

## CHAPTER IX HISTORICAL AND DOGMATIC TRADITION

The distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition arose in an attempt to clarify the difference between the faith of the Church and the results of scientific history. Faith and history are both anchored in past realities. The manner in which they differ, however, is less clear than that in which they are similar. Why, it was asked, is the historian of the Christian past not led inevitably to the Christian faith? And why does the Christian need to rely upon dogmatic definitions of the magisterium if an impartial study of Church history would suffice for faith? Modern theologians of tradition answered these questions by affirming the medieval teaching that theology is a sacred science. Unlike history, theology has God for its subject, and so commands all other disciplines.<sup>1</sup> The distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition, then, if we can anticipate the argument of this section, was for the theologians of the period a subordination. Just as theology rules all other sciences, so dogmatic tradition subordinates history to itself. The object of dogmatic tradition, God, is not only different from the object of history, but guarantees, as first truth, the truth of history.

The danger of this approach, however, is that it apparently lifts dogma out of the historic realm. The doctrine of God can be seen from this approach as a supra-historical fact, something which has no need of historical foundation. When this happens, historical scholarship suffers. It is no surprise that the achievement of the historical school in nineteenth century Germany belonged primarily to Protestant scholars. So a problem arose. How could Catholic theologians affirm the primacy of the teachings of the Church, on the one hand, and integrate those teachings with the results of critical historical scholarship, on the other hand?

The use of the term dogmatic tradition developed in order to describe that source of Christian truth, transmitted from the past, whose apostolic origins cannot be documented. In contrast to it is the redundant term historical tradition, which refers to that source of truth whose apostolic origins can be documented. Nineteenth century theologians avoided the infelicity of the term historical tradition by distinguishing between the authority of history and of dogma in the testimony of tradition.<sup>2</sup> The authority of history belongs to the concrete monuments in which history is, so to speak, inscribed. The authority of dogma, however, is the authority of the Catholic Church. Its vitality cannot be reduced to the expressions of it in history. What Catholic theologians

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<sup>1</sup> On God as the subject of theology, see Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Latin text, English translation, introduction, notes, appendices and glossary, General Editor Thomas Gilby, 60 vols. (Cambridge, England: Blackfriars, in conjunction with McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, and Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1964-1976), 1.24-27 (Part I, q. I, art. 7). On theology as the ruling science, see Thomas Aquinas, Scriptum super libros Sententiarum, 1.8 (Prologus, q. 1, a. 1, solutio).

<sup>2</sup> Franzelin, 80-87 (thesis x); Scheeben, 3.170-73 (section 24).

presumed in their treatment of this was the apostolic origin of dogma. This presumption was challenged by those for whom the historical veracity of what the Church called its living tradition was a matter of doubt. How, critics asked, can the Church call tradition what cannot be traced back to the apostles? This raised a double issue: the relation of history to dogma and the relation of historical documentation to dogma. The issue was central to that debate in which the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition was employed.

Our question is the extent to which the distinction does justice to history and to dogma. In the following analysis of the distinction, we will trace the genesis of its terms in their pre-history, so to speak, in Newman and Scheeben. The Modernist controversy will then provide a context for examining those movements, historicism and immanentism, which could have sundered dogma and history. Next, in the writings of Blondel, we will see a felicitous melding of dogma and history within the context of tradition itself. Finally, the discussions at the time of the definition of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary – in which the terms dogmatic and historical tradition came into full play – will help clarify the ambiguities of the terms. A verdict on the importance of the distinction between the two types of tradition can then be rendered in connection with the topic of the historicity of dogma.<sup>3</sup>

#### IX.1. Pre-History in Newman and Scheeben

The Modernist controversy, usually dated 1898-1910, brought the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition (if not the terms themselves) into general currency. But the root of the distinction lies in the nineteenth century. It was alluded to by John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Shortly after his 1845 conversion to Roman Catholicism, Newman made preparations to study in Rome. Before his departure, we know that he was slightly contemptuous of the level of Catholic scholarship. “Roman Catholic divines are generally nothing beyond accurate dogmatic teachers,” he wrote, “and know little of history and scholarship.”<sup>4</sup> After his arrival in the Italian capital, Newman’s own teachings failed to win the wholehearted approval of the Roman academic establishment.<sup>5</sup> This might suggest a fundamental disagreement between

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<sup>3</sup> Our exposition of dogmatic and historical tradition owes an enormous debt to the treatment of the matter by Congar, I.263-270; II.93-101, 123-136, 207-213 (translation, 213-221, 328-338, 361-375, 451-458).

<sup>4</sup> Letter of August 31, 1846, to Lord Adare, in The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman, edited at the Birmingham Oratory with notes and an introduction by Charles Stephen Dessain [et al.], 31 vols. (London and New York: Thomas Nelson, 1961- [volumes published from 1978 bear the imprint of Oxford's Clarendon Press]), XI.240.

<sup>5</sup> Owen Chadwick (From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development (Cambridge, England: At the University Press, 1957), p. 177) notes that Carlo Passaglia (1812-1887) lectured at the Gregorian against Newman, and that both Passaglia and Giovanni Perrone (1794-1876) considered Newman's response to the kind of scepticism associated with the name of Hume as rather extreme.

Newman and the Roman school on the relation of history to dogma, but such is not the case. Even prior to his conversion, Newman had written that the dogmatic definitions of the fifth-century Pope Leo had greater weight than the historical arguments from Scripture, the Fathers, and the creed, all of which were advanced by the heretical Monophysites.<sup>6</sup> And in the 1864 *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman argued, in a more conclusive way, for the distinction between history and dogma. There he compares the ecclesiastical criteria of antiquity (a firm historical foundation extending back to the apostles) and catholicity (the consent of the universal Church as a sign of its truth). In Newman's judgment, the mark of catholicity, even when apostolic testimony was lacking, did not infringe upon the mark of antiquity.<sup>7</sup> In other words, a dogmatic definition which was authoritatively promulgated did not depend upon the historical record. Instead, it springs from the tradition of the Church, a tradition which is more than the sum of written testimony.

Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835-1888) took up the same train of thought and gave it sharper expression in his 1873 *Katholische Dogmatik*. To be sure, Scheeben's opponents – the Jansenists and German Protestants – were not the Anglicans in relation to whom Newman had to define himself. But the continental appeal to Scripture and to the patristic writings, as manifestations of the grace of God, was not unlike the Anglican appeal to antiquity, especially if this were understood as solely confirmed by documentary evidence. In his treatment of revelation, for instance, Scheeben compared the Protestant principle of *Scriptura sola* with the Jansenists' reverence for the patristic evidence of Church tradition. Both groups regard their sources as media of revelation which possess of themselves an immediate certainty.<sup>8</sup> Every other medium, by consequence, is for them merely human work and human sayings, without divine authority.

This is wrong, Scheeben argued, on two counts: first, because it confuses authority with authenticity, and second, because it mistakes the true role of obedience in faith. Let us examine Scheeben's first case. One cannot simply consider the teaching of the Church authoritative insofar as it is authentic, he taught. Nor can one confine the authority of the Church to legislating those laws which enable the believer to fulfil an obligation of faith which existed prior to the laws. Instead, the authority of the Church is that which enables one to know the truth, according to Scheeben, apart from those grounds or insights which can be said to belong to oneself.<sup>9</sup> To apply for a moment a

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<sup>6</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, the edition of 1845, edited with an introduction by J.M.Cameron (Hammondsworth and Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974), chap. V, sec. iii, p. 322.

<sup>7</sup> Id., *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: Being a History of His Religious Opinions*, edited with an introduction by Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Scheeben, *Gesammelte Schriften*, III.42 (sec. 7., par. 57).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., III.47-48 (sec. 8, pars. 69-71).

terminology which was not Scheeben's, we could say that the insights which scholars can win for themselves belong to historical tradition. Dogmatic tradition, on the other hand, belongs to the Church alone. It is dogmatic precisely because it cannot be drawn, he claimed, from a scientific scrutiny of historical documents.

This is reflected in the infallibility of the Roman pontiff, defined shortly before the publication of Scheeben's Dogmatik.<sup>10</sup> In that work, Scheeben often refers to papal authority, and his references are of importance for the distinction between dogmatic and historical tradition. True Catholic faith, he writes, is that which the Church alone transmits. Catholics know what the Church transmits insofar as they hold their faith in genuine obedience to the binding authority of God's vicar, the pope. Having presented this second case, Scheeben comes to a point decisive for understanding the degree to which historical tradition was subordinated to dogmatic tradition. The obedience which the Catholic owes to the pope, he writes, must grasp the entirety of the truth which the Church presents, and must "sacrifice *unconditionally* all subjective views and prejudices to that truth."<sup>11</sup> Scheeben nowhere equates subjective views and prejudices with the results of historical scholarship. But because scholarship does not possess the supernatural guarantees which belong to the pontiff, and because (as we saw above) papal authority is irreducible to what one can know by oneself, such an equation can be made. Historical tradition, where it is contradicted by dogmatic tradition, must sacrifice itself, according to Scheeben. It does so in obedience to an authority which is supernatural, and so mysterious, in a precise theological sense, having to do with the entry of the divine into history.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See the dogmatic constitution De Ecclesia Christi (usually known as *Pastor aeternus*) of the fourth session of Vatican Council I (July 18, 1870), esp. chap. 4, in Denzinger, sec. 1839 (translation, p. 457). The complete text can be found in Acta et Decreta sacrorum Conciliorum recentiorum (1789-1870), Collectio Lacensis, auctoribus presbyteris S.J. e Domo B.V.M. sine labe conceptae ad lacum, 7 vols. (Freiburg in Breisgau: Sumptibus Herder, 1870 (vol. 1) -1890 (vol. VI)), vol. VII, cols. 482-487. Volume VII contains all the official documents pertaining to Vatican I.

<sup>11</sup> "Vollkommen und wahrhaft katholisch ist nämlich unser Glaube . . . inwiefern dieser Gerhorsam [gegen die päpstliche Autorität] als ein vollkommener und totaler *ausnahmslos* die ganze von der Kirche vorgelegte Wahrheit umfasst und *vorbehaltlos* alle subjektiven Ansichten und Vorurteile ihr zum Opfer bringt." Scheeben, Gesammelte Schriften, III.345 (Dogmatik, sec. 43, par. 768).

