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Newman's Essay on Development Revisited

PETER TOON

THE LIFE AND THOUGHT of John Henry Newman continues to attract attention both within and without the Roman Catholic Church. An important witness to this popularity is the recent publication as a paperback of his difficult book, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845). This was the book which was published as Newman joined the Church of Rome and which set forth a historical justification for his becoming a Roman Catholic. Contemporaries understood him to be saying that he had found in the theory of development, based on the analogy of the development of ideas in the human mind and in the mental life of society, a way of explaining the relationship of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles (recorded in the New Testament) to the teaching of the Council of Trent and to the Creed of Pius IV. The doctrines of the New Testament were meant to evolve in the life of the church into something larger and greater than the original, their dogmatic form being guaranteed by the magisterium of the church. Thus the Faith of Christ could not be known in its fulness by reading the Bible; the voice of the contemporary (Roman) church had to be heard as well.

In recent years the *Essay* has been an important catalyst within the Roman Church in the efforts of theologians to reassess the received theories concerning tradition and the formation and accumulation of dogma.¹ My purpose here is not to evaluate that reassessment; rather, it is to answer the question, how was the *Essay* received and judged when it first appeared in 1845 (second edition 1846) by what I may term conservative Protestants? The responses of Roman Catholics, Tractarians, and others have been the subjects of studies;² but, the particular responses of conservative Low and High Church Anglicans, not to mention Scottish Presbyterians and British Nonconformists have not been studied. Here, therefore, as examples of the conservative responses I want to describe the replies of three men, two Anglicans and one Presbyterian.³ The latter was a minister in the Free Kirk

and the former include one High and one Low Churchman. My purpose in writing this article is really to ask, indirectly and with reference to a historical controversy, the question whether or not Evangelical Protestants have done sufficient thinking about the issues raised by the *Essay*: the relation of Christianity and history, the relation of Scripture and dogma, and the cultural and historical situationalism of all doctrine and dogma. I must answer negatively and hope that the reissue of the *Essay* and the current interest in Newman will be a means of causing Evangelical Protestants to face up to this issue in a realistic way.⁴

William Gresley

ONE of the more popular reactions to Newman's *Essay* came from William Gresley, a High Churchman and Prebendary of Lichfield. He was opposed to the Anglican Evangelicals (cf. his controversy with F. Close in 1845-1846) on the one side, and to Roman Catholicism on the other. For him the traditional high-church tradition in his Church of England was all important.

His tract *The Theory of Development Briefly Considered* (1846) had its origin in a sermon preached at St. Leonard's on December 14th, 1845. The text was Jude 3 which refers to the faith once delivered to the saints, and he began by emphasising the finality of the Revelation of God given in the New Testament. He claimed that the Church of England appealed to the Bible as the final authority and to the testimony of the primitive, undivided church when Scripture was not clear. He noted that the most recent advocate of Roman Catholicism (Newman) had abandoned the usual way of appealing to the Scriptures, antiquity and tradition in preference for a theory of development.

In looking at this new theory, wrote Gresley, there was need to distinguish between 'development properly so called and development in the way of additions'.

Development in the way of expansion or enlargement or explanation is perfectly legitimate: but when it involves an addition to the ancient faith then it is no longer rightly called development, nor in truth, a corruption, but is a departure from the faith (p. 7).

He proceeded to supply two examples of true and legitimate development. First, there was the actual increase in the number of members of the church, in the orders of the ministry (deacons, presbyters and bishops being added by the apostles). Secondly, there was the emergence of church buildings. Homes and caves gave way to churches, basilicas and cathedrals, often adorned by beautiful architecture and sanctified by sacred music.

The most obvious example of illegitimate and unwarranted development was the supremacy of the Pope, a doctrine unknown in the

primitive church. Other additions included the invocation of saints, penance, and indulgences.

Gresley closed by admitting that there is a legitimate development of doctrine in the way of explanation and definition and this is best illustrated by comparing the developed Nicene Creed with the primitive Apostles' Creed. In the Church of England was the continuance of 'the faith as it had been taught by the Apostles, recorded in Scripture, summed up in the Creeds and practised by the primitive Church'. And in this church he rejoiced to remain.

