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The Critical Synthetic Realist Test of Doctrinal Development: A Formal Epistemological Framework for Distinguishing Authentic Development, Doctrinal Corruption, and the Progressive Understanding of Truth

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Abstract

Religious traditions frequently affirm the permanence of truth while revising the conceptual and institutional forms through which truth is articulated. The resulting difficulty is not simply to establish whether doctrines change, but to determine when change represents defensible intellectual development rather than contradiction, corruption, or accommodation to prevailing opinion. Building on Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR), this article develops the Critical Synthetic Realist Test of Doctrinal Development (CSRTDD) as a two-stage framework for examining that problem. Three necessary conditions—ontological coherence, epistemic accountability, and critical corrigibility—establish eligibility for comparative appraisal. Four weighted criteria—historical continuity, interdisciplinary integration, ethical consistency, and explanatory adequacy—then support an explicitly defeasible assessment of competing interpretations. The argument places Augustine, Aquinas, Vincent of Lérins, and Newman in conversation with Lonergan, Congar, Bhaskar, MacIntyre, Fricker, and contemporary philosophy of science. A worked analysis of Catholic teaching on religious freedom illustrates both the framework's possibilities and its limitations. Quantum theory is discussed solely as a qualified analogy concerning the relation between reality and conceptual representation. The article argues that doctrinal development is best understood as critically accountable progress in understanding, not as mere chronological novelty, unqualified continuity, or numerical proof of theological truth.

Keywords: Critical Synthetic Realism, Doctrinal Development, Theological Epistemology, John Henry Newman, Epistemic Fracture, Religious Freedom, Critical Realism

1. Introduction: Truth and the Historicity of Doctrine

The most persistent difficulty in the theory of doctrinal development arises from the relationship between the apparent permanence of religious truth and the manifest historicity of its expression. Communities that regard certain truths as revealed or otherwise foundational must nevertheless interpret those truths through languages, concepts, controversies, and institutions that are themselves subject to change. A doctrine formulated in response to one intellectual or political circumstance may subsequently confront questions that its original proponents could not have anticipated. When its language is revised, the alteration may represent an improvement in understanding, a prudent change of application, a substantive contradiction, or the abandonment of an earlier commitment. None of these possibilities can be established simply by pointing to the existence of change. The problem is evaluative: what makes one development intellectually defensible and another corrupting?.

Two shortcuts have repeatedly distorted the discussion. The first equates fidelity with preservation and assumes that the historical endurance of a formulation establishes its truth. Yet an interpretation can be preserved with exceptional consistency while retaining mistaken empirical assumptions, inadequate moral reasoning, or an unresolved conceptual ambiguity. The second equates

progress with revision and supposes that a later interpretation is preferable because it accords more readily with contemporary sensibilities. This is no more satisfactory: intellectual fashions are themselves fallible, and moral consensus can conceal injustice as readily as inherited authority can perpetuate it. A credible theory must therefore account for the evidential relevance of continuity without converting continuity into an epistemic veto, and it must recognize the possibility of correction without identifying novelty with progress.

The present argument extends original formulation of the Critical Synthetic Realist Test of Doctrinal Development. In his wider account of Critical Synthetic Realism, distinguishes the independence of reality from the historically mediated and corrigible character of knowledge; his discussions of theological authority and intellectual emancipation develop related concerns [1-5]. The proposal advanced here is narrower than a complete philosophy of religion. It concerns the standards by which a proposed doctrinal change may be examined, explained, criticized, and provisionally classified. Its contribution is the distinction between noncompensatory conditions of epistemic eligibility and comparative criteria of developmental adequacy. That distinction seeks to make disagreements more tractable without pretending to dissolve them through a mathematical procedure.

The argument proceeds from the historical sources of the problem to its philosophical reconstruction and formal appraisal. It then examines a disputed Catholic development, considers the transferability of the method to other traditions, and addresses objections concerning authority, relativism, ethics, and numerical scoring. The central thesis is that authentic development requires an intelligible relationship to an inherited object of inquiry and a defensible improvement in understanding under the disciplines of coherence, evidence, criticism, historical responsibility, and ethical reflection. This thesis does not assume that every theological proposition is empirically testable, nor that doctrinal legitimacy can be established from a standpoint entirely outside the interpretive traditions in which doctrines arise.

