

RAHNER ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOGMA

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One of the most distinctive features of the Roman Catholic theology of the past was its concept of doctrinal change, and briefly put, that concept was that doctrine did not change. As a matter of fact, the history of dogma was not generally discussed by Roman Catholics until the 19th century.¹ The reason is not difficult to discover, for there was an inbuilt suspicion of the whole idea of development or history of dogma. As Cardinal Gibbons asserted, "The Church proposes the doctrines of faith . . . which know neither variation nor decay."² The argument was that the Christian religion is unchangeable in all its revealed doctrines so that no article of faith may be added, subtracted, or changed as to meaning from that given by Christ. The church cannot make new dogmas, but can only hand down the sacred deposit that was entrusted to her. That deposit was completed with the death of the last of the Apostles and is contained in both the written and unwritten tradition. This means that the dogmas are not added to the sacred deposit, but are contained in it or grow out of it. The Church only has the power to declare a truth to be revealed by God and to give it an infallible interpretation, thus dispelling uncertainty. The dogma itself does not develop and therefore has no history; there is development only in the subjective apprehension of it and outward expression of it.

But this view is no longer held by "progressive" Roman theologians. In fact, it is particularly embarrassing for them because they not only recognize that later dogmatic pronouncements do at least seem to be real developments, but they also are reinterpreting so radically past dogma that the contemporary meaning hardly seems inherent in the original statements. Consequently, recent Roman theologians have begun to speak of the development of dogma, but only with certain limitations placed upon the discussion. In such discussions, one thing cannot be surrendered by the Roman theologian, namely, the insistence that a defined dogma is without error with regard to its objective content (at least, this is the theory). This means that whatever the nature of the development of dogma the theologian is willing to admit, this development may never contradict the objective content of a dogma that has been infallibly set forth by the teaching church.

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1. Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 207.
2. James Cardinal Gibbons, *The Faith of Our Fathers* (Baltimore: John Murphy Company, 1917), p. 12; cf. pp. 10-15, 65-94.

This gives rise to a two-fold problem, a problem which Karl Rahner states aptly and with which he wrestled in great detail: how authentic identity on the one hand and really genuine development on the other can be reconciled.³

This brings us directly to Rahner's consideration of the development of dogma. It is especially appropriate to consider his treatment of this subject because he is undoubtedly the most significant "progressive" Roman Catholic theologian of recent years, as may be recognized for instance by the frequent reference to him in the Evangelical Protestant-Roman Catholic dialogue at the Twenty-third Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Society. If one wants to understand current Roman theology, he must first come to grips with Rahner. In addition, the materials that can be drawn upon for a study of his view of the development of dogma are vast. He has articles on this topic in his *Theological Dictionary* and in *Sacramentum Mundi*. There are occasional references to the history and development of dogma in the various articles in *Theological Investigations* and of special interest are those dealing with Trinity, Christology, and Mariology. In Volume IV an entire article is devoted to the subject entitled "Considerations on the Development of Dogma." However, the definitive article and the one most carefully worked out is "The Development of Dogma" in Volume I. After going through the other material, I have chosen to use this last article as the basis for consideration in this paper, for this is the loom where Rahner brings the threads together to weave the pattern of his view.

I. THE FACT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOGMA

"Many of the Church's doctrines are characterized by the fact that they have not always been present in the Church and in her consciousness in faith in an expressly apprehensible form."⁴ These are the opening words of Rahner's article "The Development of Dogma." An example of this assertion is the dogma of the "bodily Assumption of our Lady into Heaven." It has not always been in existence as an explicit statement, that is, it has not been proposed to the faith of every age with the clarity, precision, definiteness, and binding character which it has today. In a certain sense it has developed or come to be, for when the Gospel was first preached this doctrine was not found in its present form. This raises the far-reaching question of the meaning, possibility, and limits of such a "development of dogma." Rahner proposes to investigate this, not from general theological consideration, but inductively from the actual facts of such a development. "The historical course of the development of dogma is itself the process in which its own mystery is progressively unveiled. It is in the very act of developing, and not in any prior reflection, that the living reality of the

3. Karl Rahner, "Considerations on the Development of Dogma," *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), vol. IV, p. 5 (hereafter cited as CDD).
4. Karl Rahner, "The Development of Dogma," *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton and Todd, 1963), Vol. I, p. 39 (hereafter cited as DD).

