his philosophical anthropology, Rahner can explain why this must be so. His analysis of the unlimited transcendence of the human spirit makes it possible for him to uphold the absolute and definitive character of the Christian revelation. Further, Rahner's analysis of the social and historical dimensions of the human person provides him with materials with which to do justice to the role of the Church. By its dogmatic teaching, the Church assures the historical transmission of the revelation which has come to mankind in Christ. The dialectical relationship between the transcendental and predicamental aspects of revelation, in Rahner's theology, enables him to hold on to the permanence of dogma without denying that, from a certain point of view, it may also be mutable. His balanced and nuanced position, while making room for more discontinuity than would have been allowed by the Neo-Scholastic theory of knowledge, does not forfeit the traditional claim that the Church can definitively declare the truth revealed in Christ.

KASPER

Walter Kasper, a younger colleague of Rahner at Münster until his recent return to Tübingen, while relying on Rahner for much of

²³ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

what he says, adds many valuable observations from the standpoint of doctrinal history. In his groundbreaking study on the nature of dogma²⁴ he made it clear that the absolutist concept of dogma which became enshrined in the textbooks of the early twentieth century was itself, ironically, the product of historical conditioning. Fundamentally, the groundwork was laid by Greek metaphysical thinking which looked upon the eternal as superior to the temporal. Truth for the Greek mind (as contrasted with the Biblical) consisted in an escape from the ambiguity of flux into the realm of pure and changeless ideas.²⁵ Eighteenth century rationalism made its contribution by its tendency to atomize revelation into a determinate number of clear and distinct ideas.²⁶ When this non-historical thinking was challenged by German idealism in the nineteenth century, Catholic theology reacted in a negative and defensive way, laying unprecedented stress on the authority of the ecclesiastical magisterium.²⁷ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Church made certain declarations which so accented the divinely authoritative character of dogma that its stormy human history was cast into the shade.²⁸

Vatican II, according to Kasper, reversed the previous trend by fully accepting the involvement of the Church in history.²⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, as we have noted above, characterizes our era as one marked by the development of a historical and dynamic view of reality.³⁰ What does this mean for the notion of dogma itself?

For Kasper, the fact that human nature is totally involved in history makes it inevitable that all human thought and expression, even when it has to do with God and revelation, must be marked by a certain provisionality. While maintaining that there is an abiding human essence, Kasper asserts that this does not exist except in

²⁴ *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes* (Mainz, 1965).

²⁵ W. Kasper, "Geschichtlichkeit der Dogmen?" *Stimmen der Zeit* 179 (1967), 401-16, p. 402.

²⁶ *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes*, 35-42.

²⁷ W. Kasper, *The Methods of Dogmatic Theology* (Glen Rock, N.J., 1969), 19.

²⁸ "Geschichtlichkeit," 407.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 402.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 404; cf. *supra*, p. 115ff.

mutable forms. The constant attributes of human nature—rationality, bodiliness, freedom, sociability—are themselves realized in varying ways. Thus man cannot think or speak except under the conditions in which he finds himself.³¹

The word of God is not exempt from these human limitations. In Christ God has taken on the fragmentariness of history *inconfuse, inseparabiliter* (DS 302), and thus our anthropological considerations must hold in the domain of faith. The word of God must be found in the dimensions of history.³²

Applying these considerations to dogma, Kasper reaffirms much of what Rahner has said. Dogma, he holds, must in some sense be abidingly true; otherwise it would not reflect the definitiveness of Jesus Christ as the final appearance of God's truth. But dogma, insofar as it is a human affirmation about this revelation, must also contain an element of provisionality. The fulfillment of all God's promises in Jesus Christ is not yet manifest; the Church is still under-way.

