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Tradition and Apocalypse

AN ESSAY ON THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

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Tradition and Traditionalism

I

It seems clear to me that the concept of "tradition" in the theological sense, however lucid and cogent it might appear to the eyes of faith, is incorrigibly obscure and incoherent. This, I would argue, is true not only of the vague, popular version of that concept that a good many believers harbor but rarely think about. It is true also of the version that many (perhaps most) Christian theologians have tended consciously to adopt since the publication in 1845 of the first edition of John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, which more or less set the agenda for discussion of the topic, and to which no alternative account of any very great significance has yet been proposed. To this day, in fact, only Maurice

1. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, edition of 1878 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909) (hereafter, *Essay*).

Blondel's *Histoire et Dogme*² of 1904 has made anything like a substantial advance in theological reflection on the issues raised in that text, and then more as a supplement than as an alternative to Newman's argument. This is unsurprising, I suppose, inasmuch as "tradition" in this specifically theological acceptation is a very new idea, relatively considered, with no very deep roots in the tradition of the church. But the general neglect of the topic leaves a fairly enormous unresolved question in Christian thought lying quite conspicuously and troublingly open. When we speak of "Christian tradition," what are we really talking about? Can we really prove the existence of—and then in fact identify—a particular living, continuous, and internally coherent phenomenon that corresponds to that phrase, or will any attempt to do so find evidence only of a product of pure historical fortuity, consisting in a mere mechanically determined series of consecutive viable forms united more by evolutionary imperatives than by internal rationality? In part, I suspect that theologians have generally failed to address this question with the rigor it merits because, when frankly confronted, it inevitably yields answers contrary to their theological interests. That, however, may be a baseless supposition. One must concede that it is still a fairly new question, at least in any explicit and salient form.

Newman's treatise, after all, did not merely address the issue; it inaugurated the entire project of treating "tradition" as an object of theological inquiry in its own right, rather than as something merely quietly assumed—a vague designation, that is, for a dogmatic and spiritual continuity across generations that Christian thought had always presupposed

^{2.} In English, the treatise can be found in Maurice Blondel, "The Letter on Apologetics" and "History and Dogma," trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) (hereafter, History and Dogma).

in its understanding of itself but had never really properly reflected upon. As the first systematic attempt to demonstrate the intrinsic rationality of Christian doctrinal and theological history as a totality, obedient to general principles of logical consistency, the Essay was nothing less than epochal in its importance. But, for all its considerable richness and subtlety, it was at the last a self-defeating exercise; ultimately, it amounted to an inadvertently sophistical effort to transform a tautology into a syllogism. Newman really did, it seems, succeed in convincing himself; at least, his good faith in the matter appears beyond doubt, if for no other reason than that writing the book apparently precipitated his conversion from high Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. And his argument has certainly convinced or beguiled generations of devout readers. But the book remains little more than an illusionist's trick for all that. It retains its power to enthrall and persuade only so long as one studiously maintains one's willing suspension of disbelief and, so to speak, keeps one's seat. If, however, one instead sneaks backstage and peers at the performance from the wings, the stage machineries and sleights of hand become all too visible, and the enchantment evaporates. "We must not let in daylight upon magic," as Walter Bagehot said. And Newman's *Essay*, to the degree that it succeeds in convincing its readers, is a feat of magic through and through.

This is not a complaint on my part, incidentally. Nor is it to say that the argument Newman attempted was not worth the effort, or even that it was wholly fruitless. His essential intuition was correct, without doubt: Christianity claims for itself the status not merely of *a* revelation of God's nature, purposes, acts, and will for his creatures, but also of the one *unique* and unsurpassable revelation of these things. More outlandishly, it asserts (as perhaps no other putatively revealed