2. Classical Sources: Continuity, Analogy, and Organic Growth

Augustine's intellectual itinerary offers an instructive starting point because it depicts the search for truth as a process in which conviction and correction coexist. The Confessions recounts changes in philosophical allegiance and theological understanding that Augustine did not regard as evidence that truth itself had changed [6]. His later reconsideration of earlier positions similarly illustrates the distinction between the truth sought and the judgments made about it. It would be anachronistic to turn Augustine into a contemporary fallibilist; his epistemology remains inseparable from divine illumination and Christian authority. Nevertheless, his example makes visible a principle indispensable to any theory of development: correction of a belief may express fidelity to truth rather than betrayal of it. The significance of the distinction is logical as well as historical, for the acknowledgment of error presupposes a standard not exhausted by the judgment being corrected.

Aquinas provides a complementary account through his treatment of theological language. In the Summa Theologiae, especially the discussion of divine names, he maintains that human discourse can refer meaningfully to God without comprehending the divine essence [7]. Analogical predication thus permits genuine but nonexhaustive understanding. The implication for doctrinal history is not that every conceptual innovation is legitimate, but that the inadequacy of a formulation need not imply the nonexistence or instability of its intended referent. A later distinction may clarify an earlier insight; it may equally obscure that insight or introduce a contradiction. The question must be settled through interpretive and philosophical argument rather than through the assumption that the oldest or most elaborate formulation is necessarily the most adequate.

Vincent of Lérins famously insisted upon continuity of identity while allowing for genuine growth in understanding. As shows, Vincent's account is not reducible to mechanical repetition: the distinction between development and alteration presupposes that a living tradition may mature without becoming something else [8]. Yet historical identity is not equivalent to correspondence with reality. A continuous tradition may preserve a mistake, just as an apparently discontinuous correction may disclose an overlooked aspect of its founding insight. This does not render continuity dispensable. It establishes instead that continuity has a determinate but limited role: it helps decide whether a proposed change belongs to the history of a particular tradition, not whether the proposition thereby becomes true.

remains the most substantial classical attempt to specify that role [9]. His seven notes—preservation of type, continuity of principles, assimilative power, logical sequence, anticipation of future developments, conservative action upon the past, and chronic vigor—describe the features by which a developing idea may retain its identity through intellectual expansion. Newman understood that genuine development can introduce vocabulary and distinctions absent from an earlier period, and that an idea's encounter with external thought can disclose rather than destroy its implications. The CSRTDD does not replace this historical-theological achievement. It asks what further examination is necessary when the preservation of type, the judgment of coherence, and the claims of moral or empirical learning pull in different directions. A framework that cannot entertain the possibility of a coherent but mistaken inheritance has not yet distinguished the history of belief from the justification of belief.

3. Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Rational Traditions

The twentieth-century discussion broadened the problem beyond the logical relations among doctrinal propositions. Treated reform as an ecclesial and historical undertaking in which practices, institutional structures, and fidelity to Christian sources cannot be isolated from one another [10]. His work invites the theologian to ask whether a community's actual conduct expresses or compromises the principles that its doctrinal language professes. Institutional history is not, however, a simple tribunal of doctrinal truth. The fact that a teaching was associated with harmful conduct

does not automatically show that the teaching logically entails the harm; careful analysis must distinguish implication, misuse, historical association, and contingent application. Nevertheless, a doctrine whose defenders refuse to consider its institutional consequences has not fully examined its operative meaning.