George Stanley Faber^a

G. S. FABER (1773-1854), son of an Anglican clergyman, studied at Oxford and in 1801 was Bampton Lecturer. After holding three successive livings in the diocese of Durham from 1805 to 1832 he was appointed Master of Sherburn Hospital, where he supervised extensive renovations. In 1830 he had also been made a Canon of Salisbury Cathedral. He was a Low Churchman who strenuously advocated Evangelical doctrine as well as definite eschatological theories about the place of Europe and Asia in the imminent plans of God. After opposing Tractarian doctrine he continued to comment on secessions to Popery. Hence his *Letters on Tractarian Secession to Popery: with remarks on Mr. Newman's Principle of Development . . . etc.* (1846), which had previously appeared in the *Christian's Monthly Magazine*.

Letter V has the title: 'The Tendency of Mr. Newman's Essay on the Theory of Development'. In it Faber quickly revealed his viewpoint:

Were I an Infidel, and did I possess the species of intellect which Mr. Newman possesses, the mode, which, in the present day, I should select for the most effectual propagation of Infidelity, would be the precise mode adopted by that gentleman in his recent Work (p. 75).

In that Faber was not an infidel and did not possess a mind like Newman's he could not possibly know how he would react; but, in that he thought he would know, we must follow his argument. He was convinced that only with 'mere uninquiring and indiscriminating dupes who are prepared to believe anything' will the ostensible object of the *Essay*, the promotion of Popery, be achieved. There was, however, a much greater likelihood that it would, as already stated, promote infidelity. Faber greatly feared the latter and in 1831 had published *Fruits of Infidelity contrasted with the Fruits of Christianity*. So he proceeded to illustrate this two-fold estimate of the *Essay*, taking the tendency to infidelity first.

Faber was convinced that a common Romanist method of argument was 'to put in immediate juxtaposition, a morally certain truth, and (which we scripturists deem) a morally certain falsehood; and then to maintain, with whatever plausibility they can command, that the two

rest upon the same basis of evidential demonstration. The conclusion, which they would draw, somewhat in the mode of a *reductio ad absurdum* is: that, would we be consistent, we must *accept* both, or *reject* both' (p. 77). Newman had supposedly used this method in the *Tracts for the Times* and Faber had exposed it in his *Provincial Letters* (1842). But in the *Essay*, Faber judged, Newman was using the method once more. By way of proof that this was so Faber supplied six examples of which we may notice three. Our first (his second) refers to the possible abandonment of Creeds.

The gentleman assures us: that 'as no one has power over the issue of his principles', he is bound to maintain the equal credibility of the Creed which bears the name of Athanasius and the Creed which Pope Pius (subsequent to the Council of Trent) has thought fit to suffix to the Ancient Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed; inasmuch as the *latter* rests upon just as good evidence as the former (*Essay*, pp. 9, 11, 29).

This is precisely our opinion, replies the Socinian: and we thank you for the candid admission. You have given us an argument, which we shall not fail to use in our holy labour of proselyting. We bless either your simplicity or your dishonesty, as the case may be, in fancying that you could thus establish the Creed of Pope Pius. Instead of leading us to believe both Creeds; you fully satisfy us, and every reasonable inquirer with us, that, evidently, we ought to believe neither (p. 79).

Our second (his third) relates to the abandonment of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Mr. Newman would enforce upon his pupils the absolute necessity of admitting the Papal Supremacy: because, so far as the primitive acknowledgment of it is concerned, it rests upon just as solid a basis as the Doctrine of the Trinity. Would you be consistent, you must admit also the Papal Supremacy. Nay, so far as primitive evidence is concerned, there is actually 'less difficulty' in admitting the Supremacy than in admitting the Trinity' (*Essay*, p. 167).

Our obligations to you, quoth the Socinian, are immeasurable. *You*, my young friends of our excellent academical establishments, hear what the equally talented and honest sage of Littlemore declares. I suppose I need scarcely say, that you will now be fully satisfied as to the utter baselessness of the Doctrine of the Trinity. Mr. Newman is deservedly the oracle of his followers: and you hear his virtual admission, that this long litigated doctrine was the invention of a later age or (as our revered Dr. Priestly called it) a prominent corruption of Christianity (pp. 79-80).

Our third (his fifth) relates to the abandonment of the doctrine of original sin.