creed has ever done) an essential identity between the particular historical events by which that revelation was vouchsafed and the content of what was thereby made known. Thus the very category of "tradition" in Christian theological terms cannot be easily subsumed into any wider, more general category of "religious tradition" as such. Using the term in that more universal sense, "tradition" is merely the faithful transmission down the ages of some invariable truth—theoretical or practical or mystical—often of immemorial antiquity. The Gospel, however, by its own account, is not simply a perennial wisdom delivered through—and so, at the last, severable from—the vehicle of the particular and local history in which it was first made manifest; it is instead a particular and local history that purports to disclose *itself* as the eternal and universal truth of all things. By its very nature, a claim that audacious cannot help but be marked by a kind of perilous if captivating delicacy, a fragility that calls for the most tactful and careful application of hermeneutical art. There is something so positively absurd in this precarious balancing of the whole edifice of eternal truth upon the tiny, tenuous, evanescent foundation of a fleeting temporal episode that it arrests our attention chiefly by its implausibility. And then too, of course, as Newman was obviously keenly aware, that episode can itself never be extracted from the flow of history, inasmuch as no historical event exists as a singularity; its meaning—its very reality—is unveiled only through history itself, by all that came before and by all that comes after; if this were not so of the event of revelation, no less than of any other historical occurrence, that event would constitute nothing more than an impenetrable enigma, without antecedents or consequents, and so would be incapable of making itself intelligible in rational terms. True, the potentially interminable interpretive

labor inaugurated by that event may necessarily have acquired ever greater and more exalted metaphysical dimensions over time, ever more comprehensive propositions regarding the frame of reality in the abstract or of existence in general, ever more *ahistorical* asseverations about being or nature or supernature as philosophical categories; but the hard, obdurate, indissoluble matter of its reflections must always remain a set of occurrences that reportedly took place at this or that location, and of words that were supposedly spoken to this or that person, and of continuities of memory that have allegedly been sustained intact across differing ages and cultures and that have truly informed every "healthy" development of dogma and theology.

All of this being so, the authority that Christian tradition claims for itself is credible only to the degree that the story of Christian doctrine's long, frequently ambiguous, painfully gradual emergence over many centuries can convincingly be narrated as at once the story of the unbroken preservation of a changeless, rationally coherent, always implicit dogmatic content and also the story of the dynamic process of an ever greater crystallization, clarification, and explicit disclosure of that content in ideas, words, and practices. That is to say, more simply, what is required is a concept of tradition that can simultaneously assure us of an essential immutability in Christian confession while also offering us a credible apologia for all the transformations through which that confession has manifestly gone over the centuries. Or, to state the matter more simply still, what is required is a concept that can account both for everything in Christian belief that has not changed over time as well as for everything that has. But then it seems obvious that, in principle, such a concept would have to do more than is logically possible. It would almost certainly

have to possess such plasticity as to be useless: potentially, it could serve as a defense of anything and so, actually, it would provide an effective defense of nothing.

That is an issue I shall consider at some length below. What I would note here is that where Newman definitely erred and erred hopelessly, I would argue—was in imagining that such a concept could be devised and then successfully fortified against critique purely by way of the historical reconstruction of doctrinal development. History is intractably resistant to such uses, no matter how good or how iron a will the historian brings to bear upon it. It simply refuses to submit to any reduction of its contingencies and intricacies to laws or principles of reason. More to the point, it allows of no univocal logic, no stable distinction between the essential and the accidental, no sure discrimination between intrinsic meaning and pure fortuity, no clear delineation between what happened because it had to happen and what happened although it ought not to have done so. The coursing river of history never abates long enough to allow the contours of its bed to be revealed, or in fact long enough to prevent those contours themselves from suffering constant alterations and erosions, and even the most indefatigable explorer will die before discovering all the river's tributaries, much less its secret springs. Invariably, then, the effort to make the evidences of history conform to some more abstract rationality leads to nothing but an unending contest of narratives. And even if, at the last, one faction should claim victory and should establish (by either main force or dialectical finesse) that its version of the story must be preferred over all others, the guiding logic of the final narrative will prove to be the same in every case: that what happened must have happened in this way, and that we know this because it did happen in this way, and that we

know this because it *must* have happened this way, and that we know this because what happened is what *had* to happen . . . (or something to that effect). Every claim made in the story's defense turns out to be simply the story itself told in a slightly different way. And logical circles prove nothing. The great dilemma that Newman left behind for future generations of theological apologists, however, was not merely that he posed a question to which his answer proved finally inadequate (though in fact, *vide infra*, this is precisely what he did); rather, it was that the question itself, once raised, proved impossible either to forget or to evade. It was now an indelible feature of the apologetic landscape; more than that, it was an internal challenge to Christian self-understanding that needed to be confronted.