<sup>12</sup> This point finds its confirmation in Scheeben's 1865 Die Mysterien des Christentums, which he revised shortly before his death in 1888. There he writes that if one tries to explain infallibility as that which belongs to the whole Church by means of the mere agreement of individuals, it is because one cannot be reconciled to that which is supernatural or mysterious in the Church. Scheeben, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. II: Die Mysterien des Christentums, final text, 3rd edition, ed. Josef Hofer (1941, 1949, 1958), sec. 80, p. 456. Translation: The Mysteries of Christianity, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1946), pp. 554-555.

It might be said that Scheeben, with his emphasis on the need to sacrifice subjective views and prejudices – a phrase which covers those results of historical scholarship at odds with the teaching of the Church – comes close to advocating a *sacrificium intellectus*. He evidently presumes that the teaching of the Church is objective (in the sense of unbiased) and without prejudice. To that extent, he can be criticized for obscuring the constitutive role of prejudice (in the sense of prejudgment),<sup>13</sup> and for ignoring the inevitable traces of the concepts of a given epoch which dogmatic formulas bear.<sup>14</sup> Yet the sacrifice of subjective views is, in Scheeben’s thought, less a plea for unbiased neutrality than for the mind of the Church. He wants the Christian not just to have a perspective on the truth, but the truth itself. Furthermore, the adjective “subjective,” which Scheeben uses, can be applied not only the “views” of which he speaks but to “prejudices” as well. That is to say, Scheeben can be construed not as an opponent of prejudices in general, but only of those which are subjective, contrary to the authority of the Church, and hence ill founded. Far from advocating a sacrifice of the intellect, Scheeben hints, in his remarks on obedience, that the notion of what is properly intellectual needs to be redefined.

This is significant for understanding the background of the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition. Scheeben, and Newman as well, were not deliberately trying to sever the two, but to define their proper relation. Without a doubt, Newman resolutely opposed those who would make historical documentation the foundation of dogmatic tradition. And in Scheeben’s case, dogma is virtually defined as that which cannot be derived from scientific history. One could infer from this testimony that historical and dogmatic tradition are to be opposed. Catholics must ally themselves either with the teachings of the Church or with the results of secular scholarship. This was the conclusion of many critics of Roman Catholicism, who could cite passages from Catholic theologians to confirm their theses.<sup>15</sup> Yet the more proper conclusion to be drawn from

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<sup>13</sup> This was expounded above, in Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. in the section entitled “Jankowitz’ Critique of Prejudice-Free Thought.”

<sup>14</sup> This has been conceded by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which has stated that the meaning of Church pronouncements depends upon the expressive power of language, that dogmatic truth can be formulated incompletely, and that these truths bear the traces of a given epoch’s conceptions of an issue. See the congregation’s document “Mysterium Ecclesiae” (“Declaratio circa Catholicam Doctrinam de Ecclesia contra nonnullos errores hodiernos tuendam,” ratified on May II, 1973), in Acta Apostolicae Sedis. Commentarium Officiale, first volume published 1909 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanus, 1973), vol. 65, pp. 396ff. Translation: “Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church against Certain Errors of the Present Day,” The Clergy Review 58 (1973): 950962, esp. par. 5, “The Notion of the Church’s Infallibility Not to Be Falsified,” pp. 956-959.

<sup>15</sup> A good example of such a critic, who refers to the work of Newman, Franzelin, and Dieckmann, is James Moffatt, The Thrill of Tradition (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944).

Newman and Scheeben is that the relation between history and dogma is one of subordination, rather than opposition. Newman subordinated antiquity to catholicity, and Scheeben subordinated the criticism of documentary sources to the authoritative teachings of the Church. The question they raised was not whether historical tradition is trustworthy in itself, but whether it is the wholly reliable last word in determining the Church's dogmatic tradition.

### IX.2. The Double Aspect of Modernism

Newman directed his attention to the Anglican-Roman Catholic question, and Scheeben was largely concerned with the problems raised by Protestant scholarship. In other words, the efforts of these thinkers were mainly directed toward a challenge to Catholicism from without. The distinction between dogmatic and historical tradition, however, was formulated more clearly in the Modernist controversy, a controversy within the Roman Catholic Church itself. Doubtless, Modernism arose in response to intellectual currents which were strong throughout the entire learned world. The Modernist ethos, one could say, was by no means restricted to Catholic circles.<sup>16</sup> Yet the term Modernism was taken up in a precise sense in the encyclical Pascendi (1907) which defined it in order to condemn it, and so Modernism became a point of controversy in a special way within the Catholic world. The distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition, or at least the concept of it, was sharply focused during the controversy, not by attacks against those outside the Church, but against those within.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Some who are unsympathetic to the condemnation of Modernism would say that the truth which the Modernists affirmed is more likely to find a hearing outside Roman Catholicism. See Alec. R. Vidler, The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church: Its Origins & Outcome, being the Norrisian Prize Essay in the University of Cambridge for the year 1933 (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1934), esp. chap. 27, "Outside the Roman Church."

<sup>17</sup> Modernism is defined in historical, philosophical, and theological terms – and at length – in the encyclical Pascendi dominici gregis of Pius X, Sept. 8, 1907. An abbreviated but substantial text is available in Denzinger, nos. 2071-2109 (translation: pp. 514-541). The complete text can be found in *Acta Sanctae Sedis: Ephemerides Romanae a ssmo d.n. Pio PP. X. Authenticae et officiales Apostolicae Sedis actis publice evulgandis declaratae*, 41 vols. plus index (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide, 1865-1908), vol. 40 (1907), pp. 593-650. Sixty-five propositions ascribed to Modernists were condemned two months before Pascendi in the decree of the Holy Office Lamentabili, published on July 3, 1904. The propositions can be found in Denzinger, nos. 2001-2065 (translation, pp. 508-513). On Sept. 10, 1910, the *motu proprio* Sacrorum antistitum was published. It contained an oath against Modernism in the form of a profession of faith, including assent to Lamentabili and Pascendi, a profession to which the clergy as a whole were required to submit. An abbreviated form of the text can be found in Denzinger, nos. 2145-2147 (translation, pp. 549-51).

### IX.2.A. Historicism and Immanentism

What is perhaps most interesting about the Modernist controversy for the development of the distinction is what can be called Modernism's double aspect. Within the ambit of Modernist theory, two distinct and contradictory movements assert themselves, historicism and immanentism. Historicism has been described above.<sup>18</sup> It is the interpretation of historical phenomena within the context of history itself, as opposed to an interpretation according to eternal or supernatural criteria. Historicism influenced theology particularly in the field of Biblical hermeneutics. One sees this in the exegetical endeavors of Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), the foremost Biblical scholar of the Modernist movement. Loisy's 1902 L'Évangile et l'Église sought to explain the Gospels not as revelation, but as "simples documents historiques."<sup>19</sup> This meant, for the historicist Loisy, that the Gospels were partial expressions of that movement which was primitive Christianity. A close analysis of them helps to explain what that movement was, and the movement provides the context in which the Gospels are to be interpreted. The encyclical Pascendi refers to historicism under the name of agnosticism.<sup>20</sup> It is agnostic in the sense that it does not regard the Gospels as divine revelation, but as purely human phenomena. To be sure, such phenomena become richly meaningful, according to Pascendi's summary of the Modernist view, when they are transfigured by faith. Yet such faith is added to the Gospels from the outside, as it were, and remains a subjective factor. Toward it, the Modernist preserves an attitude of agnosticism: one cannot know faith in the same way that one can know phenomena. Agnosticism, for the Modernist, springs from historicism. History, and not faith, is the proper context for interpreting the phenomena of history, according to such a view.

The second movement or aspect within Modernism is what Pascendi calls immanentism.<sup>21</sup> It can be defined as an attitude which excludes the transcendent on the grounds that whatever may be said to transcend the human subject can be found in an equivalent way within the subject.<sup>22</sup> For the Modernists, this meant a discrediting of the dogmatic theology whose claim was to represent, in a precise and authoritative way, that which God as the genuinely transcendent has revealed. Modernism disclaimed an attack on revelation or theology in themselves. Instead, it sought to establish between them a

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<sup>18</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. the section entitled "The Historical School. II

<sup>19</sup> Alfred Loisy, L'Évangile et l'Église, 5th ed., augmented by a preface (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1930), p. 15. Translation: The Gospel and the Church, trans. Christopher Home (1903), with an introduction by Bernard B. Scott (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Denzinger, no. 2096; translation, pp. 531-533.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2074 and passim; translation, p. 515ff.

<sup>22</sup> Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology, 1969 ed., s. v. "Immanentism," by Peter Henrici, III. 107 .

relation not of cause and effect, one could say, but of theme and improvised variation. Hence theology came to be the myriad and discontinuous reflection upon the data of revelation. George Tyrrell (1861-1909), a former Jesuit and the center of the Modernist movement in England, expressed the relation between revelation and theology in his article of 1905, “The Rights and Limits of Theology.” His example of revelation is the so-called Apostolic Creed. The criticism of the creed,” he writes, “in the light of science in general or of theology in particular, cannot touch that religious value which, quite independently of the external history of its origin, it has been proved to possess as an instrument of the spiritual life of the Churches.”<sup>23</sup> In this passage, one notes that Tyrrell draws a line between the religious value of the creed and history of its origin. He thus provides an epitome of immanentism; the creed’s value is not derived from what might once have been called its transcendent historical origin in the teaching which the apostles received from Christ. This is because the creed, which is called apostolic, only attained its full textual form in the fourth century.<sup>24</sup> An apologist such as Tyrrell, reluctant to make a claim for the creed which contradicts historical scholarship, would not want to anchor the creed’s value in a transcendent origin which could be disproved. Its value, by consequence, became an immanent one. Severed from the apostles and the revelation handed over to them, the creed served, for Tyrrell, as an instrument of the spiritual life of the spiritual life of the early churches, a locus of that religious vitality whose root is the human being’s need for the divine. Such immanentism was characteristic of the Modernists. “They sought to deduce religious truth from the needs of the subject,” as Roger Aubert has remarked, “and tried to find the mainspring of supernatural grace in the intrinsic tendencies of nature itself, instead of the ‘extrinsicism’ which saw the supernatural as working from outside nature.”<sup>25</sup> In their eyes, the supernatural was itself natural.

Historicism and immanentism, the double aspect of the Modernist movement, parallel – after a fashion – the terms of the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition. Both the Modernists and the modern theologians of tradition who made the distinction perceived a conflict between the claims of academic history and those of

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<sup>23</sup> George Tyrrell, “The Rights and Limits of Theology,” chap. VIII (pp. 200-241) of Through Scylla and Charybdis, or The Old Theology and the New (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), p. 240 (the article was first published in The Quarterly Review of October, 1905).