Provide a deeper account of responsible judgment [11,12]. Knowing is not the passive possession of authoritative propositions but a structured activity involving inquiry, understanding, and reflective assessment. Historical consciousness matters because the questions posed by an age and the conceptual resources available to it affect the form of its answers. Lonergan does not thereby dissolve objectivity into historical perspective; he asks how objectivity is achieved through responsible cognitional activity. The proposed CSRTDD is considerably more limited than Lonergan's comprehensive method. Its possible originality lies in giving a particular evaluative problem a documented sequence of judgments, not in discovering that historical interpretation or critical self-examination is necessary for theology.

Further complicates the aspiration to neutral appraisal by showing that rational inquiry takes place within traditions that supply their own questions, standards, and conceptions of excellence [13]. This observation is especially important when religious communities disagree about revelation, authority, and the grounds of moral knowledge. A purportedly universal test may merely reproduce the premises of one intellectual culture. Yet the tradition-constituted character of inquiry does not entail that traditions cannot learn from their failures or from encounters with rivals. The CSRTDD must accordingly distinguish internal intelligibility from broader argumentative defensibility. A proposal may be consistent with inherited standards while remaining poorly supported in its historical or empirical claims; conversely, a proposal may be philosophically attractive without possessing a credible developmental relation to the tradition it purports to interpret. Responsible appraisal must consider both dimensions without collapsing either into the other.

4. Critical Synthetic Realism: Reality, Knowledge, and Interpretation

Critical Synthetic Realism begins from an ontological distinction that is easily stated but difficult to maintain consistently: what is real is not identical with what a person or community presently believes to be real. Joins this realist commitment to the claim that human knowing is mediated by fallible concepts, interpretive histories, and social institutions [12]. The result is neither an assertion of exhaustive access to reality nor a reduction of reality to discourse. Distinction between the intransitive objects of inquiry and the transitive production of knowledge offers an illuminating parallel. Scientific accounts can change because human theories are revisable, without implying that the objects investigated are manufactured by each successive theory [14]. The analogy is philosophical rather than evidential: it does not establish the truth of a religious claim merely because its proponent adopts realism.

For analytical purposes three dimensions must be kept separate. Ontology concerns what exists or obtains independently of the act of judging; epistemology concerns the justification of judgments; hermeneutics concerns the interpretation and transmission of meaning. The truth of a doctrinal claim cannot be inferred directly from the authority that promulgates it, even though reliable testimony and institutional expertise may contribute to its justification. Nor can the existence of objective truth establish that a particular community has understood it adequately. Reminds us that interpretation takes place within historically formed horizons, while shows why a text's significance cannot be reduced to a simple transcription of its initial circumstances [15,16]. Accordingly, verbal identity need not secure conceptual identity, and changes of vocabulary need not imply changes of referent. Every serious dispute about development must first reconstruct the propositions actually at issue.

Fallibilism supplies the critical discipline of this realism. Challenged the view that scientific theories are conclusively established by accumulated confirmations, although theological claims are not generally falsifiable in the same manner as experimental hypotheses [17]. The transferable lesson is not a universal demand for laboratory verification, but a refusal to treat the desire to preserve a belief as evidence for that belief. In turn, contests the assumption that rational religious belief must always rest upon publicly shared inferential premises [18]. This challenge prevents epistemic accountability from degenerating into an unargued evidentialism. The CSRTDD therefore requires differentiated warrants: historical claims invite historical inquiry, empirical assertions invite relevant empirical research, philosophical conclusions require argument, and theological propositions must disclose the revelatory and interpretive premises upon which they depend. A theological claim may remain disputed without becoming irrational; it cannot claim accountability while concealing the kind of warrant it invokes.

The concepts of Epistemic Fracture and Epistemic Sovereignty extend the inquiry to the conditions under which knowledge is produced and corrected. Asongu's account of epistemic fracture identifies distortions in the acquisition, interpretation, and circulation of knowledge [5]. The term should be reserved for systematic impediments rather than used as a synonym for disagreement. Analysis of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice helps explain how persons can be disadvantaged specifically in their capacities as knowers, while shows how organized criticism can contribute to intellectual objectivity [19,20]. An institution may preserve a consensus through rigorous deliberation, or it may preserve it by systematically excluding inconvenient evidence and discrediting competent dissent. The persistence of agreement has a different epistemic significance in these two circumstances.