This said, it would not have been better for Newman never to have addressed the issue. The intellectual milieu of high Anglicanism in which he wrote the Essay was not quite as tensely poised at the cutting edge of historical and textual criticism as that of the German Lutheran academic world was; but neither was it ignorant of the new critical sciences. In his original native scholarly circles, what Newman was proposing might have been controversial, but it did not come as entirely surprising. Between the book's composition and its publication, however, Newman converted to the Roman Church, and he soon discovered that his journey across the Tiber had effectively taken him backward a few centuries in academic culture. The Roman Catholicism of his time, although necessarily committed to a formidable collection of historical claims regarding its own authority as the one true church of the apostles, was for the most part shockingly unsophisticated in the quality of the historical study it cultivated within its own institutions. At the time of the Essay's appearance, moreover, the Modernist

crisis was not so much as a dark cloud on the horizon. Much of Catholic culture's understanding of its own history was pervaded by a kind of dreamy guilelessness, which rendered it largely defenseless against the historical criticism that had been taking shape in the greater Christian intellectual world for a few generations. Newman was well aware that this situation was an unsustainable one. Modern historical science, even if much of it emanated from lands where the magisterium enjoyed no remit, could not be held at bay indefinitely. As a product, moreover, of Anglicanism's then unrivaled patristic scholarship—historical, textual, philological—Newman entertained no gauzy illusions regarding the supposedly unanimous testimony of the earliest Christian centuries, or the purportedly manifest unity of Catholic history. He was acutely conscious that the record of Christian doctrinal development, when subjected to the gaze of the impartial historian, looked nothing like a natural, smooth, inexorable unfolding of the inner logic of a set of clearly identifiable, theologically primordial, and universally attested affirmations.

Quite the reverse in fact: that record had all the appearances of a sporadic, chaotic, diffuse, often random, rarely transparent, and even more rarely pacific series of accommodations with accidental cultural and historical circumstances, usually occasioned by forces wholly extrinsic to the internal rationality of Christian belief. More often than not, the record seemed to consist largely in the tediously reiterated tale of an institution at once increasingly socially powerful and increasingly subject to political authority, eager to promote the myth of its own internal unity and continuity but repeatedly embarrassed by the discovery of one or another area of profound theological disagreement and long-standing diversity within its own walls. In each instance, it had had to struggle might-

ily to impose a consensus that had never hitherto existed, to dissolve disagreements that had persisted undetected across many generations of believers, and then to alter the record to give the impression that the terms of the armistice thus achieved were no more than the purest possible expression of something boldly confessed ubique, semper, et ab omnibus (to borrow the brash phrase of Vincent of Lérins): "everywhere, always, and by all." The final issue of each of these traumatic episodes, moreover, was without exception a set of demonstrably novel dogmatic formulations whose greatest strengths seemed to be cryptic terseness and conceptual vagueness. The ever more capacious, cultured, and independent critical schools of Newman's time were not going to avert their eyes from these things out of any tender regard for Catholicism's dewy innocence of the historical sciences, nor would Catholic culture be able to ignore those sciences indefinitely. Protestant critiques would sooner or later demand a plausible Catholic riposte. Otherwise, no intellectually respectable concept of Christian tradition was likely to survive a sustained encounter with the caustic solvents of modern scholarship. It is a testament to Newman's penetrating intelligence and his immense erudition that he was perhaps the first Catholic thinker to grasp the full dimensions of the problem.

Again, however, the solution he proposed was a failure.

