

DOGMA AS AN ECUMENICAL PROBLEM

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IF THERE is any validity in the familiar dictum that "doctrine divides but service unites," it might well be expected that dogma would be an obstacle to reconciliation among the Churches. Experience seems to show that this is the case. According to Edmund Schlink, "At any ecumenical gathering it may be observed that members of divided Churches find it much easier to pray and witness together than to formulate common dogmatic statements."¹ At the Roman Catholic-Protestant Colloquium held at Harvard five years ago, Cardinal Bea addressed himself quite forthrightly to this point. With regard to the future possibilities of the ecumenical movement, he felt obliged to warn:

First and foremost the fundamental teaching of the Catholic Church will not be changed. Compromise on points of faith which have already been defined is impossible. It would be quite unfair to our non-Catholic brethren to stir up false hopes of this nature. Nor is there a possibility that the Church—even in its zeal for eventual union—will ever be content with a recognition only of "essential dogmas," or that she will reverse or withdraw the dogmatic decrees drawn up at the Council of Trent. Again it would be simply dishonest to suggest that there is any likelihood that the dogmas of the primacy or the infallibility of the Pope will be revised. The Church has solemnly proclaimed all these doctrines to be of faith, that is to say, truths revealed by God himself and necessary for salvation. Precisely because of these solemn declarations made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the action of the Church in this field is severely limited. She must guard these truths, explain them, preach them, but she cannot compromise them. For the Church founded by Christ cannot tamper with the Word of God which he preached and entrusted to her care. She must humbly subject herself to him with whom she is inalterably united.²

THE PREVALENT CONCEPT OF DOGMA

These remarks of Cardinal Bea are predicated on a concept of dogma which has been for some time, and is today, widely accepted in Catholic

¹ E. Schlink, "The Structure of Dogmatic Statements as an Ecumenical Problem," in *The Coming Christ and the Coming Church* (Edinburgh, 1967) p. 16.

² S. H. Miller and G. E. Wright (eds.), *Dialogue at Harvard* (Cambridge, 1964) pp. 63 f.

theology. In current Catholic usage, the term "dogma" means a divinely revealed truth, proclaimed as such by the infallible teaching authority of the Church, and hence binding on all the faithful without exception, now and forever. To doubt or deny a dogma, knowing that it is a dogma, is heresy; it involves an implicit denial of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, and therefore automatically excludes one from the Church.

Nobody has ever undertaken to draw up a complete list of the Church's dogmas, and the effort would be futile, because there are many borderline cases. Any such list would presumably include the declaration of Nicaea that the Son is consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father; the definition of the First Council of Constantinople that the Holy Spirit is worthy of divine adoration; the affirmation of Chalcedon that Jesus Christ has two complete natures, divine and human; the listing of the seven sacraments by the Council of Trent; papal infallibility as defined by Vatican I; and the two Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950—the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. This is not a complete list, or even a selection of the most important, but a mere sampling to indicate the kind of thing we are talking about when we speak of dogmas.

Although many Protestants would recognize some of these dogmas as unquestionably true, and perhaps even as divinely revealed, dogma does raise serious obstacles to Christian unity; for the various Churches do not agree about what the dogmas are. The Catholic Church, in particular, has defined a number of dogmas since the great divisions between the Eastern and Western Churches in the Middle Ages and between Protestantism and Catholicism in the sixteenth century.

The problem of dogma, as an ecumenical issue, arises chiefly from the side of the Catholic Church, since it would seem that the Catholic Church must require, as a condition for reunion, that the other Churches accept the Catholic dogmas. Having taken irreversible steps on its own, Catholicism must demand that others take the same steps. If Christian reunion is conceived in this light, it seems to be a one-sided affair. The other Churches would have to come to where the Catholic Church now is, while Catholicism, apparently, would not have to make any corresponding concessions. No wonder that many Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant Christians are suspicious that Roman Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement is merely a disguised

effort to convert other Christian bodies to the Catholic version of Christianity.

If this impression is allowed to stand, the ecumenical progress of the past few decades may lead to a dead end. It is imperative, therefore, to take a new look at the Catholic understanding of dogma. Catholic theology in the past few years has been radically reassessing the status of dogma, with the result that the Church's position appears far less inflexible than is generally thought to be the case.

