Introduction: Partial and universal truth

Jesus and Paul did not belong to the Church of England.
K. Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods* (London 1999) 81

TRUTH, SCRIPTURE AND CHRISTIAN CULTURE

"It is no less sure that both patristic and medieval theology recognized that the whole of saving truth is to be found in the Bible and that the Church is bound to its rule."[1] The words of a modern scholar echo those of Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century: "We make the Scriptures the rule and the measure of every teaching."[2] Such comment may look obvious and self-explanatory, but it is not: neither as the complete expression of a theological principle since it leaves unanswered questions of interpretation – as, how literally is Scripture to be read?; nor in its implications, since "saving truth" needs to be identified and distinguished from other forms of truth; nor even as a fact about the history of the Church, for it leaves us uncertain about Christianity before the "Bible" – or more specifically the canon of the New Testament – was established, let alone what Christians were thinking and doing before the composition of the earliest New Testament texts (let us say before 55 AD, or some ten years later for the appearance of the earliest canonical Gospels[3]). Some of the apostles, in the early days the ultimate court of appeal,[4] were long-lived. By 120 they were all dead and the four-Gospel canon had not yet been established.[5]

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[1] J. H. Walgrave, *Theological Resources: Unfolding Revelation* (London 1972) 188–189.

[2] *De an. et res.*, PG 46. 49C, 52C.

[3] Although this is occasionally challenged (e.g., by P. Rolland, *L'origine et la date des évangiles* (Paris 1994) who wants to date a hypothetical text of Aramaic Matthew to before 40), the earliest plausible date for Matthew and Mark would seem to be in the sixties.

[4] For Papias' "sources" of Christian knowledge see especially E. Norelli, *Esposizione degli oracoli del Signore* (Milan 2005).

[5] For the absence of written sources of Christianity in Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch (late first and early second century) see Y.-M. Blanchard, *Aux sources du canon: Le témoignage d'Irenée* (Paris 1993) 21–43.

At some point in the middle of the second century, however, the Christian Churches determined it – which means that, though in later patristic times the manner of that determination had been long forgotten, we know that there was a Christian age when "the whole of saving truth" was *not* decided by reference to the Scriptures, and when the acceptability of the candidate Scriptures would depend on their compatibility with privileged teachings derived orally from the apostles and other early witnesses to the life of Jesus, or from writings now lost.

The historical facts of the relation of primitive Church tradition to Scripture were no clearer to the Catholic Fathers of the Council of Trent than to their Protestant rivals, but, whatever their reasoning, they were right to treat of Tradition as a source of Christian truth. Therefore, if we consider the development of "Christian doctrine" – let alone of "Christian culture" – since it is not the case that saving truth has always been determined by simple transparent reference to the Scriptures, it must be correct in principle that much more general metaphysical, religious and social truth need not – indeed cannot – be so immediately determined. Tradition will always need to be invoked. The question is: how is it to be approached?

Clearly the Church has recognized that the Scriptures (viewed as a living organism) have now become the touchstone for acceptable doctrinal development, but Christian history has shown that the formulation of even saving truth need not, perhaps cannot, be precisely determined by what is self-evidently clear to the casual reader, and that there are elements of enriching theological and philosophical truth (though perhaps not of essentially saving truth, however determined) to be revealed elsewhere. Yet to be recognizably Christian such elements must be *compatible* with the Scriptures, however interpreted. Anything incompatible is beyond the pale, but the most stringent argument would be required to dismiss anything compatible as non-Christian, let alone anti-Christian.

And what Scripture teaches is not always easy to determine. We have to interpret, and interpretation has proved, and still proves, exceptionally tricky. But we must already retrace our steps amid so many uncertainties. We need to clarify the relationship between "saving truth" and "truth", and between both these truths and the connected but not identical themes of "Christian doctrine" and "Christian thought". And then there is "Christian culture": in some sense a wider term, though without Christian doctrine and Christian thought there is no Christian (or not even post-Christian) culture.

