



## REVIEW

Newman on Doctrinal Corruption by Matthew Levering, Word on Fire Academic, Park Ridge IL, 2022, pp. viii+434, £25.97, hbk

The possibility of corruption was always on Newman's mind, surrounded as he was by critics who claimed that this was precisely what the Roman Church had done, and furthermore that his own doctrine of development was simply a defence of such 'corruption by exaggeration'. The five chapters of the book consider Newman's responses to challenges concerning corruption coming from Gibbon, Froude, Francis Newman (his own brother), Pusey, and Döllinger. This arrangement also facilitates a chronological consideration of Newman's views over the course of his life.

Edward Gibbon was an important influence on Newman who shared with him a concern and respect for historical facts. They differed about how these facts were to be linked and so also in their conclusions, Gibbon arguing for a corruption on the part of the Church, Newman for development. Newman argues that the present communion of Rome is, among the alternatives on offer, actually the nearest approximation to the Church of the Fathers, and at the same time that real doctrinal development has taken place over the course of history. While accepting from Gibbon the terms in which the study of history is to be undertaken, Newman goes beyond him in recognizing not only the secondary causes on which they agree but the primary cause, God's providence working in history. Gibbon's effort at an objective history is ruined by his anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism, mirroring what he regarded as the intolerant zeal of these two groups. Far from 'fanaticism', a favourite word of Gibbon's, Newman proposes a hypothesis, accepting that his opponents are proponents of alternative hypotheses, all seeking to account for the same historical evidence, for the fact of development, which he believes is best accounted for even historically by the truth of Christianity.

Richard Hurrell Froude was one of his closest friends and collaborators in the Oxford Movement. In the early 1830s, (Froude died in 1836) they agreed that corruptions had been introduced by the Roman Church, a view that Newman found himself obliged to argue against just a few years later. Froude remained within the limits of Anglicanism while sharing Newman's concern about the threat posed to Christian doctrine by human power. For Froude this concern was focused on changes in the constitutional position of the Anglican church following reforms in the 1820s and 1830s. The same concern continued to inform Newman's thoughts about doctrinal development, eventually leading him far beyond Froude, rejecting his own earlier analysis of Roman corruptions, giving the reasons for this move in his *Essay* and in the *Apologia*, finally regarding the Anglican church as fatally identified with the state. In the *Essay*, Newman focused not so much on Church–State relations as on doctrinal development as such, arguing that there must be not only tests of true development but an authoritative interpreter. He came to see that the dogmatic principle, a cornerstone of the Oxford Movement, was better secured in Rome. The 'living authority' is necessary because a

revelation from God must include a way of securing it from perversion and corruption. There can be doctrinal novelty and non-doctrinal discontinuity in the Church, but there cannot be doctrinal discontinuity (Levering takes these phrases from Gavin d'Costa).

Newman's brother Francis shared his conversion to evangelical Anglicanism when they were both teenagers but then gradually moved away from all dogmatic religion as his more famous brother became more and more convinced of its importance. Francis also composed an 'apologia', called *Phases of Faith*, charting his parallel journey to disbelief relying on cumulative improbabilities where his brother relied on cumulative probabilities in coming to faith. Francis proposed a religion of reason and personal experience whereas for John Henry, the teaching authority of the Church ensures that the primitive teaching remains a living power. This chapter does not focus on the specific process of corruption except in the general sense in which the charge of corrupting an original experience was always raised in apologetic arguments about Catholicism.

Edward Pusey, another of Newman's closest collaborators in his Anglican days, regarded the 1854 definition of the Immaculate Conception as clear proof that the Roman Church had corrupted, and continued to corrupt, Christian doctrine. This it did by going beyond the teaching of Scripture and the Fathers of the Church and by exaggerated Marian piety and devotion. Newman had already given significant attention to the Marian doctrines in his *Essay*. Responding to the *Eirenicon*, the work in which Pusey presented his arguments at length, Newman sought to show once again that it was a true development that led to the solemn definition. He argued that in cultures where Mary is praised Jesus is properly worshipped and, in any case, doctrinal development is already accepted by all Christians who believe Mary to be Theotokos. He annoyed some of his fellow converts, however, by agreeing with Pusey's criticisms of exaggerated Marian piety.


Johan von Döllinger is the fifth interlocutor of Newman considered here. In reacting to the definition of papal infallibility in 1870, Döllinger also believed he had found a clear example of doctrinal corruption on the part of Rome. Although not mentioned in the *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, Döllinger is as much the target of Newman's arguments as was William Gladstone. Newman's argument is that the emergence of a centralizing papacy was essential for the preservation of values central in the Patristic period, that the Church is one and universal, has the right to hold authoritative and binding councils, and enjoys autonomy in relation to any State. Doctrine concerning the Petrine office was itself subject to development under the stimulus of events and needs, for Newman this development being guided by God's providence. This final chapter shows clearly that the issues raised shaped Catholic theology significantly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, they continue to occupy theologians as one aspect of the problematic of faith and reason, theology and science, or, as here, doctrinal development and historical research.

Newman was kept busy responding to criticisms of the doctrine of papal infallibility, seeking yet another 'via media', this time between its critics which included figures such as Gladstone and Bismarck, and on the other side Ultramontane Catholics who failed to get the maximalist version of the teaching which they wanted. As he had done all through his life, in appreciating the truths of history Newman remains a believer and a theologian who goes beyond the secular historians, recognizing not only the

secondary causes on which they agree, but also the primary cause, the 'sacramental principle' as he calls it, God's providence working in history. His comments about the relationship of history and doctrine parallel exactly those of Aquinas about philosophy and theology: truths of faith cannot be rigorously proved by history/philosophy, but neither can they be simply disproved by them.

Since Schleiermacher liberal theology has sought to overcome the arguments about development and/or corruption by relativizing doctrine itself. Levering sees this continuing up to the present day, even among Catholic theologians. Today Newman's approach is regarded as dated by some for whom rupture is as important as identity in the flow of tradition. Levering believes, however, that Newmanian doctrinal development has been affirmed by Vatican II and that it is a far better path forward for the Church than any postmodern relativization of doctrine.

In spite of the impressive academic apparatus and bibliography the book is not an extended study of Newman's doctrine of development in itself but rather a series of reflections, in Newman's company, upon the threat of doctrinal corruption. Did he succeed in what he set out to do? 'Yes and no' is Levering's conclusion, and he offers this neat summary: 'For both religious liberals and religious traditionalists (as distinct from those who recognize the historicity of doctrine without falling into a historicist view of doctrine), Newman's writings are suspect, even if occasionally useful' (p. 354). Doctrinal corruption would inevitably put people at the mercy of those in power, whether civil or ecclesiastical – Froude's insight remained with Newman – and his work, even if considered by some as having failed in its purpose, succeeds at least in keeping this warning before our eyes.

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