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PROJECT

What Is “Dogmatic” About the History of Dogma?

As modern historiography began to take shape in the 18th century, Protestant Enlightenment theologians such as J.F.W. Jerusalem developed the concept of a “history of dogma.” Their aim was to look at the formation of Christian doctrine not primarily from the perspective of continuity, as implied by the idea that this doctrine had developed gradually and organically, but in terms of the discontinuities, innovations, or even ruptures that can be found within it. The Catholic Church long rejected such an approach. Thus, a negative attitude towards the history of dogma can even be seen among such Catholic theologians as Georg Hermes, who was condemned by Pope Gregory XVI in 1835 for holding that “positive doubt” was a necessary part of theological methodology and that reason was the only way that the human mind could come to know God. According to one of his students, Hermes argued that “as a Catholic he could not recognise a history of dogma in the ordinary sense of the word, because dogmas have always been what they are.” Most Catholic theologians of the 19th- and early-20th century would have agreed. Today, however, the history of dogma is a well-established discipline in faculties of Catholic Theology around the world. My project deals with the following questions: (1) When, how, and why did the Catholic attitude towards the project of a history of dogma change? (2) Is there a specifically Catholic approach to the history of dogma that differs from the approaches of other Christian denominations or from how non-theological disciplines, such as the history of ideas, approach the historical development of Christian doctrine? (3) Within Catholic theology, the history of dogma is often seen as an adjunct to dogmatic theology. But what is “dogmatic” about the history of dogma? The aim of my project is to historicise the history of dogma as a discipline within Catholic theology, to investigate what its denominational biases are, and to suggest a place for the history of dogma in relation to other theological disciplines.

Recommended Reading

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Dogma im Wandel

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