The concept of dogma underlying Bea's remarks, though widely prevalent, is of relatively recent vintage. Neither in the Bible, nor in the writings of the Fathers, nor in medieval Scholasticism does the term have this technical meaning.³ In ancient and medieval times "dogma" sometimes denotes simply an opinion or tenet of some philosophical or religious group—not necessarily true, let alone revealed. The term was used also in a juridical sense, to designate an official edict or decree. Even in the sixteenth century, as Piet Fransen points out, the Council of Trent "could 'define a dogma' while remaining perfectly conscious of the fact that the content of this *dogma* was not necessarily immutable."⁴

While there were obviously anticipations in earlier centuries—especially perhaps in the medieval concept of the *articuli fidei*—the current notion of dogma was forged in the controversial theology of the Counter Reformation. Walter Kasper attributes the emergence of the term, in its precise modern significance, to the Franciscan Philipp Neri Chrismann. In his *Regula fidei catholicae* (1792), Chrismann declares "that a dogma of the faith is nothing other than a divinely revealed doctrine and truth, which is proposed by the public judgment of the Church as something to be believed by divine faith, in such wise that the contrary is condemned by the Church as a heretical doctrine."⁵

³ For the history of the term "dogma," see the brief survey, with many references to scholarly literature, in W. Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes* (Mainz, 1965) pp. 28–38. Similar shifts have of course occurred in the meaning of the terms "faith" and "heresy," which have only recently acquired the technical significance they bear in modern Scholastic theology and modern Church documents.

⁴ P. Fransen, S.J., "The Authority of the Councils," in J. M. Todd (ed.), *Problems of Authority* (Baltimore, 1962) p. 74.

⁵ "Quod dogma fidei nil aliud sit, quam doctrina et veritas divinitus revelata, quae publico Ecclesiae iudicio fide divina credenda ita proponitur, ut contraria ab Ecclesia tamquam haeretica doctrina damnetur" (quoted in W. Kasper, *op. cit.*, p. 36).

Chrismann's narrow definition of dogma was assailed by many as too minimalistic, and his work was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1869;⁶ nevertheless it continued to exert great influence.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the faith was threatened by the attacks in the name of reason, Chrismann's authoritarian view of dogma was found to be a handy weapon. At least in substance, it reappears in the official Roman documents of the period, such as the Syllabus of Errors of 1864, the Constitutions of Vatican I, and the anti-Modernist documents of 1907-10.

The notion that there could be doctrines immune to historical limitations and capable of being imposed by the sheer weight of extrinsic authority reflects the nonhistorical and juridical type of thinking prevalent in the Church of the Counter Reformation. The roots of this mentality may be traced to Greek intellectualism and Roman legalism. More proximately, the absolutistic view of dogma reflects the characteristics of Catholic theology in a rationalistic era. To ward off naturalistic rationalism, orthodox theology adopted a supernaturalistic rationalism in which revelation was conceived as a divinely imparted system of universal and timeless truths entrusted to the Church as teacher.

Vatican II, to a great extent, broke with the concept of revelation that had been prevalent in the previous century. The Constitution *Dei verbum*, without turning its back on previous Church pronouncements, depicted revelation primarily as a vital interpersonal communion between God and man.⁷ In so doing, it paved the way for the reconsideration of dogma that has been going on in the theological literature of the past five years. Postconciliar theology calls into question at least four important features of the Neo-Scholastic notion of dogma: its identity with revelation, its conceptual objectivity, its immutability, and its universality. Let me comment briefly on each of these four points before I proceed to the question of ecumenical applications.

⁶ ASS 4 (1868-69) 508.

⁷ The theological thrust behind the document is clearly apparent in the *relatio* prepared by the Theological Commission and presented in the aula of St. Peter's by Archbishop Florit. Cf. G. Baum, O.S.A., "Vatican II's Constitution on Revelation," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 28 (1967) 58-61.

THE RECONSIDERATION OF DOGMA

Dogma and Revelation

Regarding the first point, contemporary theology is conscious of the need of re-examining the relationship between revelation, considered as a salvific event, and those propositional formulations we call "dogmas." It is commonly conceded today that revelation does not actually exist except when it is being apprehended by a living mind. Dogmatic statements serve an important, and in some ways indispensable, function in the "self-becoming" of the individual believer and in the creation of Christian community; they bring to explicit realization essential aspects of man's prepredicative encounter with God. But revelation itself cannot be limited to spoken or written words, nor do such words of themselves constitute revelation.

To illuminate the paradoxical relationship between revelation and dogma, some modern theologians have made use of the Heideggerian analysis of truth. The term "revelation" (*apokalypsis*, unveiling) has close affinities with the Greek term for "truth" (*alētheia*, unconcealment). According to Heidegger, truth is the event of the luminous self-donation of the mystery of Being. He therefore comes close to the theologian's notion of revelation as the attesting Word of uncreated Truth.⁸ If truth itself is, as Heidegger insists, at once the revealment and the concealment of the plenitude of Being, the theologian might well look upon divine revelation as the gracious self-disclosure of the immeasurable Plenitude which faith calls God.

Following this line of thought, several modern theologians have sought to clarify the relationship between dogma and revelation by applying analogously what Heidegger has to say of the relationship between beings and Being. Being itself, according to Heidegger, is interior to all beings, lighting them up for what they are, and yet is not itself a being. This paradoxical diversity within unity Heidegger calls the "ontological difference." Kasper, extending this concept, speaks of a "theological difference" between gospel and dogma.⁹ The truth of revelation, he maintains, is neither separate from dogma nor, without remainder, identical with it. Dogma has the value of revelation if, and

⁸ W. J. Richardson, S.J., "Heidegger and Theology," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 26 (1965) 91; cf. R. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island, N.Y., 1966) p. 308.

