HISTORICAL STUDY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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Modern historical inquiry is a very rigorous discipline. It demands that all research, even when concerned with the history of Christianity, shall be conducted in a thoroughly scientific manner. The principles basic to this methodology are, however, too well known to need restatement on the present occasion. (See S. J. Case, "The Christian Philosophy of History," pp. 56-91.) Our concern at present is to note more particularly the procedures and consequences attending the application of the commonly recognized modern techniques to the historical study of Christian doctrine.

It is also appropriate to observe that doctrine is only one element in the rich deposit that the Christian movement during nineteen centuries has left upon the pages of history. Coincident with the preaching of its doctrines it has spread widely over the earth, drawing into its fold many different types of persons. Peoples with varying racial and cultural heritages, living within distinctive environments, have made their several contributions toward the shaping of Christianity's history. With the increasing complexity of its membership the interests and activities and physical aspects of the church as a social institution have become constantly more diversified and involved. From time to time new political, social and cultural contacts have significantly impinged upon the life of the church. Within the institution itself there have been many changes. Organization, government and ritual have been augmented and altered with the passing of time. Conflicting emotional and intellectual forces, emerging within the groups, have not infrequently resulted in divisions and the formation of rival communions. Thus present-day Christianity has lost its primitive simplicity and become so intricately bound up with the complexities of a world-civilization, which it has helped to create and by which it has been shaped, that no specific element in the history of the religion, not even its distinctive doctrines, can any longer be easily singled out for separate study.

Yet it is a patent fact that Christianity from the outset was preeminently a didactic movement. In contrast with many of its competitors in the ancient world, its stress upon the ceremonies of the cult was quite secondary to its concern for the right belief, valid teaching, correct doctrine. This note was prominent in all of the early Christian preaching. While Paul assumed that every Corinthian convert had observed the initiatory rite of the new religion, he nevertheless declared that his chief duty had been to evangelize rather than to baptize. And other missionaries, even though they may have taken more seriously their obligation to perform the baptismal ceremony, were firmly convinced that Jesus had commanded his followers to gather disciples from all nations, teaching new devotees the things that were to be believed as well as the things that were to be done.

I

While correct belief has always been a major emphasis in Christianity, the study of doctrinal history as a distinct discipline is of comparatively recent origin. Even in modern times its status is still rather uncertain. Church historians are wont to make it a subsidiary phase of ecclesiastical developments, and systematic theologians are inclined to view it chiefly as a mine from which to quarry ideas that can be built into the structure of a present-day scheme of doctrine. Neither of these approaches does full justice to

the subject. It deserves to be pursued for its own sake and studied in the light of its relations to individuals, to institutions, and to the internal and external expansion of the Christian movement as a whole. Only thus can one hope to appreciate the luxuriant growth of Christian doctrines over the total course of their history and in all their varying forms. There is need for a range of vision sufficiently wide to include the entire scope of the history and yet so capable of elastic focal adjustments that attention can be centered upon the many different factors involved. Especially must one inquire regarding the incentives that have inspired different forms of doctrine, the social and psychological conditions that have given them meaning at one or another time and place in Christianity, and the functional demands that have impelled revision of former beliefs or the formulation of new opinions.

At the very outset the historian of Christian ideas finds himself confronted with an embarrassing question. Are genuine Christian doctrines subject to any real historical development? It is a long established and widely prevalent opinion held by all branches of Christiandom that every essential doctrine is a revealed truth deposited from without at a specific moment in the past, and is therefore not subject to the temporal changes that mark the ordinary course of events. Up to a certain point in the past it could be allowed that revelation had been progressive, but the climax had been reached with the founding of Christianity by Jesus. Thereafter under the guidance of the Holy Spirit interpreters might discover more completely the richness of the original deposit but they could add nothing essentially new to its content. Ultimate revealed truth had a history only in respect to the manner in which it had been apprehended or the measure of loyalty it had elicited during the passing of the years. Its interpretation — or its perversion — had been subject to change, while the valid content of the doctrine always remained the same.