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Einführung in das Christentum. Vorlesungen über das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis (München; Kosel Verlag, 1968), pp. 54-56. Translation: Introduction to Christianity, trans. J. R. Foster (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 50-52. Ratzinger refers to Ferdinand Kattenbusch’s Das Apostolische Symbol, 2 vols., reprint edition (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1962) as the standard work on the subject. Vol. I (Die Grundgestalt des Taufsymbols) was originally published in 1894, and vol. II (Verbreitung und Bedeutung des Taufsymbols) in 1900 – early enough for Tyrrell to be aware of Kattenbusch’s conclusions.

<sup>25</sup> Sacramentum Mundi, 1969 ed., s.v. “Modernism,” by Roger Aubert, IV.100.

dogmatic theology. For Roman Catholics, the Church embodies the apostolic deposit in what Billot called an immutable tradition. This appeared irreconcilable with the empirical fact of a Church which has experienced countless changes throughout its history. Such a conflict posed a problem to theology. Responding to it, the Modernists and the modern theologians of tradition refused to give historical criticism the last word in matters of religion. To be sure, Loisy was committed to historicist principles of Scriptural interpretation. But his book on the Gospel and the Church was directed against the lectures of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), whose view of Christianity subordinated the person of Jesus Christ to God the Father.<sup>26</sup> Harnack, grounding his opinions in a historical criticism of the Bible and subsequent dogmatic developments, sought to return Christianity to what he perceived as the original proclamation of Jesus: love for his heavenly Father and for all human beings in light of the expected imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. By contrast, dogmatic developments represented in his eyes a falling-away from the original enthusiasm.<sup>27</sup> This Loisy could not accept. He regarded doctrinal development as “fatal, donc légitime en principe,” insisting that it is nothing other than the organic growth of a living thing.<sup>28</sup> To that extent his intentions were allied with those of the modern theologians of tradition. They too refused to interpret doctrinal development as a corruption of primitive Christianity. For them, and for the Modernists as well, Christianity in its theological development represents an aspect of human existence with a life of its own. It is not to be confined – to or judged by the documentary evidence of the first Christian century.

#### IX.2.B. An Anti-Intellectual Tendency

Nevertheless, the parallels drawn above between the historicism and immanentism of the Modernists, on the one hand, and Catholic theology’s distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition, on the other, shrink in importance when compared to their differences. First of all, the Modernists were immanentist because of their historicism. This means that, as a result of interpreting the phenomena of early Christianity in the context of history alone, Modernism was led to affirm the critique offered by many practitioners of the historical critical method, namely, that the difference between the doctrine of primitive Christianity and that of later centuries was

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<sup>26</sup> Adolf Harnack, Das Wesen des Christentums. Sechzehn Vorlesungen vor Studierenden aller Facultäten im Wintersemester 1899/1900 an der Universität Berlin, 4th ed. (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1901). Translation: What Is Christianity? trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (1900), introduction by Rudolf Bultmann (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers (Harper Torchbooks, the Cloister Library), 1957).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, eleventh lecture, “Die christliche Religion in ihrer Entwicklung zum Katholizismus,” pp. 119-130; translation, pp. 190-209.

<sup>28</sup> Loisy, p. 202; translation, p. 213. Home’s translation renders the phrase as “inevitable, therefore, and in principle, legitimate,” missing the critical note in the word “fatal.”

irreconcilable. This being conceded, the justification for later doctrine as an unfolding of what was implicit in earlier doctrine was abandoned by the Modernists. Catholic theologians of tradition, however, denied that contemporary Church teaching was incompatible with the historical record. Many followed the lead of Newman (who, because he was cited with approval by the Modernists, himself became an object of suspicion) and argued that catholicity was a superior criterion for judging doctrine than antiquity.<sup>29</sup> Catholic theology, as we saw above, has tended to subordinate historical tradition to dogmatic tradition, insofar as it does not alter dogmatic teachings on the basis of new historical research. The opposite inclination can be seen in Modernism. It subordinated its understanding of dogma – accommodated is perhaps the better word – to the historicist critique.

The second distinctive difference between Modernism and the modern theologians of tradition, in their treatment of history and dogma, has to do with apologetics. The Modernists, we have seen, were immanentist in their advocacy of Christian doctrine. The value of such doctrine, they argued, lies not in its systematic presentation of divine revelation. It is, rather, of symbolic value, containing within itself the moral truths which humanity needs.<sup>30</sup> The content of doctrine consequently depends upon the manner in which Christians bring to life, according to Modernist teaching.<sup>31</sup> One cannot look to it, in Tyrrell's phrase, as a premise for exact theological argumentation.<sup>32</sup> This has led many commentators to describe Modernism as a reaction against intellectualism.<sup>33</sup> Not from the intellect, but from the heart, would it draw its faith.

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<sup>29</sup> Newman, Apologia, pp. 110-111. Here Newman describes the effect upon him of the words of St. Augustine, "securus iudicat orbis terrarum." Tyrrell quotes the same phrase, and refers to Newman, in his introduction to Scylla and Charybdis, pp. 5, 15-19. But for him, the security of the judgment of the world of the Church does not lie in its faithfulness to the apostolic teaching, as it does for Newman, but rather in the assurance that the Church's evolution is the true one.

<sup>30</sup> Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique, 1929 ed., s.v. "Modernisme," by J. Rivière, vol. X.2, cols. 2009-2047; esp. col. 2020.

<sup>31</sup> This bears some resemblance to Schleiermacher's divinatory hermeneutic, as we have described it above. See Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. the sections entitled "Schleiermacher's Reconstructive Aim" and "Individual Expressivity, Not Content."

<sup>32</sup> Tyrrell, p. 240.

<sup>33</sup> SacramentumMundi, 1969 edition, s.v. "Modernism," by Roger Aubert, IV.100; Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique, s.v. "Modernisme," by J. Rivière, vol. X.2, cols. 2020-21.

This view presented a problem, however, insofar as the realms of intellect and of the heart were divided. If faith is an affair of the heart alone, it has no intellectual basis. For this reason, Pascendi criticized the Modernist tendency to regard faith as an *incognoscibile*.<sup>34</sup> Such a tendency cannot be called anti-intellectual, for the Modernists had good reason for emphasizing the mysterious origin of faith. It could survive, after all, the assaults of an historical criticism which had apparently undermined its vaunted historical foundation. Hence the Modernist apologetic sought to clarify the reasons why historical criticism was no danger to faith: faith, the Modernist said, is independent of criticism. But the exclusion of faith from the domain of the intellect could not be tolerated by Catholic theology, in which the two had always enjoyed the most intimate relation. Such an exclusion vitiated, among other things, the Catholic arguments for the demonstrability of the existence of God. If the traditional mode of Catholic apologetic was to be reaffirmed, if dogma was to retain a firm intellectual footing, it would have to relate to and comprehend historical criticism. The one who laid the groundwork for this in the most persuasive way was not a theologian but a philosopher, Maurice Blondel (1861-1949).

### IX.3. Blondel's Integration of History and Dogma

What immediately sets Blondel's 1904 Histoire et Dogme apart from other treatments of the problem of historical and dogmatic tradition is its acknowledgment of a threat from the right as well as from the left.<sup>35</sup> The left is the historicist camp, composed of the Modernists proper.<sup>36</sup> The right is criticized under the name of extrinsicism. The extrinsicists are those who regard the dogmatic importance of the events of history as something extrinsic to history.<sup>37</sup> When confronted by a historical event which has a

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<sup>34</sup> Denzinger, nos. 2074, 2084; translation, pp. 516, 521-522.

<sup>35</sup> Maurice Blondel, Histoire et Dogme. Les lacunes philosophiques de l'exégèse moderne, first published in La Quinzaine 56 (16 Jan. 1904), 145-167; (1 Feb.), 349-373; (16 Feb.), 435-58; reprinted in Les premiers écrits de Maurice Blondel. There are two volumes of Les premiers écrits. The first volume is a reimpression of the 1893 edition of L'Action (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), and had a run of only 35 copies. The second volume (which is not, however, designated as a second volume on its title page) includes Histoire et Dogme, pp. 149-228. Both volumes were published on the initiative of the "Amis de Maurice Blondel," but only the second had a sizeable publication. The full citation is Les premiers écrits de Maurice Blondel, Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine, fondée par Felix Alcan (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956). Our citations of Histoire et Dogme are from this volume. Translation: Maurice Blondel, The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma, texts presented and translated by Alexander Dru and Iltyd Trethowan (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. 219-287.

<sup>36</sup> In Histoire et Dogme, Blondel refers on at least two occasions to Loisy, without actually naming him. See pp. 182, 193; translation, pp. 249, 259.

<sup>37</sup> Blondel is referring here to those such as Hippolyte Gayraud (1856-1911), who criticized his 1896 Lettre sur l'apologétique in an article entitled "Une nouvelle

miraculous or super natural significance, the extrinsicist relegates the scientific history of the event to a mere presupposition for its dogmatic value. The original content of the event, its relation to the milieu in which it occurred, and its situation in the other events of history, are granted little importance. Pride of place belongs to that which is abstracted from the event, namely, its miraculous or supernatural significance.

### IX.3.A. The Critique of the Right

Blondel attacked extrinsicism in two ways. First, he said that it limits its interest in historical facts to the apologetic use which can be made of them. Events become merely a sign that the divine has been revealed in history. The elaboration of their revelatory meaning belongs to the dogmatic theologian alone, not to the historian. Second, Blondel criticized the extrinsicists for failing to see the bond between history and dogma. Their argument is weakened by the fear that historical investigation undercuts dogma. Such an argument does not have, he said, “the right or the power or the desire to attain either the link which may exist between that miraculous character and the particular historical event invested with it, or the essential relationship which may exist between the facts and the ideas, or the connection which can and should be made between the given objective facts and our thought or our own lives.”<sup>38</sup> Extrinsicism, in other words, is neither able nor willing to discern the link between history and dogma. It is unable because it holds the historical facts in low esteem: they are merely a vehicle for the dogma which is based on them. The adherents of extrinsicism are unwilling to find the link between facts and faith because such a link, they might say, under cuts the truly supernatural character of dogma. But this link ought to be found, argues Blondel, if dogma is not to be regarded merely as an interpretation of history, that is, if the two are to be intrinsically connected.