⁹ Kasper, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-6.

only if, it is grasped by a mind presently influenced by God's active self-bestowal. (In classical terms, we may translate: there can be no revelation, and hence no faith, without the interior illumination of grace.) When the event of revelation occurs, there is a kind of dynamic identity between revelation and dogma. The revelatory truth is present in the dogmas through which it comes to expression, and yet continues to exceed them insofar as it surpasses man's powers of comprehension. In the words of William Richardson, "Every human effort to utter the ineffable is constricted by the law of finitude and therefore leaves something un-said."¹⁰

This notion of truth is modern but, as Kasper shows, it bears close analogies with the biblical conception of God's truth as His life-giving presence in and through His word. Even Scholasticism preserved something of this dynamic notion of revelatory truth. According to the well-known axiom, fruitfully exploited by Albert the Great, Thomas, and Bonaventure, "articulus fidei est perceptio divinae veritatis tendens in ipsam."¹¹ In the formulas of faith we catch fleeting glimpses of the divine truth toward which our whole being is tending. The truth of the revealing God cannot be reduced to the dead letter of any doctrinal affirmation, yet such an affirmation may become God's revelatory word. Because revelation is eschatological, dogma always points to a future disclosure beyond all history.

Conceptual Objectivity of Dogma

The second question raised by contemporary theology has to do with the supposed objectivity of dogmatic discourse. Some have depicted the definitions of popes and councils as if they were capable of exactly circumscribing the content they affirm. But from what we have already said it is evident that the content shatters our ordinary framework of discourse and demands a unique type of assent. From the form of dogmatic language it can easily be shown that this is the case. Schlink, in the study already referred to, calls attention to the structural complexity of creedal and confessional statements.¹² They combine elements of repentance, faith, worship, and witness. The creed is composed with a view to being uttered in the presence of God, and as a

¹⁰ Richardson, *art. cit.*, p. 98.

¹¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.* 2-2, q. 1, a. 6, *sed contra*.

¹² Schlink, *op. cit.* (n. 1 above).

testimony before men. The recitation of the creed aims to bring about a situation in which believers, gathered in worship, can better apprehend and respond to the revealing presence of the divine. Most of the early Christian confessions, which form the basis of later dogmatic statements, were framed in a liturgical context and are doxological in form.

Ian Ramsey shows the futility of treating dogmatic statements as though they were intended as descriptive or scientific statements. Building on analogies from various types of nonreligious discernment, Ramsey establishes beyond doubt that "the language of Christian doctrine is likely to bristle with improprieties" and "logical oddities."¹³ In this connection he points out that in titles used of Jesus (e.g., the eternal Son, the only-begotten of the Father) the adjectives are not further descriptions of something previously designated, but intrinsic modifiers which enable the notion of sonship to "do justice to what is 'disclosed' in worship."¹⁴ The norm of correct usage is derived from a situation in which the mystery of the divine is efficaciously evoked and encountered. It would be a fatal error, says Ramsey, to imagine that the dogma of the hypostatic union describes some fact in the way that ordinary language describes its objects. This would lead to such absurdities as the equation "Godhood + manhood = Jesus Christ."

On this point the Catholic Karl Rahner adds his testimony to that of the Lutheran Schlink and the Anglican Ramsey. The realities of God and His grace, according to Rahner, do not permit of any simple objective presentation.¹⁵ Dogmatic discourse, therefore, must somehow contrive to point the way to an existential confrontation with the mystery itself. Theological dogmatic language, he asserts, is "mystagogical," insofar as it conjures up the gracious presence of the divine. It has an almost sacramental function, transmitting not the idea but the reality of God's generous self-outpouring. The truth of symbol is existential insofar as it transcends the subject-object schema of ordinary propositional discourse, and cannot be rightly apprehended without personal appropriation.¹⁶

¹³ I. T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks edition, 1963) p. 191. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ K. Rahner, S.J., "What Is a Dogmatic Statement?" *Theological Investigations* 5 (Baltimore, 1966) 58-60.

¹⁶ In this connection one is reminded of all that Tillich has to say about symbol as the bearer of the power of that for which it stands. See the texts cited in C. J. Armbruster, S.J., *The Vision of Paul Tillich* (New York, 1967) pp. 156-59, 228-30.

Nothing here said about the peculiarities of creedal language ought to be taken as undermining its truth-value. On the contrary, these peculiarities stem from its task of conveying a truth greater and more serious than ordinary language is able to bear. Thus dogmatic speech, while it is irreducible to scientific or descriptive language, is by no means equivalent to mere subjective fantasy. The propositions of dogma, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has remarked, "are true insofar as they are a function and expression of the Church's understanding of the Christ-mystery, as given to it by the Holy Spirit. They cannot be taken out of this setting; therefore, they do not have any *purely* theoretical (i.e., non-experiential, non-existential) truth."¹⁷

Immutability of Dogma

A third development in the Catholic understanding of dogma has reference to its supposed stability. Once a dogmatic formula is hammered out, it must, according to the popular conception, remain forever. If it states a revealed truth, why should it ever be changed?