Under the domination of this hypothesis historical study of Christian doctrine became fundamentally a matter of accrediting new developments by reference to ancient norms. Two fairly distinct though closely related procedures were adopted in the effort to account for manifest and inevitable changes, without abandoning the notion of a final revelation once for all deposited with the ancients. One trend is to be seen in the process of institutionalizing doctrine by means of authoritative pronouncements of the church, itself assumed to be divinely empowered to perpetuate accurately the original revelation. The other procedure represents a more individualistic type of emphasis by which the mind of prominent leaders is thought to be capable of penetrating so deeply into Scripture and tradition as to disclose significant new insights into ancient truth. Thus there could be a growth in creeds and confessions of faith — more strictly speaking, an increasingly effective restatement of dogma — without any alterations in the original substance of doctrine. Or eminent theologians might expound in ever greater detail their authoritative opinions or an increasing number of topics without the slightest assumption that the content of revealed truth was in any degree subject to change. There might legitimately be a history of the interpretation of doctrine, but there could be no historical expansion of the thing in itself.

While this view prevailed, as it has for many centuries, historical study of Christian doctrine could hardly be thought to possess any merits on its own account. One who entered upon a discussion of the subject was quickly deflected from strictly historical pursuits to apologetic interests. When

changes were recognized they had to be explained in either of two ways. One sought to demonstrate that more recently postulated doctrines, if acceptable, were not really new, but were only legitimate restatements of older beliefs reaffirmed by ecclestiastical assemblies or by individual theologians. Or, if this assurance was not forthcoming, then the novelties were declared to be false and were vigorously condemned. Proper doctrines, even when freshly phrased, were legitimate because they coincided substantially with what had been everywhere, permanently and universally believed. Novelty was profane, antiquity alone was sacred.

A professed conformity to an authoritarian antiquity remained the norm for measuring the validity of belief all through the period when the general councils were elaborating their creedal formulas, and it also prevailed even among the most aggressive theological thinkers like Origen, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. No one felt any urge to analyze the genetic processes that had brought about significant changes. The developmental history of the subject elicited no interest, except as it served to make evident the survival of ancient truth that had been deposited in Christianity by revelation, or as it provided guidance for applying the "true-false" criterion to the new ideas that from time to time sought a home within Christian circles.

II

At first sight the rise of the Protestant movement in the sixteenth century might seem to have given birth to a new interest in the study of doctrinal history. In the famous — or infamous —"Magdeburg Centuries," in which an attempt was made to produce an exhaustive history of the first thirteen centuries of Christianity, doctrine was given separate treatment in each succeeding century. But one needs to read only a few pages of the work to discover that the discussion is pervaded throughout by a strongly biased apologetic interest designed not only to show that true doctrine always perpetuates simply the ancient deposit of revelation, but also to demonstrate that its genuine survival is to be found only in the Lutheran branch of Protestantism. The "true-false" norm was so rigidly followed that the fourth chapter in each century, dealing specifically with doctrine, was succeeded by a fifth chapter treating heresies as a distinct subject. The Protestant reformers in general were interested in the authoritative content of ancient beliefs rather than in their historical development. In so far as they conceived doctrine to have had a history, the course of its development in the Catholic Church seemed to be one of lamentable degeneration. Protestants professed to restore doctrine to its original purity. As Melanchthon affirmed: "We have introduced no new dogma into the church, but we renew and illustrate the doctrine of the Catholic Church." The authentic repositories of this genuine heritage were the Scriptures supplemented by the interpretative formulations embodied in the Apostles', the Nicene and the Athanasian creeds.

The ferment of religious activity and thinking awakened by the Protestant reformation did, however, set in motion forces that in the course of time compelled a clearer recognition of the phenomena of actual development in the history of Christian doctrine, in spite of continued adherence to the older traditional idea of a static deposit. Many circumstances affecting the shaping of Protestantism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries rendered it very difficult if not impossible to maintain belief in the authoritarian original of all currently approved Christian ideas. Moreover, divergences in doctrine became too firmly established to permit of their being dismissed in every instance as simply

false. At the same time Protestants failed to establish any universally acceptable ecclesiastical instrument for measuring the validity of dogma. In this respect the Catholics were more fortunate, thanks to the work of the Council of Trent and the efficient activities of the Papacy. But Protestantism was destined to suffer from diversities that sometimes bordered on chaos. No general council of Protestants, and no other device for establishing ecclesiastical uniformity, proved available. Instead there grew up several separate and rival branches of Protestantism, as well as minor sects, each insisting on a distinctive type of doctrine. While there was a common claim to represent a true restoration of Christianity's original purity of belief, the existence of variations was too conspicuous to be permanently ignored, and the fact of actual development in the history of doctrine gradually attained a measure of recognition.