Blondel was by no means the first of Catholic thinkers in this period to insist upon the integration of history and dogma. The French Dominican, Antoine Lemonnyer (1872-1932), for example, distinguished in 1903 between the theological and historical points of view. The one possesses, so to speak, what is given in theology; the other justifies it. Although he subordinated historical theology to positive theology,

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apologétique chrétienne,” Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne 132 (1896). Gayraud censured Blondel’s notion that the supernatural is the indispensable condition of all true philosophy, arguing that what is necessary to human nature and philosophy cannot be really supernatural. For an account of their dispute, see Henri Bouillard, Blondel et le Christianisme (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1961), chap. I; translation: Blondel and Christianity, trans. James M. Somerville (Washington, D.C., and Cleveland: Corpus Books, 1970).

<sup>38</sup> “Et cette argumentation elle-même ne considère le surnaturel que comme un signe et une consigne, sans avoir le droit ni le pouvoir ni le vouloir d’atteindre soit le lien qu’il peut y avoir entre ce caractère miraculeux et l’événement historique et particulier qui en est revêtu, soit le rapport essentiel qui peut exister entre les faits et les idées, soit la liaison qui peut et doit se nouer entre ces données objectives et notre pensée ou notre vie propres.” Blondel, Histoire et Dogme, in Les premiers écrits, p. 156; translation, p. 227.

Lemonnyer nevertheless insisted upon the justification of dogmas by the means of history.<sup>39</sup> Another French Dominican, Ambroise Gardeil (1859-1931), expressed a similar idea.<sup>40</sup> Because, he said, the “progressive” historical-critical method neglects the accretions of legitimate tradition, it should be replaced with a “regressive” method. This method consists of taking those testimonies from the past which have been used to substantiate dogmatic theology, and to immerse them, through historical research, in their own milieu. The purpose of this would be not to discredit dogmatic theology by casting doubt upon its sources, but to revive it with an ever-more critical and historical documentation. In this way, Gardeil would integrate history and dogma. He proposed to make explicit the debt which history owes dogma, here regarded as the teaching of those later documents which develop from and interpret an earlier historical documentation. The later documents follow normally from the earlier, he said, and are providential by virtue of the earlier.<sup>41</sup> Thus a historical foundation is a sine qua non for dogmatic definitions.

We can conclude that, for both Lemonnyer and Gardeil, dogma and history are related intrinsically. These men insisted that the faith of the Church is rooted in the past, and clarifies its meaning. Their thought is thus compatible with that of Blondel. But neither of the two Dominicans criticized, as Blondel did, the extrinsicism to which the cautious theology of the anti-Modernists was prone. They were quite willing to point to history as a sign that God had acted. Only Blondel, however, acknowledged the unwillingness of many conservative theologians to examine what, according to the historical record, God had in fact done.

### IX.3.B. The Critique of the Left

Nevertheless it must be said that Blondel’s critique of extrinsicism is only a small part of Histoire et Dogme. He devotes five times as much space to a critique of historicism. This second critique is of considerable value for understanding the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition. Blondel’s argument against historicism sets itself apart because, while it points to the limits of historical research, it does so in the name of real history or of reality, not of a supernaturalism unavailable to

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<sup>39</sup> Antoine Lemonnyer, “Théologie positive et théologie historique,” Revue du clergé français 34 (1903): 5-18; and “Comment s’organise la théologie catholique,” ibid., 36 (1903): 225-242. These are summarized and evaluated in Lucio da Veiga Coutinho, Tradition et histoire dans la controverse Moderniste (1898-1910), Analecta Gregoriana, vol. 73 (Rome: At the Gregorian University, 1954), pp. 98-103.

<sup>40</sup> Ambroise Gardeil, “La réforme de la théologie catholique,” Revue Thomiste 11 (1903), 5-19, 197-215, 428-457; cited by and discussed in da Veiga Coutinho, pp. 103-106.

<sup>41</sup> “Seulement au lieu de tout trancher au nom de documents collatéraux, ce qui suffirait pour une pensée humaine, le théologien fait appel aux documents postérieurs qui sont l’aboutissant normal, parce qu’il est providentiel, de la virtualité des premiers.” Gardeil, “La réforme,” pp. 447-49, quoted in da Veiga Coutinho, p. 106.

science. Blondel begins by examining what it means to be critical. The essence of critical thought lies, according to *Histoire et Dogme*, not in the critique of this or that datum of knowledge, but in the critique of knowledge itself.<sup>42</sup> Such a critical examination of historical knowledge suggests that the historian's integration of history depends upon ultimate metaphysical questions, which the phenomena of history alone cannot answer. At this point, Blondel makes a central distinction, that between real history and the abstractions of the historian. "Real history is composed of human lives," writes Blondel, "and human life is metaphysics in act."<sup>43</sup> In other words, real history entails spiritual, psychological, and moral issues which can never be reduced to the phenomena by which they are known. The abstractions of the historian, on the other hand, are interpretive syntheses. The historian integrates facts within a deterministic chain, according to Blondel, and this interpretation – no matter how intelligible or scientific – differs from real history. The difference between the two is central because it marks the limit beyond which historiography cannot go without degenerating into historicism.

The great error of historicism, says Blondel, is its failure to acknowledge the limits of historical research. Instead, it attempts to answer ultimate questions by erecting an historical ontology. This is accomplished in three steps. First, the historicist adopts the thesis that the observation of phenomena enables one to induce the real truth of how things came to be. The second historicist thesis is that the observation of phenomena, linked by the observer in a deterministic manner, constitutes the raw material of history. Finally, according to Blondel, the historicist is led to a fatal step. "The historical facts will be given the role of reality itself," he writes, "and an ontology, purely phenomenological in character, will be extracted from a methodology and a phenomenology."<sup>44</sup> This is fatal because historical facts are not reality itself. To be sure, they are the expression of reality, that through which reality can be grasped. And there is nothing wrong with the methodology which grasps them. But the historical facts remain phenomena, and do not themselves answer the question of the meaning of being. In that sense, they are incapable of erecting an ontology. The question of the meaning of being is a riddle which history cannot solve, because history is underway. It cannot provide a completed context within which to evaluate its individual incidents.<sup>45</sup> Blondel realized this, and his examination of the issue marks a step beyond other Catholic critics of

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<sup>42</sup> Blondel, *Les premiers écrits*, p. 164; translation, p. 234.

<sup>43</sup> "L'histoire réelle est faite de vies humaines; et la vie humaine c'est de la métaphysique en acte." *Ibid.*, p. 168; translation, p. 237.

<sup>44</sup> "On va faire jouer à la donnée historique le rôle de la réalité profonde; on va d'une méthodologie et d'une phénoménologie tirer une ontologie qui ne sera qu'un phénoménisme." *Ibid.*, p. 171; translation, p. 240.

<sup>45</sup> This was the dilemma in which the German historical school found itself embroiled, as Gadamer has shown. See the above discussion in *Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition*, esp. the section entitled "Ranke and the Continuity of History."

historicism. The shortcomings of historicism do not stem, in his mind, from the supernaturalism to which theology alone has access, and with which history has nothing to do. Instead, its shortcomings are due to the ontological questions which history inevitably raises and which it has not the competence to decide. In sum, historicism fails not because it ignores the supernatural which is extrinsic to it, in Blondel's opinion, but because it overlooks its own intrinsic connection with metaphysics.

What is decisive for our understanding of the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition, however, is the manner in which Blondel resisted the temptation to subordinate history to dogma. The problem of the apparent incommensurability of primitive Christianity with the Catholic Church almost demands such a subordination. It alone would seem to account for the refinement of dogma, which bears so little outward resemblance to the apostolic kerygma; for the survival of Christianity, long after the expectation of an imminent parousia had dimmed; and for the integration of Christian and classical thought, despite the relative unsophistication of the apostles. Only if Christian dogma could rise above primitive Christianity's humble history, it would seem, is the achievement of the Catholic Church comprehensible. Blondel, however, avoided the subordination of history to a super natural dogma. Instead, he spoke in Histoire et Dogme of the incarnation of dogma within history: "truth, even though divinely inspired, cannot commune with human thought except by becoming incarnate in the contingent forms which make it, little by little, assimilable."<sup>46</sup> Dogma needs history, as it were, in order to be grasped. The two thus have a dialectical relationship. History is the expression of dogmatic truth, one can say, and the force of dogmatic truth informs history. Neither one dominates the other. Instead, they have a role of mutual verification and vivification.

### IX.3.C. The Synthesis of Tradition

Doubtless, it must be said that not all interpreters have drawn this lesson from Blondel. The French Jesuit theologian, Eugène Portalié (1852-1909), for example, criticized Histoire et Dogme for transforming the Church's tradition into something supra-historical.<sup>47</sup> Blondel's work contributes to the separation of history and dogma, in his view, because it integrates the two within tradition, defined as that which cannot be reduced to history. Blondel, we must concede, does emphasize the irreducibility of tradition. Histoire et Dogme often suggests that tradition is supernatural, wholly distinct from the natural order. It relies, Blondel writes, "on texts, but at the same time it relies primarily on something else, on an experience always in act which enables it to remain in

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<sup>46</sup> "[L]a vérité, fût-elle divinement exprimée, ne peut communier à la pensée humaine qu'en s'incarnant sous les formes contingentes qui la lui rendent peu à peu assimilable." Blondel, Les premiers écrits, p. 179; translation, p. 246.

<sup>47</sup> Eugène Portalié, "La valeur historique du dogme," Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique de Toulouse (1905): 77-128; cited by and discussed in da Veiga Coutinho, pp. 146-151.

some respects master of the texts.”<sup>48</sup> The image of tradition as the proud mistress who dominates historical texts seems to devalue them. It calls forth, in Blondel’s writings, another image of tradition: “Turned lovingly towards the past where its treasure lies, it moves towards the future, where it conquers and illuminates.”<sup>49</sup> If tradition conquers the future, one might be anxious about its disposition toward the past. Blondel makes this disposition explicit: “Something in the Church escapes scientific examination; and it is the Church which, without rejecting or neglecting the contributions of exegesis and history, nevertheless controls them, because in the very tradition which constitutes her, she possesses another means of knowing her author.”<sup>50</sup> Tradition, for Blondel, paves a way to knowledge of Jesus Christ and is, with respect to critical history, the one in control. These citations reveal the source of Portalié’s discomfort. In his opinion, Blondel did not clearly see that tradition is itself a part of critical history. The fundamental facts of Christian revelation, said the Jesuit, must be capable of documentation. If they are historically unverifiable, he wrote, they lose their apologetic value altogether. And if one pretends to affirm them by relying – as Blondel, in Portalié’s view, seems to do – on the faith and authority of the Church, one will then be trapped in an inadmissible vicious circle, at least insofar as one has only established ecclesiastical authority upon a foundation independent of historical facts.<sup>51</sup> We have seen that Blondel does speak of tradition as a mistress who conquers and controls history. If he truly severs the bases of Christianity from critical history, the objection of Portalié is insurmountable.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> “Elle se fonde sans doute sur les textes, mais elle se fonde en même temps et d’abord sur autre chose qu’eux, sur une expérience toujours en acte qui lui permet de rester, à certains égards, maîtresse des textes au lieu d’y être strictement asservie.” Blondel, Le premiers écrits, p. 204; translation, p. 267.