The Church lives precisely through the proclamation of its own provisionality. In the meantime dogmas can be stations on the way, but they cannot be the goal. They must prove themselves true inasmuch as they point beyond themselves and open up the future of the Church rather than bring it to a halt. The Church must not rigidly cut itself off and isolate itself by means of dogmas. Rather, they should serve to preserve openness and to prevent heretical constriction and induration.³³

The flexibility of dogma, according to Kasper, is demanded in order that it may perform a threefold service toward faith. First, it must function as a vehicle for the expression of the personal faith of the men who actually compose the Church; it must be "thought liturgy," and liturgy, conversely, must be "prayed dogma." This is the "doxological" function of dogma.³⁴ Secondly, dogma must open up new horizons of promise, leading men closer to the ever greater

³¹ *Ibid.*, 404-5.

³² *Ibid.*, 406, 414.

³³ *Ibid.*, 409.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 407.

God. It has an "eschatological" dimension of promise.³⁵ Thirdly, dogma must serve the life and mission of the Church, whose faith it expresses. Dogmas are not to be multiplied uselessly, by fanatical *Konsequenzmacherei*, but they must make sense in terms of the actual situation.³⁶ The gospel is not rightly proclaimed unless it awakens faith, hope, and love in the contemporary world.³⁷

Excessive concern for the stability of the formulations of faith, Kasper concludes, can be a sign of lack of faith. There is no reason why the Christian should be afraid of history, since by taking on human nature, the Word of God has assumed and elevated historicity itself. For the Christian, history is no longer an oppressive law standing over man, but rather the way on which we walk in trust and faith, assured that God is with us.³⁸

Kasper does not claim to have "solved" the paradox of reconciling the identity of the faith with the different forms of life, thought, and speech which are inherent in the human situation. In a sense, he would have to deny that the problem can be solved; for there is no changeless core of the gospel that can be distilled "chemically pure." The abiding essence does not exist except in mutable forms. Thus no one can point to any given doctrine and state that, as actually understood and expressed, it must endure forever. What Kasper does is to exclude a false solution which would seek to separate the historical from the suprahistorical. Every human statement of revelation, because it is human, is mutable; every such human statement, because it is a statement of revelation, expresses something permanently valid.

Kasper's observations on the historicity of dogma are on the whole in line with those of Rahner, though he goes slightly beyond the latter in emphasizing the historical relativity of individual pronouncements of the magisterium.^{38a} More the historian than the

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 408-10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 411.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 416.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

^{38a} In a paper published since my own remarks were delivered in oral form, Rahner differentiates his views on infallibility from those of Hans Küng and Walter Kasper, both of whom, in his estimation, would hold that the infallibility of the Church is quite consistent with errors by the magisterium in partic-

metaphysician, Kasper lacks the originality and profundity of Rahner, but he writes with greater clarity and backs up many of Rahner's contentions with apt illustrations from the history of doctrine. Like Rahner, he apparently feels at home with the solemn teachings of the official Church, though he claims the right to interpret all Church pronouncements against the background of the situation out of which they arose. He thus does not feel bound to take every magisterial declaration at face value.

DEWART

Leslie Dewart, a layman who teaches at St. Michael's in Toronto, has indicated his views on the reformability of dogma in his 1966 bestseller, *The Future of Belief*, and his 1969 sequel to it, *The Foundations of Belief*.

Like our three European witnesses, Dewart holds that "the truth of Christianity is a historical, not an eternal one."³⁹ He therefore refuses to seek some abiding essence of Christianity behind its cultural manifestations. Further, he holds that it is futile to seek any one immutable form of dogma. Dogma necessarily uses particular cultural forms, and all such forms are historically conditioned. For dogma to keep alive, therefore, it must change in accordance with the shifting forms of man's cultural awareness. Failure to change could only involve the Church in a growing alienation from modern culture:

The development of dogma can be understood as the historical transformation and evolution of the conceptualization of the Christian faith. This is possible because the Christian faith is not wedded to any given cultural form, any more than it is to be found as a pure essence, devoid of a concrete cultural form. As it can endure through history and transcend cultures, it can transcend concepts. Therefore, the traditional Christian faith can be cast not only in the traditional concepts but also in the novel, emergent concepts that an evolving human experience creates.⁴⁰

ular definitions. See K. Rahner, "Zum Begriff der Unfehlbarkeit in der katholischen Theologie," *Stimmen der Zeit* 186 (July 1970) 18-31, especially pp. 18f.