II

Before enlarging on that observation, however, I should perhaps retreat a step or two to make certain that the terms of the argument are clear. Above all, I should emphasize that the specifically *theological* concept of tradition is necessarily the concept of a rational and indivisible unity somehow subsisting

within a history that encompasses an incalculable number of large, conspicuous, and substantial transformations. In one sense, it is an organic unity, within which every discrete part contributes to the life of the whole while no part is in itself wholly accidental or dispensable. It is also, in another sense, a logical unity, each of whose discrete developments is implicated in the dialectical sum of all its parts. And in yet another sense it is a causal continuum, at least according to the Aristotelian model of causality: the essential unity of a single identifiable "substance," with an intrinsic entelechy that allows it to grow and change while remaining solely what it is. That is to say, a truly living tradition, as opposed to a mere series of mechanically related episodes, must possess the indissoluble rational unity of a material nature that has been shaped by a single real formal content and by an efficient power of development whose effects are determined by an inherent and purposive finality.

This, needless to say, is nothing like our most ordinary, most benignly vulgar notions of tradition. In most cases, what we mean when we speak of *a* tradition is something that, more or less by definition, lacks any internal criterion or logic for whatever unity it happens to possess. It is a continuity sustained not by intrinsic rational relations, but by a history of largely accidental associations, most of them having begun as purely spontaneous developments that were thereafter preserved not out of logical necessity, but merely by willful ritual repetition. That is not to say that such associations are any less culturally or spiritually profound or natural or enriching in their own ways than the kind of unity theological tradition claims for itself. But, even so, much of the special magic or allure of those associations arises from their delightful arbitrariness and happy inadvertency; it is precisely the quality of non-

necessity that situates them uniquely in a particular place or particular community, in such a way that they become vehicles and expressions of that place's or that community's special identity. I am speaking here of such things as local mythologies, tribal customs, communal rites, shared enthusiasms or tastes, particular ways of indicating loyalty to a baseball team or a particular ale, and so forth, all of which express and continually renew specific forms of local distinctiveness, and all of which are faithfully observed, without any significant social or metaphysical remainder, as modes of celebrating this place or these memories. A tradition in this sense is an isolated but precious instance of cultural inertia, jealously preserved precisely on account of its entirely "irrational" particularity. It is a means of holding past, present, and future together in festive defiance of the natural transience of every historical identity, and so consists in practices that claim no warrant for their continued performance other than the evident fact of their having "always"—or, at least, regularly—been performed in this way and no other. A tradition in this sense may have only one correct expression, but that is precisely because it allows for no significant distinction within itself between expression and meaning—or, rather, because the connection between expression and meaning is so random and happenstantial that the former is rather like a string tied around one's finger to remind one of the latter, and so to abandon it would be to forget not so much what it signifies as the very existence of something that needs to be signified at all. Whatever authority this kind of tradition possesses is of the most tautological kind: we do it thus because thus it is done. Authority here is simply a matter of proper techniques: musical forms, narrative conventions, public gestures, regional cuisines, sartorial styles, dance steps, rallying cries, and so forth.

Tradition as a Christian theological category, however tradition in the sense delineated and defended by Newman, and then again by Blondel—is supposedly the dynamic and progressive disclosure of an ever wider and deeper and more inexhaustible reservoir of truth, one that it can only ever partially embody. It is a ceaseless elucidation of the obscure, a relentless advance from the dazzlingly incomprehensible surprise of the original event of revelation toward the calm, reflective stability of ever greater dogmatic clarity. As such, its credibility rests as much upon the novelties it can absorb as upon the antiquities it curates. And thus its supposed fidelity to the past depends less upon meticulously "correct" reiterations of inherited forms and formulae than upon the overarching narrative conceit that everything that has gradually appeared within its confines over time has been a faithful explication of truths latently present from the very beginning. Dogma, theology, hermeneutics, liturgy, spiritual disciplines all of these things have supposedly evolved as the inevitable coalescences of forces diffusely and inchoately present in the tradition's very first moments, rather like galaxies forming in the aftermath of the Big Bang. And, for this reason, Newman's Essay in fact constitutes one of the earliest and most thoroughgoing assaults on that dreary, disheartening kind of religious conservatism that, for want of a better term, we call "traditionalism." For traditionalism is nothing other than the failure to grasp the distinction between "tradition" as ordinarily understood and "tradition" as a theological category; it is a fretful, even at times neurotic, fixation upon those past configurations of the faith that one remembers from childhood, or remembers one's parents remembering, or remembers hearing about from those who vaguely remember remembering. It is precisely this sort of naïve, historically illiterate fidelity to a