One answer, of course, is that the meaning of words shifts according to varying circumstances of time and place. When the original language ceases to be well understood, it may prove necessary or expedient to change the words for the sake of conveying the original ideas more effectively. This much is obvious and may be abundantly illustrated from the history of dogma.

Surprising changes in the verbal tests of orthodoxy have occurred in the course of time. For example, a local Council of Antioch, in 268, ruled that the Son was not *homoousios* (of one substance) with the Father.¹⁸ Half a century later the Council of Nicaea declared that He was *homoousios*. Had the Church changed its mind? By no means. The term *homoousios* taken in one context implied Unitarianism, and in another context became a touchstone of the Church's authentic Trinitarian faith.

Many similar lessons may be culled from ancient history. The Councils of Nicaea and Sardica accepted the view that there was but one hypostasis in God. Constantinople I and Chalcedon, however, took the view that there were three divine hypostases.¹⁹ Once again, neither

¹⁷ H. U. von Balthasar, "Truth and Life," *Concilium* 21 (Glen Rock, N.J., 1967) 90.

¹⁸ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, 1958) pp. 117-19.

¹⁹ Cf. H. Küng, *Structures of the Church* (New York, 1964) pp. 386 f., with references.

formula is necessarily better than the other. What is vital is the meaning, not the choice of words. The term "hypostasis" does not have some one pre-established meaning, but receives its precise meaning from general usage and from the particular context in which it is used.

All this has evident applications for the faith of Christians today. Many of them recite the orthodox formulas with so little understanding that their thoughts may well be heretical. When the modern Christian declares that there are three divine persons, he may well have in mind the modern psychological concept of person as an autonomous subject endowed with its own proper consciousness, intellect, and will. Such a concept, consistently followed out, would lead to tritheism. God might be conceived as Siamese triplets! To safeguard Trinitarian orthodoxy, one might raise the question whether it would not be preferable to call God a single person with three modes of being. Whatever may be thought about this particular case, the principle of variability in language seems unassailable.

Many Christians, neglecting the lessons of history, fall into the error of imagining that orthodoxy consists in adhering rigidly to consecrated formulas. To reject these is considered heresy, as is suggested by the familiar expression "*si quis dixerit . . .*" in the conciliar canons. But the more one studies language, the more obvious it becomes that words are a poor test of right thinking. What most people call "orthodoxy" really ought to be called "orthology" or "orthophony"; it has to do with right speech rather than right ideas. While right speech has its value, the rightness of speech depends on a great variety of circumstances, some of which are not within the control of the Church. Thus the Church may be forced to change its canons of right speaking.

It would be a gross oversimplification, however, to imagine that the reformulation of dogma consists simply in changing words. Revelation always comes to men within some definite sociocultural situation, and this necessarily affects the manner in which they articulate the revelation conceptually. The biblical peoples inevitably expressed their experience of God in terms of their own central concerns, with the help of concepts derived from their own physical and cultural world. The content of the Bible is therefore permeated with ideas and images borrowed from the agricultural and patriarchal society of the ancient

Israelites. The subsequent history of doctrine in the Christian Church has been deeply affected by the societal forms, the customary attitudes, and the philosophical heritage of the Greek, Roman, feudal, and baroque worlds.

In interpreting biblical and ecclesiastical pronouncements, therefore, we must be alert to distinguish between the revelation itself, which is coming to expression in human concepts and words, and the culturally conditioned manner in which the revelation is expressed. A competent interpreter of any doctrinal statement will have to examine the entire historical and cultural context out of which it arose in order to discern its true significance. The modern believer cannot and should not be asked to accept the world view of ancient or medieval Christians. He should be encouraged to think as a man of his own day. To the extent that traditional statements of the faith are conditioned by a cultural situation no longer our own, they must be reinterpreted for modern man. Otherwise they will inevitably seem meaningless, incredible, or at least irrelevant.

This process of reinterpretation cannot be a matter of stripping away the human conceptual vesture until one reaches some timeless and unquestionable kernel of pure divine truth. The pursuit of such an unconditioned grasp of revelation is an illusion, betraying a serious ignorance of man's fundamental historicity. We ourselves are just as historically conditioned as our ancestors, and hence cannot hope to achieve supracultural formulations. The hermeneutic process by which we reinterpret past dogmatic formulations will involve a concrete logic of proportionality. We begin by noting that the revelation (R) was expressed in a certain way (a^1) by men in a cultural situation (a^2). Our problem is to devise a new statement (b^1) appropriate to our own cultural situation (b^2). The process of finding the right formula involves more than mere deductive logic. It calls for a living sense of the faith and for a realistic grasp of the world in which we live. To validate new and appropriate expressions, suited to the mentality of the times, is primarily the responsibility of the Church's magisterium. But the theologian has the function of exploring new possibilities and of seeking in this way to be of service to the Church.

