

Newman on Doctrinal Corruption by Matthew Levering, Word on Fire, 2022.
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This book by theologian Matthew Levering is one of the most thorough studies available on Newman's ideas on development of doctrine, a fundamental topic in theology, especially in the last two centuries.

Levering's book is structured in a unique way compared to previous works. Owen Chadwick studied Newman's contribution to historical consciousness and thinking with regards to dogmas in his *From Bousset to Newman* (1957). Later, Aidan Nichols analyzed the theory of development of dogma with a particular emphasis on Newman's contribution in his *From Newman to Congar* (1990). Recently, Stephen Morgan's *John Henry Newman and the Development of Doctrine* (2021) has examined the genesis of Newman's *Essay on Development*. Following these works, Levering's book could also be titled *From Newman to Contemporary 21st Century Theologians*.

The author takes a new angle by examining Newman's concern for doctrinal corruption. Newman's actual intent in writing his *Essay on the Development of Christian Dogma* was in fact, to answer from a theological and historical point of view, whether or not Catholic dogmas after the patristic period were a corruption. He looks at this question in a novel way by contrasting Newman's views with those of Edward Gibbons, Francis Newman, Richard Hurrell Froude, Edward Pusey and Ignaz von Döllinger. Except for the historian Gibbons, Newman was a contemporary and friends to the others, and had their thoughts and objections in mind when developing his theory.

The study of the works and correspondence of Gibbons, Francis Newman and the others reveals the principal underlying difficulties which Newman faced: What is history and its limits? What is the nature and authority of the Scriptures and Tradition? What is the correct relationship between the Church and State? And what are the conditions for the development of dogma and its promulgation?

As Chadwick writes, Newman brings home the point that the idea of Christianity is developed in history. Chadwick came to understand, contrary to Lord Acton, that Newman's theory did not emancipate him from history. "Newman possessed a theory of development *because* impartial historical inquiry could, in its measure, find truth." (Chadwick, 1957: 138).

Levering begins his analysis by discussing the challenge of religious liberalism to the very concept of dogma (22-33). Many theologians today reject the theory of development because they no longer believe in unchanging truths. For instance, Lieven Boeve "suggests that each new context involves doctrinal rupture through a recontextualization that substantially changes the beliefs and practices at the heart of the experience of Catholics" (29). This of course is very different from the Catholic teaching on the deposit of faith and Tradition. Newman held that dogmatic "truths are inadequate expressions of inexhaustible mysteries, which being

ontologically true in their reference to realities" (367). Rather than distinguish development from corruption as Newman did, Boeve believes in constant doctrinal rupture.

There are two dogmatic truths in particular which are examined throughout Levering's book: the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary and papal infallibility, which serve as a litmus test of Newman's theory. Both are doctrines which Newman had to prove to himself were not examples of doctrinal corruption before becoming Roman Catholic in 1845. Papal infallibility is, in some sense, the most important because it deals with the conditions for asserting dogmatic truth and by which authority the Church judges about doctrine.

Although Levering discusses many different letters and texts of Newman, he focuses on three which focus on the problem of doctrinal development: *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church or via Media* (1837/1877), *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) and *A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation* (1875).

Chapter 1 contrasts the notion of history held by Edward Gibbons and Newman. Newman was historically conscious and was able to write history like Edward Gibbons but unlike him was more aware of his antecedent considerations. Gibbons maintained that Christian thought was a corruption from the start whereas Newman considered that Christian thought develops over time while undergoing corruption for some at various times and places. The book deals extensively on the Christian understanding of history, and the use of history in doctrinal pronouncements (340).

Levering takes us through the evolution in Newman's own position and arguments about Roman Catholic corruption in doctrine from his *Via Media* to the *Development in Doctrine*. The French priest, Nicholas Jager, had pressed Newman to think about fundamental truths of the faith.

In chapter 2, the major influence of Hurrell Froude on Newman and the Oxford Movement is discussed. Levering explains the Movement's critique of Erastianism and Newman's notes for the development of doctrine. The importance of the threat of Erastianism or State patronage of the Church, especially as maintained by William Gladstone, will appear clearly in chapter 5.