<sup>49</sup> “Tournée amoureusement vers le passé où est son trésor, elle va vers l’avenir où est sa conquête et sa lumière.” Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> “Quelque chose de l’Église échappe au contrôle scientifique; et c’est elle qui, sans d’ailleurs jamais s’en passer et sans les négliger, contrôle tous les apports de l’exégèse et de l’histoire, puisqu’elle a, dans la Tradition même qui la constitue, un autre moyen de connaître son auteur.” Ibid., p. 206; translation, p. 268.

<sup>51</sup> “Les premiers, s’ils étaient historiquement invérifiables, perdraient aussitôt leur valeur apologétique; et, d’autre part, si l’on prétendait les affirmer en s’appuyant sur la foi et l’autorité de l’Église, on serait entraîné dans un cercle vicieux inadmissible, à moins qu’on n’eût solidement établi cette autorité de l’Église sur une base indépendante de ces faits.” Portalié, p. 83; cited in da Veiga Coutinho, pp. 147-148. The question of whether reliance on ecclesiastical authority traps one in a vicious circle was answered in the negative by Giuseppe Filograssi. See the section below entitled “Dogmatic Tradition Is Still Tradition.”

<sup>52</sup> Da Veiga Coutinho, for one, believes it is. Blondel, he writes, “ne réussit pas tout à fait à nous faire franchir raisonnablement le premier passage: *des faits a la foi*” (p. 149).

Yet the question of whether Blondel severs dogmatic Christian foundations from critical history, it seems to me, is more properly answered in the negative. First, Histoire et Dogme affirms, from its opening pages to its conclusion, that there is a reciprocal relation between historical facts and the faith expressed in dogma. To be sure, Blondel is more concerned with, and devotes more space to, a refutation of those historicists who would explain the development of dogma as a mere product of natural determinism. But he criticizes the extrinsicists as well. Rather than severing dogma from history, Blondel inquired about their proper relation of mutual dependence. Moreover, he insisted resolutely on the bond between reason and faith. In his discussion Christianity and classical thought, for example, Blondel almost turned the usual strategy of Catholic theology in this period – subordinating history to dogma – on its head. Dogma is not the adaptation of Christian facts to the eternal themes of philosophy, he wrote, as if thought and dogma were self-sufficient. Instead, dogma can be said to make the absolute incarnate within (and dependent upon) the relative. About dogmatic expressions, Histoire et Dogme presents the following thesis: “far from expressing a simple idea, an intellectual interpretation, a superior systematization that remains always capable of working upon itself, dogmatic formulae will be confined to seeking in the historical facts for the fullness of unalterable truth, which they can never exhaust but on which they must always concentrate.”<sup>53</sup> Ideas, interpretations, and systematizations – these are that to which immanentists would reduce dogma. Its truth would be confined to the mind which grasps it as such. For Blondel, however, dogma has more than an immanent value. Its truth lies in the history from which it springs. No doubt, dogma cannot exhaust the truth incarnate in history. But there its work lies. Indeed, dogma is subordinate to history, according to the French philosopher, insofar as it must draw its life from that revelation which is thoroughly historical.

The most compelling evidence that Blondel does not sever the bases of Christianity from critical history is his definition of tradition, through which he unites the two. He calls tradition “the immense echo of oral Revelation in early Christian literature and in the works of the Fathers.”<sup>54</sup> It must be admitted that an echo is not identical with the revelation itself. An echo is a reflection, a repercussion, a result. Blondel’s definition allows for a certain dissimilarity between primitive Christianity and the Roman Catholicism of later centuries. But at the same time, that echo of oral revelation which is tradition cannot be explained apart from the revelation which is its source. Blondel wants

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<sup>53</sup> “[L]es formules, loin d’exprimer une simple idée, une interprétation intellectuelle, une systématisation supérieure et toujours capable de se travailler librement elle-même, resteront astreintes à chercher dans les faits historique une plénitudes de vérité fixe qu’elles n’épuiseront sans doute jamais, mais qu’elles viseront toujours?” Blondel, Les premiers écrits, p. 186; translation, p. 252. Blondel phrases this in question form, but answers it affirmatively on the next page. It is, he says, “l’idée d’un absolu incarné dans le relatif.”

<sup>54</sup> “[L]’immense écho de la Révélation orale dans la première littérature chrétienne et dans les oeuvres des Pères.” *Ibid.*, p. 203; translation, p. 266.

to insist upon the connection between the two. If the oral testimony of the earliest Christian witnesses is history, and if its revelatory truth is dogma, then one can see how Blondel unites them. Their synthesis, he writes, “lies neither in the facts alone, nor in the ideas alone, but in the Tradition which embraces within it the facts of history, the effort of reason and the accumulated experience of the faithful.”<sup>55</sup> Here Blondel draws together those streams which previously have been regarded as crosscurrents: history and reason. The accumulated experiences of faithful action are added as a third and decisive element. Tradition, he says, is more than a collection of historical facts. The facts must be integrated in reason, that is, as ideas. These facts and ideas become Christian tradition, for Blondel, in the experiences of that faithful action which is neither datum nor interpretation, but metaphysics in act. Thus he unites history and dogma, not simply by demonstrating a reciprocal relation between the two, but by insisting that such a relation is actually accomplished in the Catholic Church’s own experience.

It is significant that faithful action gets the last word, because the integration by the faithful of fact and idea differs from that integration which takes place outside the Church. This became particularly clear in the period prior to and immediately after the 1950 declaration of the Assumption of Mary. At that time, there was an immense popular movement in the Catholic Church urging that such a declaration was possible and opportune. Yet an objection was raised, at the same time, that no historical evidence can be adduced to show that the Assumption was part of the apostolic teaching. The resulting conflict brought the terms “historical tradition” and “dogmatic tradition” into explicit use.

#### IX.4. The Contribution of the Assumption Debate

In the formal definition of the Assumption of Mary, it is stated that the patristic and theological arguments brought forward on behalf of the dogma are based upon Scripture as their ultimate foundation.<sup>56</sup> But there is a question as to the sense in which Scripture is the ultimate foundation of these arguments. In a series of three articles, the first two of which were published before the official declaration, the Würzburg patristic scholar, Berthold Altaner (1885-1964), argued that the dogma lacks a scientific foundation.<sup>57</sup> By this he meant that there is not a consistent record of testimony to the

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<sup>55</sup> “[L]e principe de la synthèse n’est ni dans les faits seuls ni dans les idées seules, il est dans la Tradition qui résume en elle les données de l’histoire, l’effort de la raison, et les expériences accumulées de l’action fidèle.” Ibid., pp. 206-7; translation, p. 269. It is noteworthy that the translator renders Blondel’s “l’action fidèle,” a phrase of particular resonance for this philosopher, by “the faithful.”

<sup>56</sup> “Haec omnia Sanctorum Patrum ac theologorum argumenta considerationesque Sacris Litteris, tamquam ultimo fundamento, nituntur.” See the Apostolic Constitution “Munificentissimus Deus,” dated Nov. 4, 1950, in Denzinger, sec. 2331 (Denzinger’s date of Nov. 1 carries no explanation); translation, p. 647. The official text (with the Nov. 4 date) can be found in the Acta Apostolicae Sedis, vol. 42 (= series II, vol. 17), 1950; pp. 753-771; p. 767 cited here.

<sup>57</sup> Berthold Altaner, “Zur Frage der Definibilität der Assumptio B.V.M.,” Theologische Revue 44 (1948), 129-140 (discussing Otho Faller’s 1946 De priorum saeculorum

Assumption of Mary's body into heaven which extends back to eyewitnesses. Indeed, one finds in the first five centuries a virtual silence on this theme. Altaner emphasizes that neither Epiphanius nor Jerome, the best informed authorities on early Christian literature and the traditions of the Holy Land in the beginning of the fifth century, have recorded any knowledge of the Assumption. The testimony of Timothy of Jerusalem to the Assumption is dated by Altaner to be later than Epiphanius and Jerome.<sup>58</sup> Another testimony to the Assumption is found in the apocryphal "Transitus Mariae."<sup>59</sup> This text can be dated between the fourth and fifth centuries, according to Altaner, but is so full of uncorroborated miracle-stories that it is valueless for scientific theology.<sup>60</sup> Later patristic testimony of the sixth to eighth centuries about the Assumption is, in Altaner's opinion, influenced by the "Transitus" account, and cannot be traced back to the first century.<sup>61</sup> He argues that the origin of the tradition of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven lies either in the apocryphal "Transitus," or in theological speculation. By theological speculation he refers to (1) the argument that Mary's body should no more have remained in the grave than Jesus' own body, and (2) the argument that the Assumption is appropriate to Mary's position as the mother of God and the new Eve.<sup>62</sup> These arguments can be said to have their ultimate foundation in Scripture, in that Scripture testifies to the special dignity of Mary, and in that the Assumption confirms that testimony.<sup>63</sup> But Altaner argues that they are not, properly speaking, proofs from Scripture. Rather, they are speculative in nature, proofs from the congruence of Mary's Assumption with the other privileges of grace accorded to her, and do not comprise what he calls "historische Tradition im strengen Sinne."<sup>64</sup> The conclusion is that none of these arguments is of genuine scientific value.<sup>65</sup>

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silentio circa Assumptionem B. Mariae Virginis ; 45 (1949) ,129-142 (discussing Martin Jugie' s 1944 La Mort et l'Assomption de la Sainte Vierge); 46 (1950), 5-20 (also discussing Jugie).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 44 (1948), cols. 130-134. The text by Timothy, presbyter of Jerusalem, "In Prophetam Symeonem, et in textum Evangelii, *Nunc dimittis servum tuum*, et in Beatam Mariam Virginem," can be found in Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca, vol. 86.1, cols. 237-252.