Another trend emerging out of this situation was a disposition to deal less exclusively with dogma as an official pronouncement of the church and to give more consideration to the theological thinking of individuals. If the individual thinker was orthodox formal dogma and private doctrine were not contradictory, although they were not necessarily identical. Yet they represented varying stages in progressive thinking, and thus this observation laid the basis for a conception of doctrine as an actual historical development. In the middle of the seventeenth century a distinguished Jesuit scholar, Dionysius Petavius, expounded this point most learnedly and won for himself the not inappropriate title of "father of the history of dogma." Also a contemporary Scottish theologian, John Forbes, who spoke for the Reformed branch of Protestantism in Amsterdam, made a similar contribution to the subject. But in neither instance was it assumed that the study of doctrinal history should be pursued for any other purpose than that of apologetics.

A further recognition of the significance of private opinions for the determination of valid beliefs was stimulated by several factors affecting the Protestant world during the eighteenth century. German Pietism had cultivated an undogmatic temper unfavorable toward ecclesiastical authority, whether Catholic or Protestant. Formal dogma was discounted in favor of personal piety and mystical experience realized by the individual devotee, even though he might on occasion have been thought a heretic. This tolerant attitude found classic expression in Gottfried Arnold's "Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie," the first church history to be written in the German language (published in 1699 to 1715). In England the rationalists, by assuming that ecclesiastical dogma found its ultimate justification in the human mind — that supremely perfect instrument for thinking God's thoughts after him — so magnified the work of the systematic theologian as virtually to abolish the authority of ecclesiastical legislation. Similar results followed the spread of Aufklärung in Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Especially under the influence of Hegelian philosophy, the history of Christian doctrine became a distinctly developmental process dependent for its validity upon the intellectual efficiency of persons, rather than upon legislative enactments by ecclesiastical officials or assemblies.

The elevation of private doctrine to a position of respect, equal if not superior to the reverence once paid to creedal formulas, marked a distinct advance in the method of studying doctrinal history. But several difficulties still remained to be surmounted. English rationalism and Hegelian idealism, even when the latter found so competent an expositor as F. C. Baur, made doctrine too completely an intellectual abstrac-

tion to allow it to be viewed as a vital historical reality. And a second obstacle in the way of adequate historical apprehension was the prevailing disposition to classify doctrine at every period in its development according to the topics that were most immediately interesting to the later interpreter, without his asking whether this arrangement was true to the mind of the ancient theologian. Then, too, there was still a general tendency to make one's reading of doctrinal history, even though it was exhibited as primarily the work of specific persons, support one or another current system of belief held by a particular branch of Protestantism.

III

With the advancing decades of the nineteenth century critical attitudes became more thoroughly established. The idea of a scriptural canon lost its dignity as a norm for justifying Christian beliefs. The "lower" and the "higher" criticisms were freely applied to the study of all ancient documents, both canonical and extra-canonical. The long standing barriers separating secular from sacred history were almost completely demolished. The conception of evolution, now rapidly gaining ground in the fields of the natural and social sciences, also invaded the preserves of the Christian theologian. In the meantime a so-called "liberal" type of Protestantism came in full flower, especially in Germany, and gave wide vogue to a view of the nature of Christianity that is nowadays familiarly associated in its origins with the names of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, and has received its most conspicuous application to the study of doctrine in Harnack's monumental "History of Dogma."

The controversy that arose over Harnack's particular definition of the term "dogma," and the general characteristics of his presentation, are matters too familiar to bear repeating. We mention only a few items that seem most pertinent to our subject. In the first place there is a clearly perceived distinction between dogma as an official declaration of the belief of the church and privately held doctrines expounded by individual theologians. In both areas of activity a process of change and mutual interaction is also recognized. There is diligent documentation and there is also commendable caution in respect to forcing stereotyped topics and systems upon the authorities cited. And the opinions of "heretics" are given a proportionate and unprejudiced consideration, in so far as they contributed to the shaping of ecclesiastical dogmas.