Chapter 3 examines the relationship between John Newman's *Apologia* and Francis Newman's *Phases of Faith*. Francis, four years younger than Newman, a fellow of Baliol College, eventually lost his faith in Christianity, becoming a Unitarian. *In Phases of Faith* Francis rejects dogmatic Christianity. Various topics underline this chapter: private judgment, development of doctrine, and religious skepticism as well as the odd claim by G. Egner (a pseudonym for P. J. Fitzpatrick) that Newman became Catholic to resolve his skepticism (221).

Levering observes that the objections raised by Francis and others since are based on the *a priori* assumptions of their philosophy of history. He explains the two foundational principles: the sacramental and doctrinal principles which are integral in Newman's understanding of what

we can know about religion and the world. Newman was aware of the historical objections to numerous passages of Scripture. He replied that the Scriptures cannot be expected to say what they were not intended to, and that they require the explanation of the Church.

The 4th chapter is on Edward Pusey's serious and legitimate concerns about doctrinal corruption when papal infallibility sanctions development that is not unanimously held. The case studied is the definition of the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Pusey thought that its definition did not respond to an urgent need in the Church nor did it represent the universal understanding of the so called three branches of the Church (Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox). Newman's reply was that it is the Church's prerogative to define and develop doctrine, on the one hand, and distinguish between doctrine about Mary and excesses in piety, on the other.

The 5th and final chapter again concerns history and deals specifically with Ignaz von Döllinger's claims regarding the determining role of history in theological discourse. Döllinger's friend, Lord John Acton, also believed that history must be the final arbiter in theological disputes (287). Döllinger strongly argued against papal infallibility which he considered a "choking excrescence on the organization of the Church," (295) demonstrable by any serious historical study of the papacy. For him, such a study indicates the errors of popes and suggests that the doctrine of papal infallibility, rather than a development of the second millennium, is a corruption (304). In the end, for Newman, the starting point is belief in the infallibility of the Church, and that belief in dogmas is ultimately based on faith, not reason or history (341). Newman argued that the concentration of power in the pope after the Patristic period was necessary due to the vast extension of the Church, and its autonomy from the State. He also contended that passages such as Matthew 16:18, hardly commented by the Church Fathers, had a prophetic import that was later understood in the Church. Döllinger, instead, did not allow for doctrinal development after the Patristic Age (344).

Newman's most significant theological contribution is his theory of development, according to Morgan. His analysis is that there is a real need to study Newman within the on-going discussion about papal magisterium (Morgan, 2021: 263-276).

Levering examines almost all the major studies on Newman, whose authors he cites and whose opinions he presents, in a balanced manner—while expressing his disagreement when it is the case. The extensive bibliography includes many contemporary authors. To Levering's merit he cites some authors with whom he has a fundamental disagreement, indicating where at times he agrees with them.

In his conclusion Levering, rightly discusses ideas of the contemporary theologian David Bentley Hart, who dismisses Tradition in favor of a future non-expressible religious experience. Levering dedicates six pages of the conclusions to contrast Hart and Newman's thought (361-367). It would have been preferable to present Newman at greater length vis a vis Loisy and Rahner, even though the author notes that Hart continues in their line of thinking. However, it is one of Levering's great achievements in this volume to have clearly, and convincingly, replied to

objections made to Newman's theory of development, not only by Francis Newman, Edward Pusey and Ignaz von Döllinger, but by contemporary theologians such as Boeve and Hart. In doing so he is able to compliment the perspectives of scholars like Andrew Meszaros, Christopher Cimorelli, Stephen Morgan, and Reinhard Hütter, who respond in their recent works to historicist theological trends (1).

Levering, thus provides us in *Newman on Doctrinal Corruption* with a weighty study of Newman's theology of history, his notion of dogma and its development, and a confirmation of the validity of his theory of development. The author shows us how Newman sustained belief in the Christian deposit of faith (from which over time, in history, doctrine develops); and how he does this without falling into religious liberalism or dogmatism.

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