Epistemic Sovereignty names the corresponding responsibility of persons and communities to exercise disciplined judgment rather than surrender that judgment to coercion or unexamined authority. It does not imply that each individual is intellectually self-sufficient or that expertise is dispensable. Human inquiry necessarily depends upon testimony, training, and accumulated knowledge. The distinction is between authority that makes reasons available for scrutiny and authority that substitutes status

for reasons. In doctrinal controversies, this means that defenders and critics alike must be prepared to identify their assumptions, answer serious objections, and recognize when evidence does not warrant a decisive conclusion. A framework that demands corrigibility of inherited doctrine must apply the same demand to its own categories and procedures.

5. The Formal Test: Necessary Conditions and Comparative Criteria

The methodological proposal rests on a distinction between eligibility and comparative merit. A doctrinal change should not be certified as an authentic development simply because it scores well on a collection of attractive characteristics. Some failures are logically prior to such comparisons. A formulation that depends upon an unresolved contradiction in its central claims, systematically misrepresents the evidence on which it relies, or forecloses every meaningful avenue of criticism cannot become epistemically legitimate merely by possessing historical pedigree or appealing ethical consequences. The CSRTDD therefore begins with three noncompensatory conditions: ontological coherence, epistemic accountability, and critical corrigibility. Their satisfaction does not prove the doctrine true; it permits the inquiry to proceed to the question of comparative developmental adequacy.

Ontological coherence requires the evaluator to reconstruct the candidate's claims precisely enough to identify their intended referents, their logical relations, and the background assumptions on which they depend. A contradiction exists when incompatible propositions are affirmed in the same respect, not whenever historical texts employ different language. The evaluator must therefore distinguish contradiction from differences of scope, conceptual framework, application, and terminology. Epistemic accountability requires the proponents of a development to identify the appropriate grounds for their assertions, confront relevant contrary evidence, and distinguish the force of an authority claim within a tradition from the force of an argument addressed to those outside it. Critical corrigibility requires responsiveness to warranted criticism of interpretation, rationale, and contingent assumptions. Even communities that regard some propositions as irreformable must explain how the content and scope of those propositions are identified and why proposed reconciliations with other teachings are intellectually defensible.

Let D denote a candidate development and O(D), E(D), and C(D) the judgments that it satisfies ontological coherence, epistemic accountability, and critical corrigibility, respectively. The formal admissibility rule is $A(D) = O(D) \wedge E(D) \wedge C(D)$. For a simplified binary representation this is equivalent to $A(D) = O(D) \times E(D) \times C(D)$, with each term taking the value zero or one. Actual historical evaluation, however, requires a third status: unresolved. When evidence is insufficient to determine a necessary condition, judgment is suspended rather than converted into a failure. The distinction is indispensable because an absence of demonstrated justification is not always a demonstration of falsity, and scholarly uncertainty should not be disguised as decisive classification.

Only an admissible candidate proceeds to the four comparative criteria. Historical continuity asks whether the proposed formulation preserves or defensibly reconstructs the constitutive concerns of the tradition; interdisciplinary integration asks whether relevant external knowledge has been responsibly considered without reducing theology to another discipline; ethical consistency asks whether the formulation and its implications withstand explicitly defended moral reasoning; and explanatory adequacy asks whether the proposal clarifies difficulties, avoids ad hoc qualifications, and improves understanding relative to alternatives. These criteria overlap in practice, and their use requires vigilance against double counting. They are not four independent instruments that directly measure truth. They organize judgments that remain interpretive, contestable, and dependent upon the evidence made available.

6. Scoring, Weights, and the Limits of Quantification

The original CSRTDD assigns historical continuity a weight of 25%, interdisciplinary integration 20%, ethical consistency 30%, and explanatory adequacy 25% [1]. This distribution is retained here to preserve fidelity to the author's initial proposal. The greater weight accorded to ethical consistency reflects the significant consequences that doctrinal formulations can have for human persons and institutions, but it does not establish that ethical considerations override all other forms of justification. The weights are methodological judgments, not empirically discovered constants, and their defensibility must be tested through alternative scenarios and interdisciplinary critique. In particular, the significance of historical continuity may differ when the object of inquiry is a Catholic magisterial definition rather than a Buddhist philosophical interpretation or a jurisprudential development within Islam.