Such reconceptualization has been occurring throughout the history of the Church. It may be illustrated, sufficiently for our purposes, by

the axiom "Outside the Church no salvation" (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). This ancient maxim, with a venerable patristic pedigree, was affirmed in the strongest terms by popes and ecumenical councils in the Middle Ages.²⁰ And there can be little doubt but that those who proclaimed the principle understood it in a harshly literal sense. In our time the ancient understanding of the formula is repugnant to practically all Catholics. As Gregory Baum has written, "the conciliar documents . . . make it quite clear that this sentence is no longer taught *eodem sensu eademque sententia*. According to the repeated teaching of Vatican Council II there is plentiful salvation outside the Church."²¹ Many contemporary theologians would prefer to see the formula used as little as possible in preaching, since it will almost inevitably be misunderstood.²²

What is here in question is no mere change of words. The formula must be changed because in the mental and social structures of the contemporary world there is no longer any room for an exclusivist concept of the Church. The old formula was not totally wrong. It was based on a valid insight into the ecclesial character of all Christian salvation; it called attention to the inseparability of the grace of God from the Church of Christ. But the modern conception of the relationship between the Church, as a visible community of believers, and the saving grace of God must be more nuanced than the axiom "Outside the Church no salvation" would suggest.

It is an oversimplification, therefore, to say that dogmas are ir-reformable. In principle, every dogmatic statement is subject to reformulation. At times it may be sufficient to reclothe the old concepts in new words which, for all practical purposes, have the same meanings. But in other cases the consecrated formula will reflect an inadequate understanding. In order to bring out the deeper and divinely intended meaning, which alone is inseparable from faith, it may be necessary to discard the human concepts as well as the words of those who first framed the dogma. When men acquire new cultural conditioning and mental horizons, they have to reconceptualize

²⁰ See especially the affirmations of Lateran Council IV (*DS* 802), the Bull *Unam sanctam* (*DS* 870), and the Decree *pro Iacobitis* of the Council of Florence (*DS* 1351).

²¹ G. Baum, O.S.A., "The Magisterium in a Changing Church," *Concilium* 21 (Glen Rock, N.J., 1967) 69.

²² So, e.g., H. Küng, *The Church* (New York, 1968) p. 318.

their dogmas from their present point of view. There are signs that this process is now going on with respect to many Catholic dogmas, such as original sin, transubstantiation, and perhaps the virginal conception of Jesus. This prompts us to ask whether those doctrines that have traditionally divided the Churches might not be capable of an equally radical reinterpretation.

Universality of Dogma

Before developing the ecumenical implications of this point, let me make my fourth and last remark about the emerging concept of dogma. Modern theologians have generally taken it for granted that a dogmatic formula, once it is sufficiently validated, ought to be professed by all believers everywhere. But this has not always been assumed. The New Testament displays a proliferation of creedal affirmations traceable to various segments of the primitive Church. And in the early centuries, as a glance at the opening pages of Denzinger's *Enchiridion* will show, the several Churches were content to possess their own local creeds. At least until the conversion of Constantine, when Christianity became the general law of the Empire, the recitation of identical creedal formulas was not considered essential to Christian fellowship. The Churches had other ways of testing the genuineness of one another's apostolic faith.

In the Middle Ages the Latin West, excessively isolated in its own theological world, began to make additions to the ancient creeds and to formulate new dogmas without regard to the rest of Christendom. The addition of the *Filioque* to the Nicene Creed, of course, was one of the major factors leading to the tragic schism between East and West. The Council of Florence, which in the fifteenth century temporarily patched up this schism, showed an exemplary breadth of understanding.²³ It affirmed that the unity of the Church should be built not on particular doctrinal formulas but rather "on the cornerstone, Christ Jesus, who will make both one." In the union then decreed, there was no question of compelling either Church to accept the devotional practices of the other. The Western and Eastern Churches were allowed

²³ In the following several paragraphs I am profoundly indebted to G. Dejaifve, S.J., "Diversité dogmatique et unité de la révélation," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 89 (1967) 16-25. For the history of the debate on the procession of the Holy Spirit, see J. Gill, S.J., *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge, Eng., 1959) chap. 7.

to follow their own liturgical calendars and to worship their own saints (which might seem to imply the validity of each other's canonizations).

More importantly for our purposes, an agreement based on mutual tolerance was reached regarding the crucial question of the procession of the Holy Spirit. Both East and West were permitted to follow the long-standing tradition of their own Churches. The Latins, therefore, could continue to declare—and to recite in their Creed—that the Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son, while the Greeks could omit the *Filioque* from the Creed and subscribe to the formula “from the Father through the Son.”