Yet again, Mr. Newman assures us: that Original Sin and Purgatory rest upon an equality of evidence; so that the law of testimony, when fairly followed out, either 'admits both or excludes both' (*Essay*, p. 17).

Here, no doubt, Socinians, Pelagians, Infidels, and Atheists, will all concur in lauding the candour of Mr. Newman; but their decision upon the alternative, which he offers them, requires not the formality of a direct statement (p. 83).

Faber is very conscious that 'the perpetually asserted equality of evidence as respects indubitable truths and mendacious fictions is, in itself, nothing better than a gross and palpable falsehood, whatever may have been the gentleman's motive for broaching it'. However, his main point is to show the obvious tendency of the book to the promotion of infidelity and this he believed he had done.

Turning now to the ostensible subject of the *Essay*, the promotion of Popery, Faber has a few comments to make on aspects of the theory of development but his first remark is a general one: 'Its great utility and surpassing excellence consist in the Extraction of Something out of Nothing' (p. 90). He was critical of the view that 'the resurrection of God's saints in the body, their future glorification, the sanctity of relics, the real or material presence in the Eucharist, the merit of virginity, and, lastly, the prerogatives of Mary, the Mother of God, are all successive and legitimate developments of the Lord's assumption of our nature' (*Essay*, pp. 370-371). Faber's response was:

A more splendid specimen of the *Quidlibet ex quolibet* was, I suppose, never beheld even in the land of popish wonders. I need only remark that the sole truth in the whole catena, namely, the corporeal resurrection of the dead and the future glory of the saints of God, is not a development of the Incarnation, but a perfectly independent matter of distinct and express scriptural revelation; therefore, we believe it. As for the other developments, they are either the covert mockery of an Infidel or the sickly dreams of a demented visionary (p. 91).

He made similar criticisms of the view that hyperdulia is a development from the divinity of Christ, that the cultus of the saints has developed from the beautification of the saints, and the adoration of the host from the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Holy Supper. Only what is clearly revealed in Holy Scripture is acceptable.

We move on now to Letter VI which continues the arguments of Letter V. The first part examines the silence of the early Fathers (which Newman accepted as reasonable and compatible with his theory) concerning the use of images in churches, the cult of Mary, the doctrine of purgatory, the rise of papacy and the supposed excellency of monachism. For Faber the silence meant that primitive Christianity did not countenance or approve these matters and so, in fact, he could only regard them, not as legitimate developments but corruptions. In the second brief section Faber argued against the antiquity of the doctrine that the Mass is an expiatory sacrifice. The third section took up Newman's assertion that 'whatever be historical Christianity it is not Protestantism' and in it Faber wrote:

Small wonder is it that Historical Christianity should not be Protestantism. After the persecution of the Primitive Church had ceased, Ecclesiastical History becomes little more than the History of the Rise and Completion of that fearful Apostasy, which, to say nothing of Daniel, forms the grand subject of Evangelical Prophecy. . . . The Dominant

Tyranny, no doubt, precisely as it had been foretold, compendiously settled the matter, by calling the Protestors heretics, and by persecuting them to the death whenever the Secular Power was ignominiously content to be its tool: but to say, with Mr. Newman, that 'Historical Christianity is not Protestantism' is only to say that 'Protestantism is not the predicted apostasy' (p. 119).

In further sections Faber is concerned with the doctrine of Justification, the establishment of the Pauline/Lutheran doctrine and the rejection of both the Tractarian and Roman doctrines.

Our final remarks must be of the positive ideas of development which appear in the two letters. Apart from the underlying view that the Western Church was severely corrupted and that Biblical Christianity was restored in the Reformation, the only comments on true development are the following:

Now there certainly is such a thing as Development. That point must be at once conceded. For instance: a Scriptural doctrine may be more honestly and soundly held; and yet the holder of it, if requested to state it in writing, will probably not express himself with such scholastic precision, as to prevent an ingenious lawyer from driving (as the phrase is) a coach and six through it. Precision of this sort is acquired only by controversy: and, truly, under any other aspect than that of eliciting truth and dispelling error, the thus necessary evil of controversy is to be deprecated; for, sure enough, it is not the best moral sugar in the world. When a clear Scriptural Doctrine then, comes to be precisely, instead of loosely, expressed so that the misapprehension or misrepresentation of it is, as far as the conventionalities of language are concerned, thereby rendered something like impossible: we may safely, I suppose, call the process a development (p. 89).