mythic prehistory, and precisely this sort of infantile longing for the feeling of security that changeless patterns of behavior and interminably repeated nursery tales can instill, that Newman set out to clear away so that he could erect more redoubtable defenses against the approaching leveling gales of historiological critique—defenses, that is, consisting in something better able than morbid anxiety to withstand the storm.

Perhaps the greatest problem with most Christian traditionalism—apart, that is, from its seemingly invincible tendency toward the most authoritarian, fantastic, and diabolical kind of political "integralism"³—is its lack of any deep perspective upon the past. It is notoriously parochial in its historical consciousness. This is because, as I have already intimated, a devout traditionalism is as often as not motivated by a sickly nostalgia for something recalled from childhood, or something almost recalled from somewhere just beyond the verge of one's earliest memory. Where this is not quite true, as in cases of adult converts to the faith, traditionalism is often animated

3. For a particularly harrowing example of this tendency, see Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister's Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy (Havertown, PA: Editiones Scholasticae, 2020), a volume that, in the course of sympathetically contemplating a return to a throne-and-altar style of accommodation between the Catholic Church and a (hereditarily) monarchical state, defends capital punishment, inalienable property rights, the political disenfranchisement of Jews and other non-Catholics, the political disenfranchisement of women, the legal subordination of women to men, the use of draconian forms of coercion to enforce a "Christian" social order, the banning of most religions, the execution of blasphemers and heretics, and even perhaps the legitimacy of the institution of slavery, but nowhere advocates any of the actual social or moral principles advanced by Christ. I do not exaggerate. And the book is anything but an outlier in integralist circles. True, Crean and Fimister's buoyantly fascistic vision of a renewed Catholic Christendom seems clearly inflected by a certain number of pathologies peculiar to its authors (the diseased fantasies of exercising power over subject bodies and souls, especially, suggest a deeply crypto-erotic and sadomasochistic undercurrent in their reasoning); but, while the sheer overtness of the book's moral disorders is something of a rarity, its advocacy of certain especially vicious structures of state violence is not.

by memories of a vet bitterer kind; it is a fierce adherence to a largely simplified and fabulous version of the confession to which the convert has fled from some other confession that has left him or her cruelly disappointed. Often, converts are the most zealous traditionalists of all, inasmuch as they are desperate to assure themselves ever and again that they have passed from darkness to light, from confusion to clarity, from something unstable and fluid to something firm and immutable. Whatever the traditionalist's guiding passion, however pathetic wistfulness or truculent resentment—he or she is in either case devoted to a comforting illusion; and, to avoid being traumatically disabused of that illusion, it becomes necessary for him or her to cling to as parsimoniously narrow and soothingly familiar a picture of the faith as possible. Naturally, of course, that picture must most emphatically *not* emanate from too deep down in "the dark backward and abysm of time." The past is a foreign country, as L. P. Hartley says; they do things differently there. The further back the traditionalist casts his or her gaze, the more alien the prospect becomes, and the more deeply mired the story in ambiguities, conceptual and linguistic saltations, and inadjudicable—indeed, unintelligible—conflicts. The illusion of a formally consistent history of development appears all too quickly to dissolve as soon as one ventures even a little past the nearest retrospective frontiers. Even the tone and tenor of the "orthodox" discourses of those distant centuries will as often as not sound jarringly dissonant to modern traditionalist ears. It is precisely the real depth, richness, complexity, subtlety, and antiquity of the tradition that the traditionalist finds most threatening.