The primary issue, on the surface of the discussion, concerned the legitimacy of the use or omission of certain words. One might read the Decree of Union as if it meant that both verbal formulas had the same meaning. But in reality, as Kasper notes, the dispute was rooted in irreducibly diverse forms of thought.²⁴ The decision amounted to a recognition that the revealed truth was so rich that it could not be captured by either of the two formulas. Although verbally they seemed contradictory, and could hardly be combined in a single unified system, they were seen as expressing different aspects of the same divine mystery. Thus the Council of Florence implicitly rejected the equation “one faith = one dogma.” It acknowledged that there can be a dogmatic statement which is, from a certain point of view, valid and orthodox, but which need not be imposed on believers who look at things from another angle.

The valid principle of dogmatic pluralism, after prevailing at Florence, became obscured during the Counter Reformation, and even more so in the past century, when the Church felt obliged to take stringent measures to stave off various forms of relativism. But in Vatican Council II pluralism managed to reassert itself, as several passages from the Decree on Ecumenism²⁵ will attest:

The heritage handed down by the apostles was received in different forms and ways, so that from the beginnings of the Church it has had a varied development in various places, thanks to a similar variety of natural gifts and conditions of life. (no. 14)

²⁴ W. Kasper, “Geschichtlichkeit der Dogmen?” *Stimmen der Zeit* 179 (1967) 401–416, esp. 410 f.

²⁵ English translation in W. M. Abbott, S.J., and J. Gallagher, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, 1966) pp. 341–66.

In the investigation of revealed truth, East and West have used different methods and approaches in understanding and proclaiming divine things. It is hardly surprising, therefore, if sometimes one tradition has come nearer than the other to an apt appreciation of certain aspects of a revealed mystery, or has expressed them in a clearer manner. As a result, these various theological formulations are often to be considered complementary rather than conflicting. (no. 17)

After taking all these factors into consideration, this sacred Synod confirms what previous Councils and Roman Pontiffs have proclaimed: in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, one must "impose no burden beyond what is indispensable" (Acts 15:28). (no. 18)

A similar regard for pluralism may be found in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which strongly emphasizes the value of the distinctive contributions of individual local churches to the many-splendored spectacle of Catholic unity. The unity of the faith, we are told, is all the more radiant when refracted in the variety of many traditions (cf. no. 13).

ECUMENICAL APPLICATIONS

As a result of the current reassessment of dogma, briefly surveyed in the preceding paragraphs, we may be in a position to moderate somewhat the apparent rigidity of Cardinal Bea's statement quoted at the beginning of this essay. It is far from obvious that the dogmas of the Church, having been "revealed by God himself," cannot be revised by the Church, or that they are unconditionally "necessary for salvation," or that they can in no sense be subjected to compromise. Our findings suggest that the Catholic dogmas as presently formulated and understood may be significantly changed, and that positive acceptance of all the dogmas may not be absolutely necessary for communion with the Roman Church. Let me explain each of these two points in greater detail.

With regard to the "irreformability" of dogma, I have endeavored to show that, as our total fund of knowledge increases, and as our perspectives change, dogmatic formulations must be kept under constant review. Without failing in due reverence for the past, we may frankly admit that an increasing number of dogmatic statements are showing the kind of inadequacy already noted in the axiom "Outside the Church no salvation." This may be readily illustrated regarding several ecumenically disputed dogmas.

If the Church were today in a position to speak for the first time about the institution of the sacraments, it would not be likely to declare without qualification, as Trent did, that the seven sacraments of the New Law "were all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord" (*DS* 1601). A contemporary scholar familiar with modern biblical and historical studies would see the need of important distinctions that would scarcely have occurred to a sixteenth-century theologian.

So too, in speaking of the origins of the papacy, we should be unlikely to use the concepts and terms of Vatican I, which forbade anyone, under pain of anathema, to deny "that Blessed Peter the Apostle was constituted by Christ the Lord prince of all the apostles and visible head of the entire Church militant," or that Christ invested him "directly and immediately with the primacy not of honor alone, but of true and proper jurisdiction" (*DS* 3055). These statements embody important principles regarding the unity of the Church, and to these the contemporary Catholic feels strongly committed. But the formulation reflects the religious "style" of the baroque Church and the exegesis of an age less sensitive to historicity. If someone were being asked to become a sharer in the belief of the Church as of 1968 rather than 1870, it would not be desirable or necessary to hold him to anachronistic or triumphalistic declarations of this kind. The path toward Christian unity would be greatly facilitated if Catholics abandoned any thought of obliging other Christians to submit to outmoded and admittedly deficient expressions of the faith, even though these expressions are to be found in documents of the highest authority. To demand this type of submission would contravene the principle of Florence, reaffirmed by Vatican II, that one must "impose no burden beyond what is indispensable."