In spite of the admirable qualities exhibited in Harnack's work, it still leaves unsatisfied certain desiderata of the modern historian of Christian doctrine. It must not be forgotten that Harnack devoted himself specifically to only one aspect of the subject, namely, to those beliefs that crystallized into formal dogmas of the church. But his fundamental proposition that dogma is "in its conception and in its completion a work of the Greek spirit upon the ground of the Gospel" (see the fourth German edition, I. 20) is methodologically vulnerable at two vital points. In the first place it presupposes a fixed quantum of gospel belief on which the Greek genius for logical and apologetic formulation is assumed to have reared its superstructure. But if this superstructure was subject to a process of development while it was in the making, what justification has the historian for assuming that a like developmental process was not in operation while the foundation was being constructed. One may escape the dilemma by allowing that dogma was formulated after the process of gospel-building had been completed, the canon of Scripture being fundamental to dogma. This growth Harnack would readily admit; canon, like dogma, arose by a process of gradual development.

But Harnack's thesis involved another idea. In the background of his thinking there lurks very perceptibly the apologetic figure of an original deposit, a given canon, greatly reduced in its proportions to fit the Ritschlian conception of a special insert of revelation supposedly capable of being extracted from the gospels by distinguishing their transitory from their permanent elements. The latter consisted of the unique God-consciousness of Jesus and the excellence of his moral and spiritual ideals. Thus Harnack, believing it possible to perceive the given thing with which Christianity originally started, can fix a definite point of departure from which to trace the development of dogma. To state the matter in his own phrasing, he is able "to distinguish that which was born of the original power of Christianity from that which has been assimilated by it in the course of its history."

One need not quarrel with this or with any other sincere effort to define the supernatural essence of Christianity, but this task involves metaphysical considerations that are super-historical in character and the study of which must be guided by other canons than those of historical methodology. And if the historian believes, as well he may, in the reality of divine forces active within the sphere of human experience, he will still be unable by the pursuit of strictly historical procedures to prove or disprove the validity of revelation, or to specify moments when it began or ceased. It requires the exercise of another sort of judgment to decree that one set of historical occurrences, say the teaching of Jesus, represents divine operations while a different group of events, such for example as the creedal formulations of the early ecumenical councils, belongs to a totally different category. By failing to recognize his limitations at this point the historian is betrayed into the hands of the apologist, a fate that overtook even Harnack.

The second notable defect in the method of Harnack is his failure to appreciate the vital social roots of Christian doctrine. Even the history of formal dogma cannot be adequately appraised primarily in terms of Greek speculative interests. To call dogma a work of the Greek spirit, even though one adds that this spirit operated on gospel soil, is to miss the most powerful formative factor in the situation. That was the influence of the Christian church as a developing social institution gradually establishing its traditions and rites by a process of sanctified custom, the defence of which in the course of time called into being the formulation of new doctrines and dogmas. The evolutionary procedure was from cult to dogma, not vice versa. Dogmas were phrased less for the purpose of persuading believers to philosophize than to preserve the traditions and ceremonies of the ecclesiastical institution from losing their identity and validity on coming into contact with Greek speculation. Christian thinking was, one might say, inoculated with only enough of the philosophical virus to render its theologians immune. If the inoculation took so radically that speculative interests transcended their fidelity to the cult they were cast out as heretical. And thinkers within the church, however great their debt to gentile philosophy, were always stout champions of their institution.

IV

If we grant the future historian of Christian doctrine release from the apologetic tasks that have so long been imposed upon his predecessors, how shall we describe his correct methods of procedure?

Perhaps, in the first place, he should be admonished to note that Christian doctrines have always been rooted in the life of Christian groups. He must seek the key to the understanding of doctrine in the social purposes by which it was inspired and in the ser-

vice of which it was formulated. Not merely formal dogmas, but even the more private types of belief, in so far as they proved popular, were in a fundamental sense the product of the institution. The danger of overlooking this fact is greatest, perhaps, in our thinking about the beginnings of Christian doctrine in the time of Jesus and his followers. This disposition is the result of a subsequent Christian desire to detach them from their immediate Jewish situation and transport them to a non-historical setting in later times. But the present-day emphasis in historical method compels a full recognition of the close integration of Jesus and his Jewish disciples with their religious institutional life and hopes in Palestine.