³⁹ *The Future of Belief* (New York, 1967), 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 118-9.

Fundamental to Dewart's position is his philosophical analysis of the concept.⁴¹ Conceptualization, as he understands it, is the socio-historical process by which animal knowledge becomes elaborated into the psychic life proper to man. There can be no valid separation between sensation and intellection, or between conceptualization and language. Concepts, as the means by which we relate ourselves to the demands of a given situation, have to be constantly revised in accordance with new situations. The truth of concepts, Dewart believes, is not their correspondence with some antecedent reality to which they must conform, but rather their effectiveness in enabling man to deal with successive situations. The concepts of faith, accordingly, are true to the extent that they effectively relate man to the reality in which he believes, thereby enabling him to intensify and enrich his authentic religious experience.⁴²

Conceding that his views are in some respects close to Modernism, Dewart takes pains to distinguish his position from that condemned in the anti-Modernist documents.⁴³ Unlike the Modernists as portrayed in *Pascendi gregis*, Dewart holds that the faith experience is brought about not by man's instinctual drives but by the free and personal presence of God to human history; further, he holds—in contradistinction to the Modernists—that man necessarily requires the mediation of concepts and language in order to be conscious of God's self-revelation.

Wherein does Dewart find the continuity and self-identity of Christian faith? It is not, he maintains, a static continuity of mere repetition, nor is it, on the other hand, the merely phenomenal continuity of unbroken passage from the same to the different. Rather, it is "a faithful continuity, that is, a continuity like that of human existence itself, which embodies and brings up to the present the progress of its career and the perfection of its original inspiration."⁴⁴ Development, therefore, can be understood as the historical transformation and evolution of the concepts of the Christian faith. De-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 100-7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114-6, note 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 116-7.

velopment, as Dewart conceives of it, permits the emergence of novel concepts created by evolving human experience.⁴⁵

Since conceptualization, in his theory, is radically unstable, Dewart displays little interest in saving the authority of magisterial declarations. Docile submission to the Church's teaching office is, for him, unworthy of the modern Christian. "The nature of the authority of the teaching office," he writes, "cannot adequately be understood in the simplistic terms of the past. . . . For modern man no longer learns, in any sphere whatever, by being told what the truth is."⁴⁶ The idea of unconditionally binding propositions, whether in Scripture or in Church documents, strikes Dewart as a relic of an undeveloped stage in human consciousness. For the man of our day, he contends, it is impossible to think of God's revelation as being tied to infallible statements. Rather, God "reveals himself in and through human concepts whose truth is ever inconclusive, ever growing, ever evolving, since these concepts share in the nature of all human conscious life."⁴⁷

Dewart's urgent demands for the modernization of Catholic dogma may well be justified. I have no difficulty with his views on the mutability of concepts, and on the primacy of experience over conceptualization. But he dichotomizes too much between experience and concept, and underestimates the noetic importance of both. In his polemics against the "correspondence" theory of truth he sometimes speaks as though concepts and statements could be true regardless of the way things really are.⁴⁸ In so doing, he deprives the Church's confessions of faith of a great part of their seriousness. When Christians proclaim that Jesus is the Incarnate Word or that he rose from the dead, they surely intend to do more than report

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁶ *The Foundations of Belief* (New York, 1969) 453.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 464.