<sup>59</sup> The original Greek text, and two Latin versions of this "Transitus," can be found in Constantin von Tischendorf, ed., Apocalypses apocryphae Mosis, Esdrae, Pauli, Iohannis, item Mariae dormitio, additis Evangeliorum et Actuum apocryphorum supplementis, reprint of the 1866 edition (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966), 95-112, 113-123, 135-136.

<sup>60</sup> Altaner, Theologische Revue, 44 (1948), cols. 135-137.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., cols. 138-139.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 46 (1950), cols. 12-14.

<sup>63</sup> The two principal texts, according to Altaner, are Gen. 3.15 and Luke 1. 28.

<sup>64</sup> Altaner, Theologische Revue 44 (1948), col. 140.

#### IX.4.A. The Problem of a Trans-Historical Dogma

Altaner was not the first to express reservations about the lack of documentary evidence for the tradition of Mary's Assumption. Louvain theologian, Joseph Coppens (b. 1896), touched upon the same points, although more cautiously. His article of 1947 recommends that the Assumption, in the absence of established historical proofs, be regarded as a "fait transhistorique ou purement doctrinal."<sup>66</sup> It can be discovered with the other truths of faith in a formal connection, he writes, but it lacks the material testimony of historical documents such as Scripture and the patristic writings.<sup>67</sup> Towards the end of his article, Coppens expresses anxiety that the official definition of the Assumption might suggest a certain divorce between the contents of dogma and the testimony of history.<sup>68</sup> To be sure, he maintains the reality of the Assumption throughout his article. But Coppens introduces a distinction between two kinds of knowledge about that reality, and argues that only one of the two kinds is at hand. A dogma can be known either historically or dogmatically, he says. Faith knows the Assumption as an "explication dogmatique."<sup>69</sup> It is not an explication of the disappearance of the Virgin's corpse, because historical tradition does not sufficiently attest to it. Rather, it is an explication of other doctrinal or dogmatic facts about the Virgin, says Coppens, such as her moral transcendence, her soteriological role, and her cult.<sup>70</sup> Because the Assumption is not sufficiently a part of historical tradition, it should be regarded as a dogmatic fact alone. This is possible, following Coppens, because the historical and the dogmatic are two separate realms. The Assumption of Mary, following her death, cannot be grasped

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 45 (1949), col. 142; 46 (1950), col. 20.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Coppens, "La définibilité de l'Assomption," Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses 23 (1947), 5-35; p. 27 cited here.

<sup>67</sup> "[L]a donnée en question, reconnue et établie vraie, objective, réelle, se trouve en connexion plus ou moins formelle, immédiate, nécessaire avec d'autres vérités de la foi et que sa réalité est saisie précisément sous cet angle, et non pas sous celui d'une connexion avec les témoignages historiques des organes et des sources primordiales de la révélation, l'Écriture sainte et les Pères." Ibid., p. 28. Coppens does not use the word "material," but it is to a formal/material distinction that he refers.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 28. The phrase is borrowed from B. Capelle, "La fête de l'Assomption dans l'histoire liturgique," Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses 3 (1926), 35-45.

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"[E]xplication non pas précisément de la disparition du Corps de la Vierge, fait que la tradition historique n'atteste pas d'une manière suffisante, mais explication d'une série d'autres faits également doctrinaux tels la transcendance morale unique de Marie, son rôle sotériologique et le culte spécial dont elle jouit dans l'Église." Coppens, *ibid.*, p. 28.

through the terrestrial history which led up to it, he writes.<sup>71</sup> Instead, it is a supernatural matter: transhistorical, purely doctrinal, and, in a word, dogmatic. The Assumption should not be defined, because compelling historical proof for it cannot be brought forward. This position is milder than Altaner's, because it acknowledges that the Assumption is dogmatically (if not historically) grounded. A magisterial definition would not be untrue, according to Coppens, but it would be, in the light of historical criticism, inopportune.

The issue raised indirectly by Altaner and Coppens is the degree to which Catholic dogmatic belief, without the external corroboration of historical proofs, can make a persuasive claim to truth. These theologians, writing thirty years after the climax of the Modernist controversy, were quite willing to concede the weakness of historicism, and were far from suggesting that scientific history be the sole criterion for dogma. Yet they hesitated to affirm the definability of the dogma of the Assumption. For Altaner, the dogma has no scientific foundation. Without stating it explicitly, he implies that belief in the dogma can only be a tenet of unfounded faith. For Coppens, the dogma does have a foundation, but it is not firm enough, that is, historical enough, to warrant definition. The existing arguments need to be supplemented. Based on an allegorical interpretation of Scripture, and refined by speculative thought, they substantiate a dogmatic fact, but lack the persuasiveness of historical tradition. Although Altaner and Coppens did not teach that the truth of the dogma of the Assumption can only be secured by documentary evidence, nevertheless they suggested that, without such evidence, the formal definition of the dogma would pose problems. Its claim to truth would not be persuasive in the world of critical history.

The arguments against the definability of the Assumption, we can now see, led to consequences which are intolerable for Catholic theology. If one were to accept the argument of Altaner, that the proofs for the Assumption do not comprise an historical tradition, one could infer that the Church's teaching on this matter was indifferent to history. It would seem that the dogma bears no relation to the actual fate of Mary's bodily remains. And if one were to accept the argument of Coppens, that a dogma can be known entirely apart from the history which was once affirmed as the dogma's foundation, then another inference could be made. Catholic theology would then be absolved from further historical research into the foundations of its faith, because its faith – at least its faith in the Assumption – springs from an event which took place outside of history. Hence dogmatic tradition (if that term can be used to describe what Coppens labeled a dogmatic fact) would not only be distinct from, but actually opposed to, historical tradition. Dogmatic tradition would be the tradition of the teaching of a dogma, a dogma without foundation in history.

#### IX.4.B. Dogmatic Tradition Is Still Tradition

In order to answer this challenge, Catholic theologians had to show, first, that the arguments for the Assumption had historical plausibility, and second, that the dogma

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<sup>71</sup> “[L]’on atteint l’Assomption non pas dans ses préambules historiques et, si l’on peut dire ainsi, terrestres.” Ibid., p. 28.

itself cannot be properly grasped if it is divorced from the history to which it attests. The first point, the historical question, does not directly concern us. Let it suffice to say that was ably pursued by the Frankfurt Jesuit, Joseph Ternus (b. 1892), who re-examined the documents to which Altaner referred and cast doubt upon the conclusions which Altaner had drawn from them.<sup>72</sup> The second point, the divorce between historical and dogmatic tradition, is of more immediate interest. Such a divorce was rejected by the Roman Jesuit, Giuseppe Filograssi (b. 1875). In an article of 1949, Filograssi concedes to Altaner that there is no purely historical proof of the Assumption. But he also argues that the proof for the dogma from congruence (that Mary's Assumption coincides with and flows from the other privileges of grace accorded her) will not suffice.<sup>73</sup> What does suffice, he says, is the proof from ecclesiastical consensus. There is a consensus on the Assumption in the Catholic world, argues Filograssi, and no consensus would exist if the truth of the matter were not from the beginning of Christian history a part of (at least implicit) revelation, or contained in Scripture and dogmatic tradition, or in dogmatic tradition alone.<sup>74</sup> Filograssi's direct use of the term dogmatic tradition might suggest that he regarded this as something totally removed from historical tradition. But this is not the case. A valid dogmatic tradition, he insists, does not contradict legitimate and objective conclusions of history, even when the dogmatic tradition apparently lacks historical evidence.<sup>75</sup> The consensus of the Church could not have been reached if the dogmatic tradition were without historical foundation.

Filograssi's teachings on the consensus ecclesiae bring out a point which Altaner explicitly rejected. In the last of his three articles, the German theologian had argued that the proof of the Assumption from the consensus of the Church should be seen as a "petitio principii."<sup>76</sup> It is, in other words, a postulation of a first-century origin for the dogma, in which what is to be proved is implicitly taken for granted. Filograssi countered this by recalling an approach which we have seen earlier, the so-called regressive historical method.<sup>77</sup> In contrast to the progressive method, which deliberately neglects the developments of dogma in order to get to their origins, the regressive method

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<sup>72</sup> Joseph Ternus, "Zur historisch-theologischen Tradition der Himmelfahrt Mariens," *Scholastik* 25 (1950): 321-60.

<sup>73</sup> I. (Giuseppe) Filograssi, "Traditio Divino-Apostolica et Assumptio B.V.M.," *Gregorianum* 30 (1949): 443-489, pp. 482-3 cited here.

<sup>74</sup> "Nec consensus vigere posset, nisi veritas Assumptionis inde ab initio saltern implicite revelata esset, sive contineatur in Sacra Scriptura et traditione dogmatica, sive in sola dogmatica traditione." *Ibid.*, p. 483.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Altaner, *Theologische Revue* 46 (1950), col. 20.

<sup>77</sup> This was the method proposed in the Modernist crisis by Ambrose Gardeil. See the section above entitled "Critique of the Right."

understands the developments as legitimate. It seeks to substantiate them by an exact study of their evolution and milieu. Filograssi acknowledges that this regressive method has many critics. Some argue that it involves the student in a vicious circle: the teaching of the Church is that which is said to be contained in the deposit of faith, and the deposit of faith is defined as that which the Church teaches. To this, Filograssi responds that the deposit of faith does indeed come first chronologically. But the meaning of that deposit only appears gradually in the life of the Church. The Church's teaching may therefore appear first logically, before the deposit of faith. But Filograssi writes that the deposit actually has prior existence.<sup>78</sup> Thus there is only an apparently vicious circle.

Other critics argue, according to Filograssi, that the regressive method attributes to documentary evidence (such as Scripture) a value which the evidence does not possess. The method may interpret Scripture allegorically, say the critic, drawing from it a meaning which the original author never intended. To this, Filograssi gives the metaphorical answer that some stars can only be seen if one has the proper telescopic equipment. Such equipment is the consensus of the Church, which sheds a certain light on the evidence in Scripture.<sup>79</sup> His point, in brief, is that the persuasiveness of historical evidence depends upon the qualifications of those who are studying it. Some are better fitted to grasp the dogmatic import of historical evidence than others.