Church's consciousness in faith comes progressively into a fuller possession of itself."⁵ Since the history from which a theory of the development of dogma must be derived has not been sufficiently investigated for this purpose, the general theory of development of dogma is still in a rudimentary stage, apologizes Rahner. "All the same a few principles may be set down."⁶

Basic and obvious, according to Rahner, is the fact that a revealed truth remains what it is, i.e., precisely true—it corresponds to reality and it always binding. But then Rahner is quick to qualify this statement by adding that all human statements, including those in which faith expresses God's saving truths, are finite, that is, they never declare the whole of reality. But this does not mean that they are false. This has tremendous significance for Rahner. "Because our statements about the infinite divine realities are finite and hence in this sense inadequate—that is, while actually corresponding to reality, yet not simply congruent with it—so every formula in which the faith is expressed can in principle be surpassed while still retaining its truth."⁷ Rahner is careful to emphasize that as man views the Absolute from his own historical viewpoint, the divine reality itself does not change, nor do the true propositions about this reality become false; rather, there is a change in the perspective with which the individual sees the reality through these propositions. Thus he can express it differently and state something new about it which had not been explicitly stated before. "It is change in, not of, identity."⁸ Thus, it is necessary both to preserve and change, otherwise one betrays the truth by either falling into error or failing to make the truth one's own in a really existential way. This principle holds true not only for theology in general, but also for revealed faith, by which I take it that Rahner refers to dogma.⁹ "The real understanding of what is revealed and its existential appropriation by men is wholly dependent on the transformation of the propositions of faith, as they were originally heard, into propositions which relate what is heard to the historical situation of the men who hear; it is only then that they become propositions of faith, emerging into the real historically conditioned world of men as decision and living deed."¹⁰

Such is Rahner's statement of the fact of dogmatic development with a preliminary understanding as to its nature. He now turns his attention to an apparent problem that has been raised by his statements about development of dogma.

II. THE PROBLEM OF DEVELOPMENT OF A CLOSED REVELATION

Rahner suggests that there might appear to be a contradiction between what he has said about development of dogma and one of the basic pro-

5. DD, I, 42.

6. DD, I, 43.

7. DD, I, 44.

8. DD, I, 45.

9. DD, I, 46.

10. DD, I, 47.

nouncements of the magisterium on faith. He refers to the doctrine that revelation closed with the death of the last of the Apostles. The solution to the apparent problem seems to be in properly understanding what is meant by "closed." Rahner suggests that revelation is said to be closed in that the definitive Reality which resolves history proper is already here; nothing new remains to be said because everything has been said, everything given in the Son of Love. Thus, revelation is closed because it is open to the concealed presence of divine plenitude in Christ. Closed is a positive rather than a negative statement.¹¹ "The believing Church possesses what she believes: Christ, his Spirit, the earnest of eternal life and its vital powers."¹² These original treasures of the faith are developed and unfolded under a positive influence of the light of faith bestowed upon the Church. That is Rahner's solution to the problem that he has posed. "The faith of the Church is ever reflected anew in the propositions of faith. It discovers what is implicitly contained in them, the logical and real implications which result from individual propositions or the combination of several."¹³