Not only must outworn formulations from previous centuries be clearly distinguished from revelation itself; the same must be said of contemporary statements which may have to be corrected at some future date. As stated above, we never receive the revealed truth except in fragile human vessels. Thus even the most current dogmatic utterances must be questioned. The true test of orthodoxy is not whether a man accepts the official statements at their face value, but whether he has sufficient confidence in the tradition to accept its formulations, in spite of all their human deficiency, as vehicles of a

divine truth that lies beyond all formulation. The Catholic may accept in substance the conjectures of the Lutheran Carl Braaten:

... we cannot now foresee the terms on which our churches might agree on those important doctrines which now divide us. It seems likely, however, that the dogmas concerning papal infallibility and Mary will have to be so reinterpreted that many people will scarcely recognize their continuity with the older traditions. Mere traditionalists who cling to ancient formulae will be unhappy. Equally radical reinterpretations of those protestant affirmations which give offense to Roman Catholics will be demanded. We cannot say *a priori* that this is impossible or improbable. Dogmas are things of history; they arise in history, they have a history; and they generate a history of interpretation in which earlier meanings are transcended through incorporation into new and quite dissimilar formulations Neither the trinitarian and christological dogmas, which we share with Roman Catholics, nor the papal and mariological dogmas, which we do not share, are exempt from new interpretations in an age of radical historical consciousness.²⁶

The current ecumenical dialogue imposes a task upon all the Churches engaged in it. The effort to explain our positions to others compels us to re-examine what we ourselves have been saying. At many points we shall doubtless find that our views have not been accepted because they are in some respects unacceptable. This should accelerate the process of dogmatic development which history, to some extent, forces on us anyway. It should help us to amend the distortions in what we have hitherto been saying and thinking about our own faith. In this way divided Christians who are committed to the same gospel, and who invoke the same Holy Spirit, may hopefully converge toward greater solidarity in confession.

The question still remains whether total unity in confession is a prerequisite for full ecclesiastical communion. From what precedes, it should be clear that simultaneous dogmatic pluralism is sometimes admissible without prejudice to church unity. If one and the same faith can be differently formulated for different historical epochs, a similar variety may be tolerated for different cultures in a single chronological period. In view of the literary form of confessional statements, as described above, creeds may be regarded as resulting from the inner exigencies of a lived faith; they should not be forcibly imposed, by external authoritative action, upon peoples not prepared for them by their corporate historical experience. The Christians of the early centuries were orthodox in their faith, but they probably could have

²⁶ C. E. Braaten, "Reunion, Yes; Return, No," *Una sancta* 23 (1966) 32-33.

made no sense of some of the dogmas which Bea would regard as "necessary for salvation." Why could not the same liberty be granted to culturally diverse peoples living contemporaneously? In line with the teaching of Vatican II, it might be fairly asked whether Christianity would not even stand to gain from a greater diversity in its creedal formulations.

The unity within difference permitted by the Florentine Decree of Union might prove paradigmatic for Protestant-Catholic relations. The Reformation Churches, if they were ever to enter into communion with Rome, could contribute many riches from their own traditions. In this connection one thinks especially of the great Reformation watchwords, such as *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola Scriptura*, *soli Deo gloria*, and of phrases such as *simul iustus et peccator* and *ecclesia semper reformanda*. These are the nearest Protestant equivalents to the new dogmas of post-Reformation Catholicism. Just as Protestants would do well to try to find some religious value in these Catholic dogmas, so Catholics should seek to relate themselves positively to the key principles which have sustained Reformation Christianity for the past four centuries.

Until recently it was common for Catholics to polemicize against the Reformation slogans, which can surely be understood in ways incompatible with the Catholic vision of the Christian dispensation. But in the past generation many Catholic theologians, including some of the most eminent (Rahner, Küng, Bouyer, van de Pol . . .), have been pointing out that these formulas admit of a Catholic interpretation. Vatican II practically adopted the last two of these expressions. In the Decree on Ecumenism it declared: "Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earth" (no. 6). And in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, the term *simul iustus et peccator* is in effect applied to the Church, which is described as being "at the same time holy and always in need of being purified" (no. 8).

As in the case of the Catholic-Orthodox discussion about the procession of the Holy Spirit, so with regard to these Protestant slogans, we should not imagine that words alone are involved. Behind the formulas lies a very definite style of thought, characteristic of Evangelical

Christianity. The question is whether Catholicism can absorb this without diluting its own witness.