Criterion	Weight	Principal question
Historical continuity	25%	Is the development intelligibly related to constitutive sources and commitments?
Interdisciplinary integration	20%	Does it engage relevant external knowledge without methodological confusion?
Ethical consistency	30%	Are its moral premises and implications coherently defended?
Explanatory adequacy	25%	Does it clarify difficulties and improve upon relevant alternatives?

Each criterion is rated on a provisional scale from zero to four: zero indicates deficient support, one weak support, two moderate support, three strong support, and four very strong support. Let H, I, M, and X denote these four ratings. The composite score is S(D) = 25[0.25H(D) + 0.20I(D) + 0.30M(D) + 0.25X(D)]. This yields a maximum of 100 and can be applied only after the necessary conditions are satisfied. Following the original proposal, scores of 85–100 indicate strongly supported development; 70–84.99 indicate provisionally supported development; 50–69.99 indicate contested development; and scores below 50 indicate insufficient comparative support. The thresholds are exploratory conventions, not calibrated empirical boundaries, and they should never be read as probabilities of theological truth.

A further caution concerns the mathematics of ordinal judgment. Ratings from zero to four identify ordered categories, but an additive formula treats the differences among categories as approximately comparable. Such a convention may be useful for organizing discussion, yet it does not acquire interval-scale validity merely by being written as an equation. Evaluators must therefore preserve the qualitative reasons underlying every score and examine whether a conclusion changes when weights or ratings are altered. Where plausible choices yield substantially different classifications, the responsible outcome is not to select the most congenial score but to report methodological instability. The principal achievement of formalization is the exposure of assumptions that otherwise remain hidden in prose.

7. An Illustrative Application: Catholic Teaching on Religious Freedom

The movement from nineteenth-century Catholic political teaching to the Second Vatican Council's declaration Dignitatis Humanae provides a demanding test because it combines a recognizable development in moral and political language with genuine disputes about continuity. Pius IX's, read in its historical setting and alongside associated condemnations of liberal political propositions, expressed serious opposition to particular accounts of religious liberty and the relationship between Church and state [21]. Dignitatis Humanae affirmed a right to immunity from coercion in religious matters, grounded in human dignity, while preserving the duty to seek religious truth [22]. These formulations should not be compared as isolated slogans. Their respective understandings of religious indifferentism, conscience, civil jurisdiction, and the obligations of political communities must be reconstructed before their doctrinal relationship can be assessed.

The strongest continuity argument distinguishes the objective truth of a religious proposition from the civil authority to compel assent to it. On this account, an obligation to seek truth does not logically imply that the state may force persons to adopt a particular religious confession, and the conciliar development clarifies the moral and political implications of responsible religious agency. The strongest discontinuity objection replies that earlier statements addressed legal and political arrangements themselves, not merely the metaphysical status of religious truth. The issue cannot be resolved by asserting that a distinction exists; the distinction must explain the relevant earlier propositions without suppressing their historical meaning. The CSRTDD contributes by specifying where the argument must occur, rather than predetermining its outcome through ecclesiastical loyalty or contemporary political preference.

For a demonstration of the procedure, suppose that the three necessary conditions are provisionally satisfied and that an evaluator assigns historical continuity 2.5, interdisciplinary integration 3.5, ethical consistency 4.0, and explanatory adequacy 3.5 on the four-point scale. Under the original weights the score is $25[(0.25 \times 2.5) + (0.20 \times 3.5) + (0.30 \times 4.0) + (0.25 \times 3.5)] = 85.00$. The result lies at the lower boundary of the strongly supported category. These are hypothetical ratings, not findings from a historical study or an expert panel. Their value is pedagogical: they reveal which considerations drive the classification and show how a scholar who contests the continuity score or the ethical premise can challenge the result in a specific and reviewable manner.