If there is a distinction between "truth" and "saving truth", then "truth" in all its forms must be compatible with "saving truth". Augustine – a pivotal

figure in the present essay – offers an interesting example pointing to the required distinction. All his life he was puzzled about the "origin" of the soul, but frequently, when frustrated at his failure to resolve the matter, he observes that to know the origin of the soul is not necessary for salvation. Which does not prevent him from continuing his search, nor probably from recognizing that, if he could find the answer, it would illumine "saving truth" and make that easier to accept. We can therefore agree that "truth" is wider than "saving truth", that the truth about God is wider than saving truth, and that those who possess and hand on saving truth may not know as many truths about God as later generations. Yet the wider knowledge of these later generations may be ill assimilated with saving truth itself.

Thus "saving truth" may be comparatively narrow and – controversially – impede the acceptance of wider truths. It is possible to be so concerned with the most important theological truths as to blind oneself to truths arising from unexpected sources. In reviewing some of the history of the expansion of "Christian truth" and of the knowledge of "truth" more generally by Christians, we frequently find situations where Christian possession (though not necessarily comprehension) of saving truth has rendered its possessors incapable of recognizing other truths compatible with saving truth and possibly illuminating it.

Some further distinctions should be made between "Christian doctrine", "Christian dogma" and "Christian thought". Stipulative definitions will serve our turn, provided we are consistent and our stipulations more or less follow current practice. "Thought" (including "belief") is clearly the widest term, and it will refer to all ideas that have a certain consistent circulation within a Christian culture. A Christian "belief", such as in limbo, may have little or no official status; it is simply an idea held by a number of Christians *qua* Christians. "Dogmas" and "doctrines" have a more official ring, and in current usage signify ideas derived directly from Scripture or expounded by official or semi-official Christian bodies such as Church councils, popes or synods. The great majority of such ideas – especially about the person of Christ and the Trinity – are of considerable antiquity, often deriving from the first five or six centuries of Christianity, though if we admit "doctrinal development" as a legitimate principle we must assume that this may continue into the future.

Perhaps we can get away without a distinction between "doctrine" and "dogma", but both of these must be distinguished from longstanding Christian beliefs seeming to underlie them, of which some may predate any tightened propositional formulation. Indeed, such propositions, especially if clearly formulated, will normally involve later expansions (or

contractions), since it seems that Christians (as other groups) have been happy to deploy ideas only broadly understood, provided they can be explained historically or seem to be useful: perhaps in liturgical or other worshipful practices.

Good examples of such general notions are the concepts of omnipotence and creation. Descriptions of God as "omnipotent" go back well into Old Testament times,[6] but generations of Christians used the term before much thought was given to its precise connotation, or to what it might or might not imply about what a tolerably intelligible God could or could not do. At an early stage of its use "omnipotent" probably meant something like "indescribably more physically powerful than anything else". Similarly, God seems to have been described as "maker of heaven and earth" long before Christians began to ask whether he made heaven and earth out of nothing or whether he perhaps brought order out of some kind of formless chaos.[7]

When modern writers treat of the development of Christianity, they normally follow Newman in treating of the development of doctrine, that is, of those propositional utterances, however determined, which are supposed to sum up the essentials of Christian belief, thus formalizing saving truth. And the development of such "doctrines" depends on the development of Christian thought in the broader sense, so that the development of Christian doctrine will go hand in hand with the development of Christian culture.

Which brings us to the fundamental difficulty, that primitive Christianity was not in the most obvious sense a set of doctrines at all; it might be better described as a set of Jewish attitudes, or as the relationship of a group of Jews to Jesus of Nazareth. Whatever these Jews and their successors knew of Christianity in a more "doctrinal" sense – namely of the nature of Christ and the God of Christ, "God the Father" – they acquired through this personal relationship and by unavoidable reflection on its significance in their immediate place and time. So that, from being the story of the words and deeds of Jesus, Christianity came to be seen as the interpretation of those words and deeds. Thus, on the one hand there is no need to suppose that the disciples ever considered the best (even if inadequate) way to describe Jesus "propositionally" which the Church later claimed to identify; yet any such developing descriptive propositions would – if adequate – have to demonstrate a fidelity to the tradition about what Jesus had meant and what he had revealed to the original group.

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[6] See N. J. Torchia, *Creatio ex Nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine* (New York 1999) 1–4.
[7] See generally G. May, *Creatio ex Nihilo* (Eng. trans. A. S. Worrall, Edinburgh 1994).