Thus it is that the purest and most ferocious traditionalism will always prove to be—speaking in mnemonic terms something of a "primacy-recency" phenomenon: a combina-

tion of the very first thing one learned and the very latest thing one can recall, with everything in between more or less ignored as just so much extraneous (and perplexing) detail. Thus, for instance, the truly militant traditionalist Catholicism of our day consists in a devotion not to the ancient or mediaeval church, much less to the enigmatic, terrible, elusive, incomprehensibly foreign figure of Christ (or to his disreputable anarchocommunist agitations, or to his very problematic relationship with religious and political authority), but rather to the early modern church of Baroque Catholic culture, and to its clericalist opulences, and to its arid liturgical practices, and to its alliance with the absolute monarchies of early modernity,4 and even to the debased theological system of manualist Thomism⁵ that enjoyed such preponderant influence during what John O'Malley has characterized as Catholicism's "long nineteenth century."6 In one sense, this is all quite curious, given that the Baroque Thomist system (and especially its teachings regarding

- 4. See note 3 above. I should mention that this alliance is not limited to the baptized early modern nation-state, but frequently includes a still deeper affinity for the imperial ambitions of those states. Hence the American integralist Adrian Vermeule has recommended a national policy of preponderantly favoring immigration from Catholic populations as a vital step toward "the eventual formation of the Empire of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and ultimately the world government required by natural law" (Vermeule, "A Principle of Immigration Priority," *Mirror of Justice* [blog], July 20, 2019, https://mirrorofjustice.blogs.com/mirrorofjustice/2019/07/a-principle-of-immigration-priority-.html). Of course, only a person of very uneven intelligence and emotional continence could write those words without recognizing their clownishness; and, needless to say, no one with any actual interest in following the teachings of Christ could promote either such policies or the adolescent fantasies of world empire they reflect; but this too is not at all atypical of the fascist integralist chic in certain quarters of contemporary Catholic traditionalism.
- 5. A school ever and adamantly to be distinguished both from the inalienably *mediaeval* synthesis of Thomas Aquinas's own thought, as well as from the best modern scholarship on that synthesis.
- 6. John O'Malley, What Happened at Vatican II? (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 53–92.

the relation between nature and supernature) could not be more at odds with the otherwise unanimous testimony of Catholic theological and doctrinal tradition, from the apostolic age through the patristic and mediaeval periods and right up to the present. And it is no less curious that many of these traditionalists are so volubly and intransigently hostile to both the last century's ressourcement movement and the inaptly named nouvelle théologie with which it was often associated. Both of these latter, after all, were attempts to return to and learn from the deepest, most ancient, and most enriching wellsprings of Catholic tradition. In another sense, however, none of this is really very curious at all: traditionalism has nothing to do with the fullness of a living tradition; in fact, it can scarcely understand that fullness as anything other than a "relativizing" assault on its own reassuring simplicity. Traditionalism of this kind is nothing more than a form of ecclesiastical fetishism; and, of course, nothing becomes a fetish until its actual material history has been forgotten and replaced by a myth.

III

Admittedly, this entire topic might seem rather recherché from the vantage of the ordinary believer. Few of the faithful ever find themselves obliged to delve down into the history of their creed; they have better things to do, and so are perfectly willing to accept the catechism they have received, and even that with as little attention as possible to any but its most prominent features. Neither, by the same token, are most believers traditionalists, since that too would require a sort of concern for details that is irrelevant to their faith. Most believers more inhabit their religion than reflectively assent to it, at least in the way that one might assent to a