III. THE "HOW" OF "BEING CONTAINED"

The last phase of Rahner's article is developed around the question of "how this 'being-contained' of new formulations of dogmatic proposition in an earlier form of consciousness in faith is to be understood *objectively*."¹⁴ This is the basic problem with which Rahner wrestles in his articles on the development of dogma. In the *Dictionary* article he says, "Thus the development of dogma confronts theology with the question *to what extent* a truth that is later defined (or to be defined) is implicit in the whole deposit of faith as hitherto known. In what ways . . . can a truth be implicit in the Gospel, in view of its structure . . . ?"¹⁵ In "Considerations on the Development of Dogma" he writes that "the Church was not always *consciously* aware that it possessed something as a divine truth in its sense of faith while it was always present to the Church." This brings him to the really problematical point. "The question is: how does this entry take place? How does the Church suddenly notice, as we may say, that the assertion on which it has been brooding in its consciousness perhaps for centuries is held by it with the unconditional assent of faith?"¹⁶ Stated in another way, the question is what is the connection between the original propositions and those reached in consequence of dogmatic development? In "The Development of Dogma" Rahner gives a four-fold answer to that question.

First, a dogmatic development may be contained in a single previous dogmatic statement in that the former is an explication stating more expressly what was contained in the latter. Thus the development is the same thing as the original proposition stated in other words, in a different con-

11. DD, I, 49.

12. DD, I, 50.

13. DD, I, 52.

14. DD, I, 55.

15. Rahner, *Theological Dictionary*, p. 126.

16. CDD, IV, 27.

ceptual language.¹⁷ But this explanation alone is insufficient to explain the actual course of the development of dogma.

Consequently, alongside this explication a second is put. Besides the possibility that something might be implicit in a single proposition, there is the explication of what is "virtually" implicit in a proposition with the help of another proposition.¹⁸ New knowledge derived in this deductive way as a conclusion can still be called "revelation" in that it is proclaimed by the Church as the object of divine faith. "But it is still very doubtful whether all the cases in which a development of dogma in the proper sense, one guaranteed by the Church, does undoubtedly take place, can be interpreted according to this scheme."¹⁹

And so Rahner is led to posit a third explication, "an explication of what is virtually implicit, the result of which may yet be claimed as the Revelation of God himself and consequently may be believed on the testimony of God himself."²⁰ Rahner's point here is quite clear. A human speaker can never survey all the necessary consequences which in fact follow from his statements. "The whole of what we 'really' state is not an expression of what we ourselves want to state."²¹ But when God speaks it is a different situation. "He is necessarily conscious of the actual vitality and dynamism of his immediate communication, and aware of all its virtues and consequences. Moreover he has from the very beginning the intention and the will to bring about its explication and to guide it in his own Spirit."²² From this we deduce and what we deduce in this way, God has not stated formally in the initial propositions from which our deduction proceeds, but he really has "com-municated" it so that entire faith can be given to it as his knowledge.

At this point Rahner calls attention to the fact that the first three explications have tacitly assumed that the starting point of a dogmatic explication is always a proposition. But, Rahner warns, this should by no means be assumed. Even in the natural order there exists a kind of knowledge which, while not articulated in propositions, is the starting point of an intellectual process which develops into propositions. Take for instance the case of love which may change one's whole being. One could approach the subject in many different ways in attempting to state what he knows about this love, but in such a case it is not merely a matter of the logical development and inference of new propositions from earlier ones, but of the formulation for the first time of propositions about a knowledge that is already possessed.²³ And this love is richer, simpler, and deeper than any body of propositions about the love could be. But still this love would

17. DD, I, 57-58.

18. DD, I, 59.

19. DD, I, 60.

20. DD, I, 60.

21. DD, I, 65.

22. DD, I, 61.

23. DD, I, 63-64.

become blind if it refused to allow itself to grow out into a reflexive consciousness involving propositions.