Development of doctrine is then for Faber the clear presentation in logical form, and in a given language and culture, of a Biblical doctrine.

William Cunningham

WILLIAM CUNNINGHAM (1805-1861) became a minister in the Church of Scotland but in 1843 at the Disruption he was a leader of those who left the Kirk to form the Free Church. When New College, Edinburgh, was opened as the theological college of the new Church he became a Professor and later the Principal. He was a learned man but his learning was primarily in orthodox Calvinism and his outlook was little influenced by the winds of change which were blowing into Scotland from Germany. His major books were all published immediately after his death and they comprise collections of articles he wrote or lectures he delivered. These were *Discussions of Church Principles* (1863), *Historical Theology* (2 vols 1862), and *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862). The last two contain a lot of material which illustrates Cunningham's view of the nature of

dogma and its development, but the article I here use is in *Discussions* and originally appeared in the *North British Review* in 1846.

Cunningham had followed the writings and careers of the Tractarians with some horror and was not very surprised when Newman joined the Church of Rome. He held that the *Essay* 'might be justly regarded as being substantially an exposition of the process of thought by which he convinced himself of the truth of Romanism, and of the course of argumentation by which he thought that system could be defended' (p. 38). He was sure that the *Essay* did not detract from Newman's established literary reputation and that there was no ground for ascribing his conversion to Rome to any decay in his intellectual powers. However, Cunningham thought that 'the work would probably have possessed a larger measure of personal interest if Mr. Newman had more formally set himself to describe the steps of his progress from the *via media*, which he formally occupied, to the extreme of Romanism—developing the changes which had taken place in his views from the commencement of the Tractarian movement till he found rest in an infallible church, and the grounds on which he would defend them' (p. 39).

This point concerning the lack of a fully logical presentation of a case and the confusion of the logical with the impressionistic is the basis for Cunningham's first basic criticism:

Mr. Newman has an ingenious and subtle, but not a very logical mind, and he has taken no pains to explain the conditions and precise results of his argument, or to point out the exact way in which it stands related to and bears upon, the general argument between Protestants and Romanists. He does not indeed claim, formally and in words, for his theory, more than, if fairly supported, it is entitled to; but, by failing to mark out its true place and logical relations, and by introducing many collateral topics, he has succeeded to some extent, in conveying an impression, that he has achieved much more than, even if his theory were admitted, he could be fairly held to have accomplished.

To illustrate this criticism he then proceeded to examine what Newman said about Protestantism and Romanism.

Of Protestantism Newman had written: 'Whatever be historical Christianity, it is not Protestantism. . . .' Cunningham granted that this statement was true if by it is meant 'that Protestantism has not always been the religion of Christendom, and that there was a period of above a thousand years when a religion materially different from it obtained, and to a large extent, in the professedly Christian church' (p. 46). His point in reply was to state that the *proper inference from this accepted fact* is to ask the question, 'What is the rule or standard by which we are to judge of what is or is not true or genuine Christianity?' Protestants, argued Cunningham, had no fear of either the historical investigation of Christianity or more particularly of Christian doctrines for this study only revealed in his opinion the great difference

between primitive Christianity and Romanism in the 19th Century.

Turning to the claim that Romanism is historical Christianity Cunningham first showed how Roman Catholic apologists had hitherto claimed an apostolic origin (either via the New Testament or unwritten apostolic tradition) for all their received doctrine and practice. Of such scholars he remarked that 'they have never, indeed, attempted to adjust authoritatively the logical relations of tradition and infallibility; but they make tradition to establish infallibility, or infallibility to guarantee tradition, according to the exigencies of the occasion' (p. 49). Newman had seemingly changed the whole framework of the theological controversy between Protestants and Romanists by his theory of development which 'cuts the knot but most certainly does not untie it' (p. 51). Cunningham continued:

The theory of development, if established and conceded, merely removes a general preliminary objection against Romanism. It gives no positive weight or validity to any Romish arguments, but only clears the field for a fair discussion. It is but a substitute for the doctrine which the Romanists used to maintain—namely, that the apostles taught many things which were not contained in, or deducible from, the New Testament, but which might be learned from other sources; and as the old doctrine of tradition, or catholic consent, required, in order to its serving any positive practical purpose in controversy, to be followed by specific proof of the apostolicity of particular tenets and practices, so the new theory of development, even when proved or conceded, requires to be followed up by specific proof, that every Romish addition to the New Testament system is a true and legitimate development, and not a corruption. Mr. Newman does not formally deny that this is the true logical position and bearing of the theory of development, and indeed, on several occasions he incidentally admits it; but he never gives to this idea anything like explicitness or prominence, and often writes as if he wished and expected it to be taken for something much more positive and effective.