⁴⁸ See in this connection the criticisms of Trethowan and Lonergan in G. Baum (ed.), *The Future of Belief Debate* (New York, 1967), 13-17, 69-91. In his most recent work, *Religion, Language, and Truth* (New York, 1970), Dewart guards against this objection. He says that true statements *do* conform to reality, but that their truth does not *consist in* their conformity to reality. See pp. 121-2.

on their own states of consciousness. Dewart himself, in a sentence that seems hard to reconcile with his general thesis, speaks of Redemption as "having been accomplished as a concrete and discrete historical event."⁴⁹ To affirm the reality of this past event seems, indeed, essential to the self-identity of Christian faith. In referring to experience and consciousness, Dewart makes too little of the historical continuity of Christian faith from age to age, and of the objective referential value which Christians have always understood to be involved in creeds and confessions.⁵⁰

Dewart's views on the magisterium are so briefly indicated that it would be unfair to criticize them for their lacunae. It is misleading, however, to state, as he does, that modern man can no longer learn by being told the truth. It is hard to think of a time when the Church was so insistently bidden to speak the truth. Whether the magisterium has the mandate to speak the truth infallibly is of course a complicated theological question. But Dewart's negative response seems overhasty, and is perhaps based on a simplistic view of both magisterium and infallibility. As is apparent from the European theologians we have examined, there are ways of defending the Church's infallible teaching office that do not preclude development through reconceptualization, as called for by the historicity of man. Critical intelligence may properly be applied to the evaluation and interpretation of magisterial declarations.

ATKINS

To complete this survey, some mention should be made of the work of a young American, Anselm Atkins, O.S.C.O. In two important articles he has explored the possibility of applying to the theory of doctrinal development the philosophical epistemologies of, respectively, Whitehead and Hegel.

⁴⁹ *The Future of Belief*, pp. 115-6, note.

⁵⁰ In affirming this I by no means wish to minimize the importance of including in the full Christian concept of truth the dynamic and personalistic elements found in the biblical notion of *alēthia*. As has been pointed out by Ian de la Potterie, Oswald Loretz, and others, there is an important pragmatic ingredient in the idea of "salvation-truth"; but we must content ourselves in the present context with a mere reference to this question, which is too large and weighty to be treated here.

In the first of these articles,⁵¹ Atkins points out that the meaning of positive statements of the faith is normally clarified, in Church Councils, by corresponding anathemas. The rejected error, according to Atkins, operates as a "negative prehension" (Whitehead's term) and thus provides a partial key to the meaning of the doctrine asserted. This cannot mean, however, that the words of the condemned proposition may never be understood in a sense compatible with orthodox belief. Because theological statements are always susceptible of a plurality of possible interpretations, it is sufficient, for the truth of the anathema, that one of the meanings of the condemned proposition be false.

Turning to the question of irreformability, Atkins maintains that there may be room for a legitimate development which retrieves a true meaning within some anathematized proposition. When this occurs, one may enunciate an orthodox proposition which possibly uses a verbal form identical with the one formerly condemned.⁵²

In some instances, Atkins maintains, an assertion and a denial cannot be reconciled, not because they are strictly contradictory, but rather because each of them is set forth in an excessively narrow framework of discourse. This might be true, he suggests, of the recurrent doctrine of *apokatastasis*, or of the Reformers' denial of indulgences, or of certain contemporary objections to the doctrine of Mary's Assumption. In cases such as these, an ecumenical theology should encourage the emergence of new settings in which the Christian insights embodied in condemned propositions can be absorbed into the orthodox system. For a higher synthesis to occur, the limitations within which the original proposition is true must be acknowledged.⁵³

As Atkins himself notes, Whitehead's theory of the development of ideas is in basic accord with what Newman and Rahner have to say on the development of Christian doctrine. By showing the

⁵¹ "Religious Assertions and Doctrinal Development," *Theological Studies* 27 (1966) 523-52.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 532-33. In this connection one is reminded of the use of phrases such as *simul iustus et peccator* and *Ecclesia semper reformanda* in contemporary Catholic theology, with the warrant of Vatican Council II. See *Lumen gentium* n. 8 (p. 24) and *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 6 (p. 350).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 537-8, 543.

theological utility of certain distinctively Whiteheadian insights, Atkins has made a solid contribution to the doctrine of "irreformability."

