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Blessed John Henry Newman and the Development of Doctrine
Blessed John Henry Newman explained the development of doctrine through his teaching on how an idea is formed and developed. In his book *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman first covered how an idea is formed, and how the conception of a “leading idea” of Christianity can be problematic. Then, Newman explained how giving form to an idea constitutes the development of the idea. Newman pointed out how it is important for an idea to interact with the world (e.g., interact with other ideas and factors). In addition, Newman defined different types of developments, such as mathematical, physical, material, logical, historical, ethical, and metaphysical developments. Newman’s explanation of how ideas in general are formed and developed can also be applied to the formation and development of Christian doctrine.

**The Development of Ideas**

Newman explained how the human activity of forming ideas about objects interacts with doctrine. He began by describing the parameters of an idea, and dispelling the notion of the idea as being a single monochromatic thought; rather, an idea is “the sum total of its possible aspects, however they may vary in the separate consciousness of individuals.”¹ Newman pointed out that these different aspects of an idea give the idea its richness. In Newman’s words, “in proportion to the variety of aspects under which [the idea] presents itself to various minds is its force and depth.”² Furthermore, the more aspects and angles belonging to and within an idea, the richer...

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and stronger the idea is. As Newman put it, once it is realized that, despite their differences, the various aspects of an idea “are capable of coalition, and of resolution into the object to which it belongs”, then “the prima facie dissimilitude of its aspects becomes, when explained, an argument for its substantiveness and integrity, and their multiplicity for its strength and power.”

This process of the development of an idea can also be applied to how a doctrine develops. A doctrine first begins as an idea, and then following this process (i.e., initial idea, which spawns different aspects, which various aspects are then eventually recognized as being part of a cohesive whole, that is, the original idea) can develop into a well-defined doctrine. Moreover, multiple related doctrines can be developed from one single initial idea.

This description of an idea naturally leads to the realization that characterizing an idea by a single specific aspect of that idea can be problematic. Although it can be useful “for the sake of convenience”, characterizing an idea by a single specific aspect will miss the other aspects of that idea and over-simplify the idea. This is especially problematic when it comes to Christianity: the notion of a “leading idea” in Christianity can result in the emphasis of one single aspect of Christianity to the detriment, exclusion, or obscuration of other aspects of Christianity. When this emphasis on one “leading idea” happens, it hides the richness and strength of Christianity.

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3 Newman, Development of Christian Doctrine, 1.1.2.
4 Newman, Development of Christian Doctrine, 1.1.3.
5 Newman, Development of Christian Doctrine, 1.1.3.
6 Newman, Development of Christian Doctrine, 1.1.3.
**Giving Form to an Idea**

Newman explained how giving form to an aspect of an idea constitutes development. The idea is propagated and considered by various minds, and different aspects of the idea are analyzed, critiqued, and reformulated. These different aspects will come into contact with and be influenced by other factors, concepts, and propositions, and then modified accordingly. The different aspects of the idea, having progressed through this process, now constitute a mature fleshed-out idea. In Newman’s words, “this body of thought, thus laboriously gained, will after all be little more than the proper representative of one idea, being in substance what that idea meant from the first, its complete image as seen in a combination of diversified aspects, with the suggestions and corrections of many minds, and the illustration of many experiences.”

**Interaction With Others**

Newman explained how interaction with others is necessary for the development of an idea, despite the risk of corruption. Newman taught that an idea is strengthened, purified, and perfected through being challenged and confronted by other ideas and doctrines. As the idea is defended and clarified, it grows in fullness and its true meaning is realized; or, its deficiencies or falsity is exposed, and the idea is abandoned, or it is absorbed by another idea.

**Uses of the Word “Development”**

There are several different common uses of the word *development* that Newman does not intend to apply to Christianity. These uses are mathematical developments, physical

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developments, and material developments.\textsuperscript{12} Mathematical developments are those borne through “mathematical definitions or equations.”\textsuperscript{13} Physical developments are those that occur in nature.\textsuperscript{14} Material developments are those changes to material or physical elements that are wrought through “human contrivance,” such as the development of natural resources.\textsuperscript{15}

**Logical, Historical, Ethical, and Metaphysical Developments**

Newman explained the differences between logical, historical, ethical, and metaphysical developments. Each of these developments can be seen in Christianity.\textsuperscript{16} A logical development is one that is primarily intellectual, based on principles already decided, and is the natural result and conclusion to be drawn based upon those on previously decided principles.\textsuperscript{17} Historical development occurs as judgments and opinions travel through time and are formed, critiqued, modified, and refined.\textsuperscript{18} Ethical development occurs when, through “strictly logical inference”, it is realized that “certain relations” and certain circumstances imply “correlative duties,” responsibilities, and actions.\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, moral development occurs when an innate idea or tendency develops and grows into a fuller and more comprehensive doctrine; for example, the innate idea of “conscience” is the basis and foundation for the more advanced and developed doctrine that there is a Judge (i.e., God) and Judgment.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[18] Newman, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, 1.2.5.
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development as a deductive process, a “mere analysis of the idea contemplated.” Different aspects are deduced from the original idea, and these deductions eventually serve to define and/or delineate the original idea.

Conclusion

The development of doctrine can be understood through an analysis of the development of an idea. A doctrine begins as a simple idea, and is fleshed out as various aspects of the idea are elucidated. The idea is further developed when it and its various aspects are influenced by outside factors and ideas. During the process of the development of the idea, the idea may either become stronger, or its weaknesses will be exposed. The different types of development of an idea that can be seen in Christianity are logical, historical, ethical, and metaphysical developments.

References