Hence not only will "Christian" doctrinal understanding (or misunderstanding) develop from the time of the original apostles, but also there must have been a set of foundational beliefs which the original apostles held, and which, in a later phrase, we can refer to as the original rule of faith (*regula fidei*). The existence of such a rule, even though implicit, provides the test of whether or not ideas coming originally from outside the minimum of Christianity "necessary for salvation" can be accepted as Christian truth in some wider sense. Since Jesus is said to have told his disciples that they will be led by the Spirit into all truth (John 16:13), there is no *a priori* reason why a process of expansion should not last as long as humanity itself.

In any full-scale consideration of Christian thought, it will be necessary to identify, as far as possible, the foundational elements of the Christianity of the earliest days of the movement: that is, the Christianity identifiable from New Testament texts and other early writings. Naturally the present investigation – concerned not with Christian origins but with the growth of a wider Christian "culture" – is being carried forward from a Christian perspective: that is, I am hypothesizing that Christianity is in some sense "true" and asking what historical facts can show us about the nature of that truth as it worked itself out as a culture. If the development of Christian culture, considered historically, were to show itself to be utterly random, with no clear line of intelligible progression, that would be a strong argument that my hypothesis about the "truth" of Christianity was unfounded. Pilate would have the last laugh.

CHRISTIAN TRADITION

In *Dominus Iesus* (AD 2000), that briefly notorious Declaration of the Roman Catholic Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, we find a claim about the nature of various Christian Churches and their relationship to the Church of Rome, and by implication about the development of Christian doctrine. "The ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery are not Churches in the proper sense." Here we have not only what amounts to an Aristotelian definition of "Church" as a centre of "focal meaning", whereby other Churches are understood to be such in varying degrees and with reference to a Church of Christ founded on the rock of Peter and his successors, but an implied thesis that proper development will always involve addition to (or exposition of), and never subtraction from, a fundamental deposit.

In *Dominus Iesus* Cardinal Ratzinger (as he then was) and his colleagues discussed doctrine in the strictest sense: creeds, the documents of councils and of the magisterium. In these cases, they argued, exposition of Christian truth is constructed on an original deposit taught by Jesus to the apostles and through them to the developing Church. As Newman was well aware, that leaves the problem of how to determine proper from improper development, but Newman's solution – which is roughly to identify the teaching of the fourth and fifth centuries and imply that such beliefs were in the mind of the Church (rather than in the mind of Jesus) from the beginning – takes us on to dangerous ground inasmuch as it would infer historical facts and more or less conscious beliefs on the basis of the evidence of later epochs. Indeed, in tempting us to misread earlier intentions in the light of later ones, it subverts the principle of doctrinal development itself.

Dominus Iesus itself comes close to offending in this regard by availing itself of a common habit of re-using ancient formulae while endowing them with meanings unlikely to coincide with the intentions of the original authors. After citations of the Fourth Lateran Council, Vatican II and a letter of the Holy Office to the archbishop of Boston, we read that Cyprian's formula "there is no salvation outside the Church" (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, *Letter* 73.21, etc.) is to be interpreted as allowing for the salvation of non-members of the Church "by virtue of a grace which, having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church" (pp. 31–2 and note 82).

Modern scholars have pointed out that Cyprian (and Origen in similar contexts) was speculating on the fate of those who leave the Church for conventicles, and not on the possible salvation of pagans.[8] That is not to imply that he would have been any more "generous" (to use our jargon) to them; his insistence on the necessity of baptism suggests that had he been asked the wider question his answer would have been equally "ungenerous". And among later Fathers of the ancient Church, especially after Augustine (whose views will be discussed in chapter 2), as well as among their medieval successors, the "ungenerous" attitude prevailed.

An earlier view, strikingly adduced in the bold claim of Justin Martyr (*First Apology* 46.1–4), that Socrates and Heraclitus are to be numbered among those "Christians" who recognized something of the Logos without

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[8] For a recent history of the question see B. Sesboué, *Hors de l'église pas de salut: Histoire d'une formule et problèmes d'interprétation* (Paris 2004). Sesboué's account of Cyprian, as I argue, is tendentious, but he comments helpfully on the effect on the debate of the discovery of millions of non-evangelized Indians in America, as well as on the background to the formulations of Vatican II.