simple proposition. In some very real and not at all dishonorable sense, their belief rests upon the experience of belief only, and that of the most generously imprecise kind. It does not need to justify itself, because it is a home rather than an ideology. Thus, in a way that would be altogether scandalous to the average traditionalist or integralist fascist or religious scold, such believers are largely indifferent to a great many of the dogmatic appurtenances of their faith. Most doctrines are not things they believe discretely, but are instead things they accept only as nebulously included within the totality of the faith as a whole. Few, for instance, truly believe anything so degrading, obscene, cruel, psychotic, and (in fact) unscriptural as the notion of the reality of a hell of eternal torment, at least not with any immediacy of conscious awareness, much less with any imaginative consideration of what so foul a belief would entail about reality; to do so would be to invite psychosis, or to accomplish the total destruction of one's own moral intelligence. Most, however, vaguely accept the idea in an indistinct, unreflective, almost symbolic form, as little more than something remote and shadowy on the far horizon, hazily and hyperbolically defining the outer edges of their spiritual Sitz im Leben. For the large majority of believers, the larger inventory of doctrines is little more than the background stage-scenery that allows them to play out the drama of religious life in some kind of coherent setting, rather than as set off starkly and vertiginously against an existential void. And this suffices for a life of faith, so long as one does not get bored and begin inspecting the stage too closely. If one does that, all the scenery—the trees, the distant hills, the quaint village nestled in the fold of the valley, the white steeple on its humble church, and so forth—will be revealed as just so much purely functional, crudely daubed pasteboard. At

that point, one will no longer be able to proceed with perfect innocence, and it will become necessary to make an explicit decision among three possible options: to commit oneself to forcing each feature of the background—tree, hill, village, steeple, and so forth—into the foreground, hoping to prove that all of it is in fact really what it purports to be; to resign oneself to a faith purged of the comforting illusion of cozily close horizons and familiar landmarks; or to forsake belief altogether.

If only it were possible for everyone to enjoy the blissful naïveté of incurious belief, without it degenerating into fundamentalism or morbid formalism or some other impediment to healthy moral and intellectual growth; then, perhaps, the incensed anxiety that produces traditionalism and the tragic disappointment that destroys faith could both be avoided. But, as Newman understood, an unsustainable fiction sooner or later, by definition, loses its power to persuade. And so he set out to prevent disenchantment by trying to demonstrate that—however indistinct, impressionistic, and unprepossessing that stage background may often seem—there is a depth of reality behind it that it symbolically expresses; one may turn a critical eye on those crudely rendered images without surrendering to disillusionment if one is at the same time willing to look through them to the living truth they represent. He may well have been right. But, in making his argument, he trained his gaze on only one horizon of that landscape, and that the receding horizon of the past. As a result, all he truly succeeded in demonstrating was that, again, it is impossible to defend the legitimacy of Christian tradition simply by recourse to the historical record, as though it were clearly the record of an inexorably unfolding deposit of belief already wholly contained in the most primordial moments of Christian revelation. Historical scholarship by itself provides no evidence of such a thing, or of any discernible rational unity within the course of Christian tradition that one could confidently claim has been sustained intact amid the flux of times and cultures. And the record has only grown clearer since Newman's time.

Today, the seeming irreconcilability between tradition and history—between, that is, any uniform narrative about a demonstrably constant orthodoxy preserved from the earliest centuries onward and the intractable evidences of early Christianity's historiography—has assumed the institutional form of what in psychotherapeutic parlance might be characterized as a dissociative identity disorder. In Newman's time, theology and Christian historical studies were only barely distinct aspects of a single speculative, critical, and hermeneutical science. In ours, theology of any kind—systematic, dogmatic, philosophical—and Early Christian Studies could scarcely be more rigidly sequestered from one another. The failure, for more than a century and a half, to arrive at a convincing synthesis of the historical and the dogmatic perspectives in modern Christian thought has led to an ever greater divergence of disciplines, almost as if—to simplify the matter, but not to misrepresent it—the one has taken almost exclusive ownership of any concern for the "Jesus of history" and the other almost exclusive ownership of any concern for the "Christ of faith." In fact, it is all but axiomatic in much of the Christian academic world that younger scholars of theology should avoid Early Christian Studies, lest they imperil their faith, and no less axiomatic that aspiring scholars of the Christianity and Christian texts of late antiquity would do well to ignore the historically unballasted pronouncements of systematic or dogmatic theology, lest they forfeit their scholarly credibility.

Many historians of the early centuries of the faith who are especially conscious of the plurality and contradictoriness of the earliest Christian factions, and of later tradition's seemingly immense departures from what the evidence tells us of those centuries, frequently regard the history of theological speculation as a fantastic series of irrelevancies and misprisions, while many theologians who take refuge in vague talk of "development" or "tradition" frequently dismiss the problems posed by "historical-critical" and "Early Christian" scholarship as hermeneutically naïve.