More recently, Atkins has raised the question whether Hegel's dialectical logic might not have similar relevance to the theology of doctrinal development.⁵⁴ Dissatisfied with Newman's organic model, which seems to allow only for continuous growth, Atkins feels the need to make room for reversals, negations, or what he calls "de-developments." In this connection the Hegelian triad of affirmation, negation and resolution invites careful consideration.

In his analysis of the doctrinal process, Atkins argues that the prereflexive datum (e.g. Jesus of Nazareth) is transformed by being taken up into man's reflective grasp. Once reflection has occurred, there can be no return to the innocence of prereflective experience. Subsequent statements, therefore, cannot simply bypass what has been done. The heritage, which might be lost through forgetfulness, is preserved by any further statement which takes up the undetermined element as it has been modified by previous affirmations.

Since man inevitably speaks out of his own situation, he cannot simply repeat the old heresies or the orthodox doctrines opposed to them. Merely parroting the words, Atkins contends, will not exactly reproduce the ancient meaning. To keep the past alive, one must say something different. "One may forget *Denzinger*, in which case one resigns from theology. Or one may negate it, thus keeping it dialectically alive. But one cannot simply affirm it. One can no more return to the purity of an earlier reflective level than he can return to his mother's womb."⁵⁵

What place can inerrancy have in such a dialectical theory of dogma? One possibility might be, according to Atkins, to treat inerrancy as a doctrine to be negated. Dialectic can absorb inerrancy by calling it one more error—with the reservation, however, that the negation itself will have to be overcome in the resolution stage, when dialectic will negate itself, chastened by the claims of inerrancy. Meanwhile, inerrancy would remain as a "negative presence" to be pondered and profited by.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ "Doctrinal Development and Dialectic," *Continuum* 6 (1968), 3-23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

While this first possibility apparently appeals to Atkins, he also suggests a second, less radical, alternative, namely to accept inerrancy as a function of the dialectic. According to dialectic, the Law of Identity is valid only within a given field of discourse. Inerrancy, then, might mean that in a doctrinal pronouncement the Church has arrived at the best resolution available on a particular level. The *homoousion* of Nicaea, then, could not be denied on the level of Nicaea without loss of orthodoxy, but at a subsequent stage one could say "no" to the *homoousion* without contradicting Nicaea.⁵⁷

While Atkins' second alternative is in perfect agreement with his earlier article and with the observations of the European theologians whom we have here considered, his first proposal, regarding the legitimacy of "negations," arouses some misgivings. The Hegelian triad of affirmation, negation, and resolution is too crude to do justice to the many levels and aspects of theological discourse. Atkins is correct, of course, in saying that a proposition emanating from an earlier or foreign culture can never be affirmed with exactly the same meaning. But this does not require that it should be denied by later generations. There is nothing in the nature of the case that requires that because men in the nineteenth century said that Napoleon lost at Waterloo, men of the twentieth century should have to say that he did *not* lose. No doubt, in the light of a different perspective, the earlier assertion, when repeated, will take on nuances it did not formerly have. Possibly some other term will have to be devised to correspond to our new conceptualization of the event of Waterloo.

Applying this to theology, I should say that an unqualified negation of an orthodox proposition cannot itself be orthodox. A suitably qualified negation, of course, could be both legitimate and orthodox—but would not such a qualified statement be more like Atkins' "resolution" than his "negation"? New resolutions on higher and more comprehensive levels are always welcome, even when they demand the abandonment of ancient and venerable formulas—formulas which were quite acceptable in terms of a more limited context.

I would hope that in my "negation" of Atkins' thesis I have incorporated what is valid in his position, and thus moved toward a

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

"resolution." If I have failed in this, Atkins would at least have to admit the legitimacy of my negation to prepare for a resolution still to be achieved.