benefit of any institutional sacrament (and that they have contemporary parallels), was not followed up until much later. There may be something similar in Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* 6.6.45.6), but Augustine – more characteristic of the ancient Church *when it began to consider* the possible salvation of pagans – is inclined to think that even the salvation of the Penitent Thief on the cross is only intelligible if he had already been baptized.[9]

On this point the attitude of *Dominus Iesus* is rather similar to Newman's: what is later explicit (in this case some sort of baptism of desire) is not merely compatible with the earlier "essentials" of the faith but would have been readily accepted (if presented to them) by all earlier "orthodox" thinkers. That seems to confuse the mind of the Church with the mind of God, nullifying Jesus' words that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. We do not need to be led where we have already arrived, and to argue that even Cyprian (let alone Augustine) understood "outside the Church" (*extra ecclesiam*) as we understand it is to play down the importance of the challenges the Church faced at particular periods of its history and to imply that by easy deduction an ancient Christian could have teased out later doctrinal assumptions.

Attitudes of this sort, though consistent and multivarious, are dangerous, causing scandal in the strict theological sense and laying Christians open to the contempt of historically literate unbelievers and those who listen to them.[10] In this book I shall try to maintain the distinction between theology and the history of theology, recognizing that without that distinction history has to be falsified in the interests of what can be called a fundamentalism of tradition which confuses and perverts the uninformed as much as a crude biblicism. In making the distinction, I am immeasurably assisted by the fact that the modern scholar has better tools and opportunities to get history "right" than any of his predecessors – though we have only approximated to that position since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

If problems about theology and its history arise with matters of faith, how much more do they arise in matters of morals where it is impossible to deny that the Church has radically modified its earlier condemnations, as

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[9] See below p. 120.
[10] A second variety of "scandalous" material – less about the beliefs of historical figures than their mentality, yet similarly liable to provoke scepticism – can occasionally be found, for example, in A. Scola's generally illuminating *The Nuptial Mystery* (1998; Eng. trans. M. K. Borras, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2005). Thus Scola rather implausibly insists (p. 48) that "Their [the Cappadocians', especially Gregory of Nyssa's] position [on double creation], however – we repeat – cannot be confused with a fear of sex." That is unnecessarily to provoke in the less pietistic the reaction "Oh yeah?"

notoriously of usury and of religious freedom as well as its toleration of slavery, torture and capital punishment. Development, whether strictly doctrinal or more broadly of Catholic culture, occurs when particular challenges from the outside world – from Gnosticism to modern feminism – have to be met. Which means that if we could identify with sufficient accuracy the challenges the Church will face, we should be able to predict some of the developments of Catholic culture in coming years, decades and centuries.

For development of doctrine, as of Catholic culture and society, is substantially a matter of what is compatible with what has gone before, not simply of what can be deduced from it – or so it is my present aim to propose. If, for example, we look at the history of the Pauline doctrine that in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, we can see how modern interpretations of the text are possible and legitimate extensions of the primal deposit brought to the surface by external events, and not such deductions from it as could easily have been made in earlier ages. Or rather, they might have been and occasionally were made, but were as readily forgotten because the spirit of the age found it easy to ignore, pervert or deny them.

Given enough time, I could draw examples from virtually any period of Church history. Given the shortness of human life and the tiredness of age, I shall focus primarily (as did Newman) on the early centuries, when patterns and principles of constructive development were firmly fixed, where problems demanding solution can easily be identified, and hence where present and future advances may the more readily be foretold, and where the basic Christological and Trinitarian dogmas of Catholic Christianity – on which I have little to add to the current consensus – were broadly established. But the period embracing the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment will demand more attention than the more "homogeneous" medieval West. In those dramatic times unexpected challenges arose, and in coping with them the Church not infrequently found itself, and still finds itself, falling back on varieties of historical fundamentalism, as in the misrepresentation of Cyprian's famous text, or alternatively bending over backwards – a posture at least as common among clergy and ex-clergy as among the laity – to adopt the premises of their opponents. In purporting to expand what they believe to be their own civilization, they manage to recycle many of the cultural errors of their opponents along with their metaphysical incoherences.