Otto Pesch, O.P., in a lengthy treatise on the subject,²⁷ has shown that the Lutheran formula *simul iustus et peccator* rests upon a mode of thought that may be called "existential"—one that corresponds to what the believer is prompted to utter in a situation of prayer, when he comes into the presence of his God. No matter how just or holy he may be, he still has to declare "Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner." Normative Catholic theology, as represented by Thomas Aquinas, for example, has taken a more objective or, in Pesch's term, a more "sapiential" point of view. It therefore seeks to analyze the process of justification from a more detached standpoint. These two theological styles, according to Pesch, lead to verbally contradictory formulas. Aquinas will have to say that once a man is justified, he is no longer in a state of sin; Luther will have to say the contrary. These statements cannot be harmonized; yet they are not strictly contradictory, any more than are the theologies of Paul and James, or John and the Synoptics. Since they stem from different points of view, the same words do not have identical meanings. Thus Pesch can conclude:

If one does not antecedently give absolute value to Luther's form of existential theology and exclude every other form as deceptive, then there is a presumption that the difference we have discussed, and likewise all other differences traceable to it, can find a home within the same walls; that the two modes of theology need each other as critical insurance against falling into mistaken forms, and that the Church of all times needs both, in order to preserve the full tension of the Christian reality.²⁸

Can logically irreconcilable dogmas, as Pesch here suggests, be admitted within one and the same Church? If one recognizes the logical anomalies of religious language, to which reference has already been made, it is difficult to see why not. It would be a bold man who would try to make a neat logical system out of the dogmas of a single Church. Catholic theology today abounds in logical antinomies, such as, for example, the twofold assertion that God's dominion is absolutely sovereign and that man remains free in working out his salvation. The

²⁷ O. H. Pesch, O.P., *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz, 1967) esp. pp. 935-48.

²⁸ "Existentielle und sapientiale Theologie," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 92 (1967) 741-42.

affirmations seem to be mutually repugnant, and no one has really succeeded in showing why they do not conflict, but Catholics are convinced that in the real order both truths are compatible. In the same way it might be possible to hold with St. Thomas and Trent that in justification the sinner is truly cleansed of his fault, and yet, with Luther, that he remains in some real sense guilty and sinful. At every point religious language has to do with truths which it cannot fully comprehend.

I do not wish to imply, of course, that in religion anything goes, or that all the formulas of all the Churches can be thrown together into some great theological mishmash. There are statements which suitably express what Christian faith perceives, and others which fail to do so. Before Christians with irreducibly diverse confessions can acknowledge their mutual solidarity in faith, they must find a way of ascertaining that neither group has substantially departed from the gospel. As Schlink points out, it is uncommonly difficult to decide under what conditions to give recognition to a formula that we do not appropriate as our own.²⁹ He recommends a careful study of the literary forms, and a reinsertion of the disputed formula into the precise confessional context out of which it arose. The tools of exegetical and hermeneutical science must be skilfully brought to bear.

In the last analysis, I suspect, there are no adequate extrinsic norms for measuring the validity of confessional statements. They cannot be tested against other biblical or creedal utterances by merely syllogistic logic. The norm must be to some extent existential. It is necessary to enter into the spiritual world of the other Church with true empathy, and in this way to assess its declarations in relation to one's own sense of the Christian reality. Christian reunion therefore presupposes a certain sharing of religious experience on the part of believers of different denominations. It also presupposes that the Churches themselves assess and ratify the judgments of individual Christians.

For those who with sufficient preparation engage in the task, religious contact with another tradition cannot fail to be immensely rewarding. It affords a new perspective on both the other tradition and one's own. While one must keep open the possibility that either or both traditions may be found to have forsaken the pure wellsprings of divine truth, one will probably find, more often than not, that the different confes-

²⁹ Schlink, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-84.

sions are surprisingly near in spirit. The manifest diversity of their confessions often conceals an inarticulate unity at a deeper level.

The aphorism "doctrine divides but service unites" is therefore not the last word. Dogma is not in the first instance a source of division but rather a badge of unity. It expresses what some relatively large body of Christians see together, and find the strength to affirm in unison, by the light of their common faith. The fact that the dogmas of different Christian groups seem to conflict should not turn us against dogma itself. The conflicts are partly due to the faultiness of the ecclesiastical statements, many of which are in urgent need of reformulation, and partly also to the ineffable richness of revelation, which defies compression into compact formulas. Ecumenical confrontation can serve the double function of making us critical of the formulations we accept from our own tradition, and of awakening us to the authentic values in other confessional families.

CONCLUSION

No attempt has been made in these pages to solve any of the substantive doctrinal issues presently dividing the Churches. My concern has been only with method. If my thesis is correct, it may take decades of ecumenical experience before any far-reaching doctrinal consensus between the Catholic Church and other Christian bodies can be achieved. But it should be clear at least that the objection put in the opening pages is not fatal. Christian reunion should on no account be conceived as if it were a mere matter of convincing Protestant, Anglican, or Orthodox believers to adopt all the Catholic dogmas presently "on the books." Nor can it consist in a simple abrogation of distinctively Catholic dogmas, or in a passive acceptance by Catholics of the present views of other denominations. Each participant in the ecumenical discussion must be seriously critical of its own traditions and genuinely anxious to receive enrichment from the heritage of the other Churches. Through this process of mutual teaching and learning we can progressively rediscover one another—and deserve to be rediscovered by one another—in Christ. As we do so, we shall undoubtedly find Christ Himself in a new and richer way. For He wills to be found not simply as the head of various separate sects and denominations, but as the bond of mutual union among all who have life in His name.