Filograssi here seems to advocate a split between dogma and history. The consensus of which he speaks appears to take the place of history. It is as if one were to say, with the ironic Hamlet, that there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so – especially if the thinking is accomplished by the whole Church in consensus. And it must be said that Filograssi rarely adds the corollary which every discussion of consensus demands. This is the corollary that a consensus on a matter of truth does not make the matter true, but rather it is the truth which forms the consensus. Instead of making this point directly, Filograssi repeats the questionable argument of Billot, namely, that the remote rule of faith cannot be considered apart from the present teaching of the magisterium.<sup>80</sup> This weakens the Roman theologian's article. It binds it too closely to a doctrine which overly exalts the magisterium, departs from the ancient teaching on the rule of faith, and neglects those doctrines within the rule which receive scant attention – or none at all – from the contemporary magisterium. Indeed, Filograssi brands those criteria for ecclesiastical truth which are not dogmatic as “mere historico.”<sup>81</sup> He fails to sufficiently examine the relation between dogma and history.

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<sup>78</sup> Filograssi, pp. 465-466.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 466-467.

<sup>80</sup> See Filograssi's treatment of “Relationes inter Ecclesiam docentem et traditionem,” *ibid.*, pp. 450-453. Our sketch of the doctrine of Billot can be found in the section above entitled “Billot's Denial that Objective Tradition Is Part of the Rule.”

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

Yet it must be admitted that Filograssi never trespasses in the direction of Coppens, sundering from history the transhistorical knowledge of the Assumption. He does express the important point (if not as strongly as he might) that the consensus on the Assumption has been achieved by theological thinking which is also historically based. There would be no consensus, in his opinion, if the dogma contradicted the legitimate and objective conclusions of history. Filograssi's position was confirmed by the German Jesuit, Otto Semmelroth (b. 1912). Historical tradition differs from dogmatic tradition, he wrote, not because one is more historical than the other, but in the way they are substantiated or "festgestellt." When documentary evidence for an unbroken tradition is lacking, one can appeal to the faith of the Church in which the tradition has been preserved.<sup>82</sup> The appeal is not anti-historical, according to the German Jesuit, because the expression of the tradition presupposes an historical deposit.<sup>83</sup> For both Filograssi and Semmelroth, then, the argument from dogmatic tradition is not opposed to historical tradition. Rather, it should suggest that, in the absence of documentary evidence, one can discover the basis for a dogma within the faith of the Church, a faith which is necessarily historical, but which cannot be reduced to historical records.

In sum, during the period of the formal definition of the Assumption, the dispute over the dogma's historical content led to a re-thinking of the relation between history and dogma. Those who judged the definition as inopportune cited the lack of documentary evidence attesting to an unbroken tradition of teaching about the Assumption. Some, like Altaner, flatly rejected the arguments for the dogma, saying that they were without scientific value. Others, like Coppens, argued that this lack of evidence only make formal definition inadvisable. The reality of the Assumption could still be maintained, according to this school, because it was a dogmatic fact. Although one could not call it an historical tradition, that did not matter, because the Assumption was trans-historical and purely doctrinal. For these theologians, dogma was not dependent upon historical documentation. But such documentation was so important to them that, without it, formal definition of a dogma established by extra-documentary means was inopportune.

Those who affirmed that the definition was firmly grounded, such as Filograssi, Ternus, and Semmelroth, refused to speak of the establishment of a dogma by extra-documentary means as non-historical. To be sure, they explicitly introduced the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition. Historical tradition refers to that tradition which is based on documentary evidence. Dogmatic tradition is another way of describing what is contained, according to the Council of Trent, in "sine scripto

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<sup>82</sup> Otto Semmelroth, "Überlieferung als Lebensfunktion der Kirche," *Stimmen der Zeit* 148 (1950-51): 1-11, p. 11 cited here.

<sup>83</sup> "An ihre Stelle [der historischen Mitteln] müssen die 'dogmatischen' Mittel aus dem Glauben an die Unfehlbarkeit des kirchlichen Lehramtes treten, wo solche historischen Zeugnisse tatsächlich fehlen oder auch nicht da sein können, weil der bezeugte Glaube erst durch die Lebendigkeit der wachsenden Kirche die Ausdrücklichkeit gewonnen hat, die ein Einsatz geschichtswissenschaftlicher Mittel voraussetzt." *Ibid.*

traditionibus,” or unwritten traditions. They are without the kind of documentary evidence which extends in an unbroken chain to the first century. But it was affirmed that these traditions nevertheless extend back to the apostles, or are at least implicit in the apostolic deposit. One knows them through the consensus of the Church, as expressed in the infallible teachings of the magisterium. Opponents of the definition of the Assumption faulted this notion of dogmatic tradition. They argued that it cannot properly be called tradition if there is no historical evidence for it. But those who approved the term dogmatic tradition insisted that there would be no consensus on a dogma without an authentic historical origin for the dogma. Dogmatic tradition is not distinct from history, but it is distinct from historical tradition. It cannot be confirmed solely by documentary evidence from antiquity. In order to evaluate this notion of dogmatic tradition, let us now examine its relation to history, defined not in terms of documentary evidence, but in terms of the effect of the past on the present.

#### IX.5. The Question of the Historicity of Dogmatic Tradition

It would not be unfair to say that the term dogmatic tradition arose primarily in criticisms of those who would sever dogma from history. Whether they were Protestant (and charged that the Catholic Church’s dogmas too often bear scant resemblance to the original teaching and intent of Jesus), or whether Catholic (and sought to explain the paucity of historical evidence for certain dogmas by insisting upon their reference to realities which were beyond history), opponents of the teaching that all doctrine has its source in the *depositum fidei* drew a line between the first century and the contemporary Church. History and dogma were in both cases incompatible. Yet they were embraced, in the modern theology of tradition, by the term dogmatic tradition. It is perhaps unfortunate that the term was yoked to its redundant counterpart, historical tradition. But those who employed both terms did so in order to make explicit the fact that tradition is more than the historical record. Their opponents, who equated tradition with the historical record, had to be answered. The answer was this: the vigor of tradition exceeds the conservative strength of documents. Dogma has a power which cannot be fully expressed in the record of its history.

There is some question, however, whether the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition does justice to the relation between history and dogma. The assertion of Blondel and of most of the modern theologians of tradition, that the Church knows its truth not solely through historical records, poses a serious problem. Their assertion is implicit in the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition and usually takes the form of a subordination of history to dogma. The major problem, to which many of the writers on the subject have testified, is the devaluation of history. Whenever the Church seems to detach its knowledge of itself from the historical record, it risks undercutting its strongest claim to be the extension in history of Christ’s own body. Many of the writers we have examined have thus preferred to “dogmatic tradition” the term “historical-theological tradition.”<sup>84</sup> Their aim has been to insist upon the historical basis of theological assertion. They feared that dogma might be falsely understood as that which

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<sup>84</sup> This is, by way of example, the term of choice both for Altaner and for his opponent, Ternus.

is beyond history. Such fears were not unfounded. The subordination of historical to dogmatic tradition can lead, as we saw, to a divorce between them. Properly speaking, however, the subordination should only be that of the historical record to dogmatic tradition. It should not be a subordination of history itself, of what Blondel called “histoire réelle.”

#### IX.5.A. Congar’s Assignment of Autonomy to History

Yet the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition can not only lead to a false understanding of dogma as unhistorical, but of history as well. It can suggest that, while dogma is dependent upon history, history is purely scientific, and so independent, free of presuppositions. There are passages in Congar’s work which suggest this. He unhesitatingly grants to history an autonomy which he thinks improper to theology. Congar rightly states that the magisterium, by emphasizing the *sensus fidei* or *consensus Ecclesiae*, can seemingly impart to them “une valeur autonome.”<sup>85</sup> It is as if the communal sense of the Church created for itself its own doctrines, apart from that which has been revealed. This is justly condemned, because the Church only transmits, however authoritatively and definitely, what has been given to it. “The Church and the magisterium have *no* autonomy whatever,” adds Congar, “in regard to the *depositum fidei*.”<sup>86</sup> They are not a law unto themselves, but are subject to the deposit of faith.

What is the significance, then, of the autonomy which Congar grants history? In a section of his work, entitled “La distinction entre un pur matériel historique et une tradition dogmatique valable,” Congar suggests that it is the autonomy of the historical sciences which prompted the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition. In his opinion, “the facts required that a distinction should be made once the historical sciences, having affirmed their autonomy, were applied to the documentary bases of the faith and so raised new questions and difficulties.”<sup>87</sup> At this point, having just concluded an appreciative reference to Altaner’s work on the Assumption, Congar seems to be suggesting a division between history and dogma. The questions and difficulties to which he refers are those such as Altaner proposed, namely, that the arguments for the Assumption have no scientific and historical value. The distinction between dogmatic and historical tradition was necessary, according to Congar, because the facts, that is, the data of real history, contradict dogma. Altaner’s argument is virtually conceded by

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<sup>85</sup> Congar, I.256; translation, p. 205.

<sup>86</sup> “L’Église et le magistère n’ont *aucune* autonomie par rapport au dépôt.” Congar, II.209; translation, p. 454.

<sup>87</sup> “[L]a distinction devait être fait, au point de vue réel, dès que les sciences historiques, ayant affirmé leur autonomie, ont été appliquées aux bases documentaires de la foi et ont ainsi suscité, pour celle-ci, questions et difficultés.” Ibid., I.268; translation, p. 219. The translator renders the phrase “au point de vue réel” with “the facts.”

Congar.<sup>88</sup> The distinction between the two kinds of tradition became necessary because the facts and theological belief were not in accord. Congar, with his emphasis on the autonomy of history, and with his characterization of its object (in the subsection title referred to above) as “un pur matériel historique” suggests that history is a science in the empirical sense. It is pure, free of theological presupposition, and autonomous. Unlike theology, it is apparently independent of a community of interpretation.

Now it must be said that Congar does not mean, by his adjective “pure,” that historical material is grasped neutrally and without bias, as if this were to be opposed to the prejudiced grasp of such material by theologians. The more likely meaning of the adjective “pure” is “human and not divine.” This can be seen from a passage in which Congar expresses the difference between historical and dogmatic tradition:

Mere history can go no further than the purely human phenomena in which the fact of Christianity is expressed. It cannot read it as the Church does, because it has not her insight.<sup>89</sup>

In this passage, history is devalued precisely for its purity. The opposite of purity is not something tainted but the Church itself, whose eyes can see what lies beyond the phenomenal. So it would be wrong to tax Congar with prizing historical criticism above theological insight. Nevertheless, there is a false note in the French theologian’s ascription to history of an autonomy which is denied to theology. First, if he means that historical science is autonomous in the sense of being free from a community of interpretation, he can be faulted, on this one point, with a certain methodological naivety. What he more probably means, to construe his words kindly, is that history is not answerable to the laws of the Church.