Shall we deny our historian the privilege of acquaintance with creative individuals who have contributed to the making of Christian doctrine? Certainly not, if he will refrain from treating them as though they had lived and worked in a vacuum. Without individual thinkers there can be no thought, even no religious thought, in the historical sense of that term; and the church as a social institution exists only as it is composed of living persons. Indeed, the historian of doctrine must be primarily concerned with real people and only secondarily with their ideas. For one will be unable to understand ideas who cannot visualize with measurable accuracy the conditions under which the ancient individual performed his labors. His distinctive type of personality, the problems that were set for him by the contemporary environment, powers of intellectual initiative, and like conditioning forces must all be kept in mind.

Every would-be historian must, of course, rely on documents that have been bequeathed to posterity by theologians of the past. How far shall we allow a present-day writer to take liberties with these documents? There seems always to be a very strong temptation to improve upon the literary source by distributing its texts according to a topical arrangement of subject-matter that was quite unknown to the original author. Presumably had he possessed our wisdom as to how a system of beliefs ought to be organized, he would gladly have adopted the new scheme. Therefore we do him the favor of completing the task that he left unaccomplished. Or, if less bold and generous, the historian may analyze more objectively the content of each document, allowing its author to speak for himself and following the order in which his own thoughts emerged. For purposes of scientific accuracy the latter course is certainly preferable, but in neither event is the result all that could be desired. A merely literary source-history of Christian doctrine is only a preliminary stage in one's return to the vital scenes that called the doctrine into being.

Consequently it would seem to be the duty of the modern historian of Christian doctrine to adopt a procedure requiring him to reconstruct with the greatest possible accuracy the life-story of the Christian society as the matrix from which doctrines have emerged. This task will involve not only a knowledge of the documents but an understanding of the personality and environment of the individuals whose opinions the documents record. Every form of stimulus that may have prompted thought, whether from within or without the Christian group, needs to be taken into account. And if one aims at comprehensiveness and continuity, genetic and developmental considerations will be kept constantly in mind.

The method that is here proposed could not guarantee the permanent validity of any form of Christian belief that might be recovered. It would show how and why and to what extent doctrines have changed, but whether for better or for worse, for true or false, it is not in the power of this

type of historical study to answer. Strict objectivity demands the exclusion of super-historical criteria from the field of historical operations, without any intention of excluding them from their own proper sphere. In other words, apologetic interests will be strictly eliminated from the historical study of Christian doctrine. The propriety of apologetic efforts, when clearly recognized as such, is certainly not to be denied. But an accurate acquaintance with what Christians in the past have believed, how they came to acquire their convictions, the functional significance of their opinions for themselves and their associates, and the evolution through which doctrines have passed down across the centuries is a study that cannot be effectively pursued if confused with an obligation to pronounce some doctrines "false" while others are to be adjudged "true."

"THE TIES OF LIFE"

Alfred Adler has produced a number of popular works in which he developed some of the implications of individual psychology. In one published some years ago, entitled "What Life Should Mean to You," he stated that every human life had three main ties to its world. The first is that which binds him to the crust of this planet and to occupations concerned with living here. The second consists in the ties to society in its many forms; the third in the relations which bind him to the opposite sex. The meaning which life has for any given individual is determined for him primarily by the nature and the quality of these several relations.

This suggests the nature of the problem which faces him who is interested in the development of the religious life. He needs training in all of these areas if he is to understand the nature of the problems which confront him and those to whom he would minister. It suggests a methodology for organizing theological curricula and for the organization of the study program of the minister or teacher in the field. His background for resolving difficulties will be deficient to the extent that he neglects pertinent studies in these several areas. His library should contain works dealing with each of these fields, and these works should decorate his desk as well as his book-shelves. He may stimulate his interest in these "ties" by announcing a series of sermons on one of them every year or so. This will insure his own study and will help his congregation to understand itself somewhat more adequately.