Here then is the second example of the lack of logical precision in the *Essay*.

Turning his attention next to the actual theory itself Cunningham found 'the following observations naturally suggest themselves':

First. It is wholly precluded—just as much so as the doctrine of tradition or catholic consent—by the proof of the perfection and sufficiency of the written word.

Secondly. It implies a virtual abandonment of the position hitherto generally occupied by Romanists in defending their cause, being a newly invented substitute for the ground on which all former defenders of Romanism—many of them men of great talent and ingenuity—had felt it to be necessary or expedient to take their stand. It is in the highest degree improbable, that a theory which was really sound in itself, and legitimately available for the defence of Romanism, should have been invented in the nineteenth century. Mr. Newman's statement that 'the view has at all times, *perhaps*, been implicitly (that is, without being explicitly stated) adopted by theologians', is unworthy of notice in an argumentative

discussion. . . . De Maistre and Möhler are the inventors of this theory of development and Mr. Newman himself is the first who has developed it. . . .

Thirdly. This theory of development is substantially infidel in its general character and tendency, and is evidently borrowed from German neology. No one who is acquainted with the writings of Popish controversialists will be in the least startled with this statement. They abound in infidelity and often contain elaborate expositions of the most plausible objections of scepticism. Their professed object in all this is, not to lead men to reject Christianity and revelation, but to shut them up to the submission to an infallible church. With this view they are accustomed to dwell largely upon the difficulties attending the proof of the truth of Christianity, and of the divine origin, canonical authority, genuineness, and integrity of the sacred Scriptures, the investigation of their true meaning, and the formation, from the study of them, of a definite system of faith and practice (pp. 53-54).

Cunningham believed that, as an Anglo-Catholic, Newman had sanctioned this kind of scepticism and that, having become a Romanist, it was not to be unexpected that he would propound an infidel theory. A theory which 'manifestly implies that the revelation made by Christ and His apostles was very defective and imperfect . . . [and] . . . that it stands much in need of enlargements and improvements . . .' (p. 55).

Being convinced that there was a definite relation between neology and Newman's theory, Cunningham referred to the *Institutiones Theologiae Christianae Dogmaticae* of J. A. L. Wegscheider (1771-1848, professor at Halle) which was first published in 1813, was in its eighth edition in 1844, and was usually reckoned to be the basic text-book of Neologian divinity. He wrote:

The general position Wegscheider lays down is this: 'Religio Christiana ad majorem perfectionis gradum evehi potest'; and, in explaining this position he makes an important distinction, which Mr. Newman has, we suspect intentionally, overlooked. 'Omnino autem in religionem major perfectio cadere dicitur, tan subjectiva quadam significatione, qua illius cognitio in hominibus perfectior reddi possit, quam objectiva, ita ut ea religionis doctrinae intelligatur indoles, quae permittit adeoque adjuvat et methodi et ipsius argumenti emendationem tempore procedente suspiciendam' (p. 56).⁶

Wegscheider clearly makes a distinction between subjective development and objective development but Newman confused the two.

He either does not see the important distinction, or he has carefully concealed it; and while it is perfectly manifest that an objective development alone can be of any practical use to him, he formally contends only for a subjective one, and brings to bear, as if in support of his theory, many analogies and illustrations, derived from the nature, operations, and progress of the human mind, the improvement of human knowledge, and other sources, which apply only to a subjective, and not to an objective development (p. 56).

Cunningham also believed that Newman manifested the 'same *ignoratio elenchi*' in his attempts to answer the objections to his theory. 'The simple application of Wegscheider's distinction shows at once that his answers to the objections are utterly destitute of weight or plausibility, and leaves his theory in all the nakedness and deformity of rationalism or infidelity' (p. 57).