But this raises a second and more fundamental issue. Does Congar intend, by saying that history is outside the laws of the Church, that the putative autonomy of history divides it from dogma? Does he mean that there are two realms, the historical and dogmatic, to both of which only the Catholic Christian has access? This would suggest a rigid separation between the two realms. Doubtless, Congar takes great pains, at other points in his discussion, to oppose the separation of history and dogma. Again and again he emphasizes the need for theologians to return to the historical sources in order to ground their speculative elaborations. But when he makes the observation, which at first glance seems so full of common sense, that pure history cannot read as the Church does, because it lacks the Church’s eyes – does he not hint at a dualistic

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<sup>88</sup> At another point, Congar opposes the argument that the Church’s present belief is the chief guarantee that something belongs to the apostolic faith. *Ibid.*, II.212; translation, p. 457.

<sup>89</sup> “La pure histoire atteint le phénoménal purement humain des expressions du donné chrétien: elle ne peut avoir la lecture de l’Église, parce qu’elle n’en pas les yeux.” *Ibid.*, I. 268; translation, p. 219. The translator interprets “La pure histoire” as “mere history,” and renders “les yeux” of the Church as “insight.”

understanding of the sacred and the secular? Is there not a suggestion that dogma and history, especially the history done by secular researchers, can never be integrated? These questions are not meant to imply that Congar's work is fundamentally flawed. Rather, they are posed in order to show the kind of problem which inevitably arises with the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition. It is a problem which even the subtle and clear sighted Congar does not escape.

The problem cannot be solved, it seems to me, by insisting only that theologians immerse their examination of dogma in the historical milieu from which it sprung, according to the regressive historical method. In addition, the question of historicity, which probes the difference between the historical event and its interpretation, must be raised.<sup>90</sup> This question takes us beyond the bounds of the modern theology of tradition. But precisely for that reason it deserves mention, both as a critique of that theology and as a factor which distinguishes the theologians of the modern period (who did not raise the question of historicity) from those who followed them (and who did raise the question). Furthermore, one cannot stop with the historicity of dogma, as if this were an issue for theologians alone. A further criticism of the nature of history itself is necessary. Its focus can be summarized as the sense in which an interpretation of history, whether secular or sacred, is itself a product of history. To the secular historian, the critique illuminates how the substantiation of history is an act of the scientific mind which relies upon that which has been given pre-scientifically. To the theologian, the critique recalls that dogma is the truth of the revelation which has been given in history. It resides necessarily in contingent, historical expressions, but its saving power always oversteps the expressive capacity of language. In this sense, then, one can speak of the historicity of dogmatic tradition. Historicity is a point of critique because the modern theologians of tradition overlooked the relation of expression, whether of history or of dogma, to the forces which lie behind the expression, the pre-scientific forces which can only be described in terms of prejudice or of pre-judgment. It is also the critique of what Gadamer calls "effective-historical consciousness."<sup>91</sup> Its goal is the demonstration that historical consciousness, which seems to rise above the prejudices of this or that historical epoch, is shaped by the very history which is the object of its study. Such a

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<sup>90</sup> See Sacramentum Mundi, 1969 ed., s.v. "History and Historicity," by Adolf Darlap and Jörg Splett, III. 31-39. A further general discussion is available in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, reprint edition 1972, s.v. "History and Value Judgments," by W.H. Dray. The modern state of the question was first and decisively attained by Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit (1927), 15th edition re-examined for the complete edition of Heidegger's works with the author's marginal notations in an appendix (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1979). See esp. section 6, "Die Aufgabe einer Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie," pp. 19-27. Translation: Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), pp. 41-49. This translation renders the word "Geschichtlichkeit," our "historicity," as "historicality."

<sup>91</sup> Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, see esp. the "Analyse des wirkungsgeschichtlichen Bewusstseins," pp. 324-360; translation, pp. 305-341.

critique would prevent the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition from leading to the objectivization of history or of dogma.

#### IX.5.B. The Binding Authority of Tradition

An analysis of the effect of history upon consciousness was never, as we have noted, undertaken by any of the modern theologians of tradition. Such an analysis calls into question, and rightly so, the kind of knowledge of its tradition which the Church claims to possess. It suggests that the infallible teachings of the magisterium are inevitably phrased in language contingent upon the limited perspective of the epoch in which they were formulated. This was, of course, conceded by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the 1973 document “*Mysterium Ecclesiae*.”<sup>92</sup> But the concession is fairly recent, and is inconceivable at the time of the Modernist controversy or of the Assumption movement. The emphasis at those times was not on the contingent nature of dogmatic formulations, but on the immutability of the truth which underlies them. Modern theologians of tradition were all-too-ready to insist upon the difference between history and dogma. History is a merely human science. Dogma, however, is the province of faith, and the object of faith is God. God, the first truth, guarantees the truth of all other sciences, history included.<sup>93</sup> Theologians steeped in this way of thinking often hesitated at the idea that the assertions of theology were limited by the conceptions of the epoch in which they were formulated

But the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition, it must be said, did seek to unite, however obliquely, the realms of history and dogma. This is where its true importance lies. While the task of the theologian and the historian are separate, both are working with the material of tradition. The Catholic tradition need not be the historian’s own tradition for the historian to probe it. And the Catholic theologian cannot dispense with the documentary materials belonging to the historian. To speak of tradition is to speak of that which is historical. Despite the theologian’s metaphysical analysis of reality, an analysis which requires constant inquiry into origins, into that which lies beyond the phenomenal, the theologian must grant that even the metaphysical analysis itself has been given in history. In that sense, it can never claim for itself a supra-historical privilege. It is available to all scientists, secular as well as sacred. This is implicit in the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition. The sciences of history and of dogma are separate, but both are rooted in history. Both are tradition.

The distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition is also important for a more controversial reason. The distinction, which emphasizes that tradition cannot be fully objectified in documents, points in an indirect way toward a fundamental fact: everyone, those who are not Catholic as well as those who are, stands within a tradition of which no one is master. If tradition is that which can not be fully objectified in documents, then it embraces all human beings. Humanity as a whole can no more objectify its varied traditions than Catholics can. Instead, it finds itself in a situation, or

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<sup>92</sup> See footnote 73 above.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 31:4-9 (II-II, q. 1, art. 1).

complex of situations, and accepts them as self-evident. This is not to say that one cannot examine one's situation and subject aspects of it to critical scrutiny. Everyone does this as an essential human task. But no one can step out of tradition and find a wholly non-traditional viewpoint from which to judge tradition.<sup>94</sup>

From this we can infer the binding authority of tradition. Tradition has authority because it is trustworthy in the following sense: it has shaped the situation in which we find ourselves, and offers possibilities for life and thought which have, so to speak, stood the test of time. And it is binding in that we cannot escape it. To be sure, we can criticize those aspects of it which rise to our attention as problematic. But even these are examined and rejected in the light which tradition sheds. The binding authority of tradition, then, is like the binding authority of history itself. This authority, however, is quite distinct from the binding authority of apostolic tradition within the Catholic Church. The modern theologians of tradition spoke of its binding authority in a juridical sense. It has authority because it has been defined as such by the successors of the apostles. This tradition might appear to have been, in magisterial definitions, fully objectified. The distinction of the modern theologians of tradition between history and dogma focuses precisely on this point: they said that mere history has not been fully objectified, and to the extent that it has been objectified (in the work of historians alone, apart from the magisterium) it lacks the authority of dogma. For this reason, the conclusions of secular historians can never have the last word in dogmatic disputes. That belongs to the magisterium.

But it is also legitimate to ask whether the definitions of the magisterium fully objectify the history which lies at the foundation of dogma. As far as I know, the modern theologians of tradition never took up this question, at least not in this explicit form. It can be answered in the negative without prejudice to the dignity of the magisterium. Then a new task presents itself: it is the examination of the extent to which the binding authority of tradition, in the Catholic sense, is analogous to the binding authority of tradition, in the general historical and philosophical sense. Tradition is binding in this latter sense because human thought is unavoidably historical. It is binding in the Catholic sense because the magisterium is that body which claims to teach with the authority of the apostles, an authority transmitted in history. The relationship of these two kinds of binding authority is an issue which, while lying outside of the scope of our reconsideration of the modern theology of tradition, demands investigation.

Needless to say, the question of the binding authority of tradition, whether philosophical, historical, or theological, is a point of dispute between Catholics and Protestants. Protestantism has always distinguished between the commandments of God and merely human traditions (Mk. 7.8 and Col. 2.8). It rejects the binding authority of ecclesiastical tradition on the grounds that this can hinder the freedom to respond to God's own call. The modern theology of tradition was developed largely as a counter-concept to the Reformation critique. In particular, the distinction between dogmatic and

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<sup>94</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Decline of Tradition, esp. the section entitled "Jankowitz' Critique of Prejudice-Free Thought."

his torical tradition aims, at least in part, at those Protestant his tor ians of dogma whose research led to the conclusion that the Catholic dogmatic tradition was not sufficiently rooted in apostolic history.<sup>95</sup> The question of the historical justifiability of the development of Catholic dogma produced, during the modern period of the theology of tradition, an ever-present critique of Protestantism.

It is therefore of some interest to see, toward the end of the modern period, a movement in Catholic theology which, in relation to Protestantism, took a relatively conciliatory approach. This movement sought to return to the Biblical roots of Christianity. In order to do so, it had to clarify the relation between Scripture and tradition. The clarification was accomplished, at least in part, by means of a distinction which was widely debated in the period shortly before the Second Vatican Council. This was the distinction between the material and formal sufficiency of Scripture. About tradition, there was no question. For Catholics, the tradition of the Church was both formally and materially sufficient to convey the Gospel. But could the same be said about Scripture? The Catholic debate over the sufficiency of Scripture brought out more clearly than ever before a point about which there had always been some doubt in Protestant circles, namely, the degree to which the Bible is central to Catholicism. To illuminate this debate, it is necessary to plunge, however briefly, into the history of the Catholic-Protestant split.

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<sup>95</sup> See the reference to Harnack in the section above entitled “Historicism and Immanentism.”