A similar thing is involved in the development of dogma, says Rahner: The objective connexion between the new proposition and the old knowledge is not merely that between something logically explicit and something logically implicit in two propositions; it is rather a connexion between what becomes partially explicit in a proposition and the unreflexive, total spiritual possession of the entire *res*, so that the explicit proposition is at the same time more and less than its implicit source. More, because as reflexively formulated it elucidates the original, spiritually simple possession of the reality and in this way enriches it. Less, because it never does more than express reflexively and remotely a part of what was spiritually possessed before. This alone is sufficient to make it clear how one may conceive of the *full* consciousness in faith possessed by the Apostle and the primitive Christian community, and yet avoid anachronisms. It is true that men did not "know" much then, if we understand by "knowledge" a form of knowledge which is set up with the help of a reflexive, highly articulated system. . . . Yet at the same time all was known, because men had laid living hold upon the total reality of God's saving Act and now lived in it spiritually.²⁴

Does this experience of the Apostles and the primitive church contribute anything to the explanation of the connection between the old knowledge and the new formulation? Someone might say "no" inasmuch as the Apostles could only pass on their completed reflexive explication in propositional form and not their original living experience. But this is precisely not the case, according to Rahner, for the Apostles not only bequeath the propositions about their experience, but also their Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, the very reality of what they have experienced in Christ. "To this extent there exists too, in post Apostolic development of dogma, the connexion between what is implicit as a living possession of the whole truth in an unreflexive but conscious way, and what is always only partially explicit in propositions. It is only an explication of this kind that provides the required bond with earlier explications, already propositional in form, and also the simultaneous passage to a new explication from the original experience through the tradition already formulated; and provides them with greater power and cogency than in the Apostolic age."²⁵

Thus Rahner explains the "how" of "being contained." His third and fourth points are the essential points of his exposition. Notice this statement near the end of "The Development of Dogma," a statement that seems as fitting as any as a conclusion to the article. "The God who speaks surveys in himself from the very beginning all the virtualities of his speech, and by his own Spirit in the Church inspires, guides and watches over their very actualization; and because from the point of view of men and their

24. DD, I, 68.

25. DD, I, 68.

properly human words and propositions, even in human speech more is actually communicated formally than can formally be stated."²⁶

CRITIQUE

Though it must always be kept in mind that Rahner writes as a theologian committed to the Roman Catholic tradition, in all fairness Protestant evangelicals should recognize that he has expressed some valid insights about the "how" of valid doctrinal development from a closed revelation. We would do well to wrestle more seriously with the problems of continuity and development, and we could learn from Rahner. However, the evangelical's application of these insights would be quite different than that of Rahner, for he operates in the context of a different theological commitment than a conservative Protestant. Consequently the "what" of doctrinal development will be quite different. Especially at issue between Protestant evangelicals and Rahner in the matter of development of dogma would be the matters of unwritten tradition, the authoritative nature of dogmatic pronouncements by the teaching church, the authority of the teaching church itself, faith as being assent to what the church teaches, and the idea that it is the Apostles and their successors (rather than God) who grant the Holy Spirit to succeeding generations of believers. Furthermore, Protestants got rid of a lot of extra-Biblical baggage back in the 16th century that they do not have to defend as being a valid outgrowth of New Testament Christianity. And not being heirs of the post-Tridentine dogmatic developments, they feel no necessity to justify the three new dogmas promulgated by the Roman Church in the 19th and 20th centuries without even the pretension of a Scriptural base. In fact, Protestants reject them for that very reason. It is no wonder that even many Roman Catholics are uneasy with the new dogmas. Rahner is obviously trying to alleviate this uneasiness by his explanation of the development of dogma. In spite of his valid insights, it is quite another question when one discusses the validity of specific Roman dogmas. His attempts at justification of recent dogmatic developments seem to be of the order of *ex post facto* rationalizations—i.e., since this is the way it is (and we are bound to accept it), here is the justification. In fact, in two places it seems that Rahner himself virtually says as much. "Whatever the general meaning, possibility, and the limits of a development of dogma may be, they cannot be deduced with the necessary exactness and precision from general theological considerations alone but must be arrived at inductively from the facts of the development."²⁷ "In many cases the Church's sure conviction in faith has temporally preceded such logical deductions...."²⁸

A more direct way of stating the issue would be to ask: Does Rahner's understanding and actual use of these principles on the development of dogma allow the original deposit of revealed truth to function as final norm over all doctrinal and dogmatic developments?

26. DD, I, 74.

27. DD, I, 41.

28. DD, I, 55.