Cultural investigations cannot be limited to the credal or narrowly doctrinal. Christianity is a historical religion or of no more than scholarly interest, and the development of historical institutions such as the Roman

see are as much a part of our story as is the complex relationship between Christian thinkers and Platonists over the nature and significance of Beauty, the human body and of art, or the still far from completed Christian analysis of sexual differentiation, or the indispensability of divine grace if salvation is to be found. Hence I shall suggest that lines and laws of development can be identified in the growth of Christian institutions similar to those in the development of Christian thought and doctrine. And all along Newman's question will keep returning: what is proper, what improper development? For only if similar lines of growth and development can be discerned in a wide range of Christian "activities" can we be sure that unfolding Catholic Christianity is ever more coherent and therefore ever more a candidate for truth.

But Protestantism will turn out to be both a hero and a villain in the play: villainous in that it has tended to run down Christ to the preached and printed word, and thus too often to an emotionless and philistine rationalism against which modern generations are in revolt – and usually thinking they are rejecting Christianity as a whole. (Which is neither to say that Protestants are all emotionless philistines nor that historically speaking many such have not had even excessive influence in the Catholic Church.) Villainous in another way too, in that, by encouraging biblical literalism, the Protestants have laid Christianity as a whole open to attack on strictly historical grounds.[11]

But Protestantism has also been heroic (in an almost Wagnerian sense) in that it has raised intriguing possibilities of moral, spiritual, scientific and philosophical advance, many of which have turned out to be blind alleys; yet without our finding (even hitting) the end of the cul-de-sac, proper development both doctrinal and cultural would have been much the slower. Yet where Protestant culture in its originally religious and later secularized forms has been the most successful, that is, in its promoting of scientific and technological progress, it is now increasingly having to recognize that science without ethics – as also art, as we shall see – is haunted by two vices: first by what used to be called *curiositas*: that is, misplaced curiosity (who, apart from those wishing to help the victims, should want to know the psychological and physiological effects of electric shocks on the human genitals?); second, by an irresponsibility fuelled by fear, arrogance or just love of power: as Tom Lehrer expressed it: "'If the rockets go up, who cares

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[11] For a test case against any strictly literalist inerrancy in the New Testament see J. M. Rist, "Luke 2:2: Making Sense of the Date of Jesus' Birth", *JTS* 56 (2005) 489–491.

where they come down?/ That's not my department,' said Werner von Braun."

The Protestant thesis of "Scripture alone" seemed the more plausible and seductive when the historical genesis of the New Testament could hardly be known; indeed, as I have implied, the decline of "mainline" Protestantism as an intellectual form of Christianity – and its consequent collapse either into liberal (i.e., more or less non-Christian) theism and even atheism, or into a narrow biblicism – is in part the direct result of failure to withstand the assaults of a modern historical criticism itself in origin the product of a Protestant "scientific" culture. And biblical fundamentalism can only flourish not only by denial of the development of doctrine but by a wholesale rejection of historical enquiry and a consequent willingness to accept logical absurdities.

"Developmental" enquiry, as I have observed, has been suspect not only among Protestant fundamentalists and fideists but among their Catholic counterparts; it is so still and not least among the more fervid. There are two major reasons for this, one understandable, the other wholly misguided. The first is the undoubtedly ultra-sceptical, if not frequently perverse notion of historical enquiry which has prevailed among New Testament scholars, some of them purporting to discern truth by "democratic" voting-procedures among members of their special guild. At its worst such "historical" enquiry operates on principles unrecognizable by other historians, and such activity has rightly brought the subject into contempt in the secular world as well as among more rational (and usually more devout) Christians.

But to identify abuses is not enough; historical enquiry is not to be dismissed on account of the inadequacy of some of its practitioners. Nor is it appropriate to look solely for "spiritual" guidance to resolve historical problems such as the *development* of the Roman see, of the concept of omnipotence or of the theology of baptism. Such appeal to "spiritual" guidance – in effect constituting a denial of secondary causation – not only negates any meaningfully human account of doctrinal development, but constitutes an alternative form of fundamentalism: not biblicist but "traditionist", and in irrational opposition to serious historical enquiry, the results of which, its adherents fear, will undermine the faith. That is paradoxical indeed in the mouths of those who claim allegiance to a "historical" religion which can no more be reduced to an emotional acceptance of authority than to a variety of metaphysics (as with the deists); but which, on the other hand, cannot be justified intellectually without metaphysics – as was supposed by many of the first Protestants in their distorting of the Bible into a replacement for not historical but philosophical enquiry.