Other important criticisms made by Cunningham include the charge that Newman did not give any good reasons for the abandonment of the old Protestant theory of the gradual corruption of the Latin, Western Church (for which see below) and the further charge that the use of the analogy of the development of Revelation within the Old Testament period is unacceptable. It failed, wrote Cunningham, in one essential particular 'namely, that God made all these developments of previous revelations through inspired men, who were commissioned, not merely to develop previous revelations, but also to communicate new ones. And as God has given us no inspired men since the time of the apostles, the fair inference is, that He did not intend to make any further objective developments of previous revelations, which it would be incumbent on the Church to receive' (p. 64).

Cunningham's own view of the development of doctrine is basically a static one. Inside the Canon of Scripture, and more so in the Old than the New Testament, there is a development of doctrine within the historical, inspired Revelation. This objective development, guaranteed and controlled by God, does not extend beyond the Apostles, with whom Revelation ceases. Thus only within the Canon of Scripture is God's truth to be found in its perfection and purity. Concerning the emergence of doctrines and dogma in the life of the church Cunningham had the following to say:

There is a subjective development of Christian doctrine both in individuals and in churches, whereby men grow in the knowledge of God's revealed will and whereby theological science is extended and improved. But the result of this development is merely to enable individuals and churches to understand more fully and accurately, and to realise more thoroughly, *what is actually contained in, or deducible from, the statements of the written word, and can be shown to be so.* This, however, is essentially different from, nay, it is in a certain sense the reverse of, an objective development, which changes and enlarges or diminishes the external revelation, the standard or system of faith (p. 56).

Therefore he readily accepted an obvious subjective development in such documents as the early Creeds.

However, accompanying the early subjective growth in understanding of such doctrines as the Holy Trinity and Christology there was a growth of corruption, in doctrine, organisation and worship. The latter Cunningham termed the 'great Protestant position, that the Church gradually became corrupted in doctrine, government, and worship by departing from the scriptural and apostolic standard and that this

is the true cause and explanation of the palpable contrast between the Church of the first century and the church at the beginning of the sixteenth century, or what is the same thing, the modern Church of Rome' (p. 60). He went on to explain that the corruption which reached its height in the medieval Church had its origin in the agency of Satan and the depravity of man; Orientalism, Platonism and Polytheism were merely influences which at particular periods concurred with the basic causes and modified their operation.

Cunningham had a very high view of the Reformation. 'We maintain that Protestantism was the Christianity of the apostles . . . and that the Protestantism (of the Reformation) was, to a large extent at least, a restoration of Christianity to its original, apostolic purity' (p. 47).

* * * * *

Happily the issues raised by Newman were treated more sensitively and wisely by a student of Cunningham's, Robert Rainy, who in 1873 published his 'Cunningham Lectures' under the title *The Delivery and Development of Doctrine*. Another Scotsman, James Orr, responded to Newman in his book *The Progress of Dogma* (1901) but his zeal allowed him to overemphasise the model of evolution in the portrayal of the formation of dogma. Thus we remain today still awaiting a study which will set forth a clear and reasonable Evangelical Protestant view of the development of doctrine/dogma.

¹ See, e.g., J. H. Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation*, 1972.

² I am thinking of such studies as: N. Lash, *Change in Focus*, 1973; Andrew Mead, 'Tractarian Criticism of Newman's Theory of Development', B.Litt. thesis, Oxford, 1973; David Nicholls, 'Newman's Anglican Critics', *Anglican Theological Review*, 1965; and C. G. Brown, 'Newman's Minor Critics', *Downside Review*, 1971.

³ There were at least three other longer responses from conservative Anglicans: from Christopher Wordsworth in *Letters to M. Gordon*, 1847, W. J. Irons in *The Theory of Development Examined*, 1846, and W. A. Butler in *Letters on Romanism*, 1850.

⁴ I am engaged in a study of Protestant views of dogma and the formation of dogma in the years 1845-1914.

⁵ I have called him a Low Churchman but in many ways he defies definition.

⁶ A fair translation of the Latin would be: 'The Christian religion can be brought to a higher degree of perfection'; and, 'All in all a religion is said to attain greater perfection both in what we might call a subjective sense, whereby men's knowledge of it can be made more perfect, and in an objective sense, which means that the nature of the religion's doctrines permits, and to that end promotes, improvement both of method and indeed content with the passage of time'.