CONCLUSION

As a result of this very selective survey, I should like to set forth certain conclusions of which I have been convinced by the authors whose work I have summarized.⁵⁸ For a justification of these conclusions I must refer the reader to the authors themselves.

1. There is a genuine self-identity in the Christian faith, namely the mystery revealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. Rooted in the events that gave it birth, and sustained by the living presence of the Holy Spirit, the Church preserves its original consciousness of the gift of God.

2. As the organ of God's definitive self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the Church can authoritatively articulate the faith. This it repeatedly does through its magisterium. While sometimes the magisterium may go astray (as is implied in the very concept of "non-infallible" teaching), the universal magisterium is preserved from error when it definitively commits the total Church in a serious matter, provided all the conditions for an infallible statement have been met. (To set forth these conditions would be a complicated matter, beside the point of the present paper). The distinction between fallible and infallible statements retains a certain validity, although, for reasons we have seen, there is no clear and sharp line between these two classes. There are fallible elements in all human discourse, even when the speaker is a pope or council.

3. Even the most normative and binding Church statements express the faith only in terms of the data, categories, and concerns at hand in a particular culture. They make use of modes of thought and expression in use at a given time and place. Contemporary man, experiencing the faith in a different context, against the horizon of a different world view, prompted by different questions and interests,

⁵⁸ For a fuller development of these concluding reflections, see the last chapter of my forthcoming book, *The Survival of Dogma* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

will quite properly see the content of Christianity in a different light, and will wish to reformulate it accordingly.

4. In order for the gospel to retain its force and impact (and thus precisely in order that it be *not* diluted) dogma must be reformulated in terms meaningful to each successive generation. New experiences and horizons of thought inevitably give rise to new categories of thinking, new concepts, images, and terminology. These may and should be used in the service of the gospel.

5. There is no reason in principle why the concepts, as well as the terminology and imagery of ancient formulations should not be revised. To avoid confusion, however, there is need for restraint and discipline. Terms should be used with due regard for the meaning they have had in longstanding tradition.

6. This historical conditioning of past magisterial statements does not deprive them of normative value today. Thanks to the transcendence of the human spirit, man can project himself sympathetically into situations not his own. He can think as if he believed that the earth is flat, or that the sun revolves around the earth, or that the first chapters of Genesis (creation, fall, flood, etc.) are literally historical. He can discern the religious importance of controversies which took place within the context created by these assumptions, and can appreciate why the Church, guided by a sure instinct of the faith, accepted and rejected certain ideas which may not be, today, viable options. Then, returning to the contemporary situation, the believer can put these earlier pronouncements to work by applying them to similar, or analogous, questions asked by contemporary believers.

7. The question, what is an appropriate expression of the faith today, has to be answered anew by each generation. The answer, however, must not be arbitrary. It should grow out of a serious and prolonged reflection on what Christianity has stood for in the past. The data of Scripture and tradition, the "sense of the faithful" in our time, and the guidance of the living magisterium are all to be solicitously sought out. The total inquiry, and especially the ultimate decision, must unfold under the aegis of the Holy Spirit, who is given to the Church for the sake of adequate discernment in all circumstances (cf. Jn 16:13). To demand totally adequate objective norms

or to look exclusively to the letter of past magisterial pronouncements, to minimize unduly the role of the Holy Spirit.

8. No generation can formulate the abiding content of the faith, "chemically pure," so as to commit all future generations. With regard to the future we can say only that, however men may see fit to reformulate the gospel, they may not legitimately forget or cancel out what previous generations of Christians have seen and, in a culturally conditioned manner, proclaimed. Because the one gospel of Jesus Christ remains, through all conceptual and verbal changes, the faith may be said to perdure, yesterday, today, and forever, until the consummation of the world.

AVERY DULLES, S.J.
Woodstock College
New York City