For myself, I have to admit, while each party is somewhat justified in its view of the other's purblindness, it seems to me that ultimately the historians and scholars of early Christianity have the stronger case, if only because Christian theology can never entirely break free from the anchor chains connecting it to the deep historical past of the faith. All Christian doctrinal claims are also historical claims, even when made at several removes from the ostensible historical data they involve or presume. And, while it may be a crude assumption on the part of the historian that historical evidence alone ought to determine the content of theological reasoning, it is worse than quixotic for the theologian to imagine that his or her reasoning deserves credence, respect, or even casual attention if it can be shown to have become utterly detached from the earliest sources and affirmations of the faith. Admittedly, a certain sophistication is always necessary when interpreting the past, and sometimes this will prove to be a sort of sophistication whose application is precluded by modern historical science but still legitimate for theology. Even so, where the historical evidence proves not merely insufficient for the theological claim being made on its basis, but positively adverse to it, then the line at which sophistication becomes empty sophistry has been reached.

And so there is something mystifying in the counsel (which I have heard many times) that theologians should not immerse themselves too deeply in Early Christian Studies, and in the tendency of theologians to become impatient with such studies for refusing to grant the identifiable continuity of some single stream of original orthodoxy amid a sea of perverse heresies, and in the indifference of many theologians to the questions raised by New Testament scholarship concerning the content of Christian scripture or the person and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Certainly it is not enough airily to wave off the perplexities produced by a close scrutiny of the historical record or to make a hasty and facile resort to something like Paul Ricoeur's "second naïveté" (which, of course, is really possible only after a serious and prolonged engagement with modern scholarship at its most witheringly skeptical).

Faith whose only rationale is faith is not faith at all. Doctrine jealously preserved or confidently espoused solely on the grounds that it is doctrine is nothing but vacuous assertion masquerading as sincere conviction. And so I would recommend the critical value of a certain affective coldness regarding the claims and appeals of faith. I admit—to wax briefly autobiographical—that I may here be relying too much on what I take to be a rational strength when in fact it is really only a sentimental limitation of my own nature. I can say only that I have no infrangible emotional attachment to faith in the abstract or to *the* faith in the concrete. It would cause me not a moment's distress to walk away tomorrow from any association with Christian beliefs and institutions if I were to conclude that it is a false or incoherent system of belief. At

^{7.} Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 232–78, 306–56.

least, I am not aware of having any appetite for believing anything I do not actually believe to be true. And the institutional trappings of belief would immediately lose any but a purely aesthetic appeal for me in such a situation. My temperamental fondness for certain styles of ecclesial life—the sonorities, shadowy interiors, and senescent stone of high Anglicanism, the austere splendor and hypnotically dithyrambic rhythms of Byzantine worship—would survive well enough on its own without the assistance of religious belief, as would my love of the high arts of Christendom. One can thoroughly delight in Palestrina and Bach, or in Dante and Milton, without any dogmatic commitments (no matter what anyone says to the contrary). Sometimes, in fact, an absence of personal faith might make the aesthetic merits of certain works all the more conspicuous and ingratiating (how hard it is to enjoy Dante's Commedia fully if one actually believes in something like the monstrous hell or the hazy heavens it describes). I am not saying that this sort of detachment is a virtue; but, in some very special circumstances, it may be an advantage. And, whether advantageous or not, I should confess it openly here anyway, because I truly wish in the rest of what follows to think my way through—albeit not exactly *straight* through—the problem of theological and doctrinal tradition, without presuming that I must arrive at a conclusion that affords me or anyone else much comfort. Perfect impartiality is, of course, impossible; and, even if it were not, it would still be impossible to prove my impartiality to others. But I can say with a clear conscience that, no matter what I might wish to be the case, I am not at all determined to prove Christian tradition's intrinsic unity. I am more than willing to conclude, if I must, that such unity is an illusion—or even perhaps a lie.