Criterion	Illustrative rating	Weight	Weighted contribution
Historical continuity	2.5 / 4	0.25	0.625
Interdisciplinary integration	3.5 / 4	0.20	0.700
Ethical consistency	4.0 / 4	0.30	1.200
Explanatory adequacy	3.5 / 4	0.25	0.875
Total		1.00	3.400 × 25 = 85.00

Sensitivity analysis illustrates why the composite should not be mistaken for a measurement of doctrinal truth. Under equal weights the same illustrative ratings yield 84.38; under a continuity-focused distribution of 55%, 10%, 15%, and 20%, the result falls to 75.63. The candidate remains comparatively strong, but it crosses a classification boundary under a modest change from the original weighting scheme. A serious application would therefore report the score together with the range of outcomes produced by defensible alternatives, document the evidence supporting each criterion, and invite independent evaluations from scholars with differing historical and theological commitments. The example does not certify Dignitatis Humanae as metaphysically true. It shows how the reasons for a judgment can be made more transparent and more vulnerable to disciplined criticism.

8. The Scope of the Method Beyond Catholic Christianity

A philosophical framework claiming relevance to objective truth cannot restrict its standards of responsible inquiry to a single ecclesial institution without further justification. This does not mean that the histories of Catholic doctrine, Islamic jurisprudence, Jewish interpretation, and Buddhist philosophy are interchangeable. Each tradition possesses distinctive accounts of authority, continuity, argument, and the objects of religious knowledge. The CSRTDD should therefore be treated as a potentially transferable architecture whose application requires reconstruction of the intellectual practices of the tradition under examination. A comparative test that simply assumes Newman's understanding of organic continuity as universally normative would fail its own demand for epistemic accountability.

Islamic jurisprudential traditions provide a case in point. The relation between inherited legal schools, interpretive authority, and independent reasoning has a complex history that resists the assumption of either intellectual immobility or unlimited revision. Reconstructs the development of Islamic legal theories in ways that could inform a tradition-specific application of the test [23]. Jewish interpretive traditions similarly require attention to the authority of texts, rabbinic reasoning, and communal practice, rather than a simple transposition of Catholic magisterial categories. Buddhist philosophy raises a more fundamental ontological question. Nāgārjuna's critique of intrinsic existence, as presented in translation and commentary, challenges any simplistic identification of realism with a substantialist metaphysics [24]. If CSR is to support serious cross-traditional inquiry, ontological coherence must refer to the intelligibility and argumentative defensibility of a proposal, not to its conformity with an ontology assumed in advance by Christian evaluators.

These examples also disclose the limits of the word development. Some transformations may be better described as reinterpretation, reconstruction, reform, or departure. Historical continuity can help distinguish these categories, but it cannot establish the truth of the underlying metaphysical commitments. The strongest claim available to the CSRTDD is consequently modest and important: it offers a disciplined way to disclose what different evaluators take to count as evidence of progress, and to identify where disagreement concerns historical facts, conceptual relations, moral premises, or claims of authority. That contribution would be undermined if the framework presented its own inherited categories as neutral descriptions of every religious tradition.

9. Quantum Physics as a Limited Epistemological Analogy

Quantum physics enters this argument only through a carefully bounded analogy. Twentieth-century developments in atomic theory challenged the expectation that physical reality could be adequately represented through every familiar category of classical mechanics. Emphasized the relation between experimental arrangements and the description of phenomena, while examined the conceptual transformation required by modern physics [25,26]. Their work offers a reminder that successful inquiry may require the revision of deeply entrenched representational habits. The lesson for CSR is that the transformation of a conceptual framework need not imply that reality itself has been created or changed by the act of reformulation.

The analogy must not be confused with an evidential argument for theological propositions. Quantum mechanics possesses mathematical structures and experimentally assessable predictions that have no straightforward counterpart in most doctrinal controversies. Nor does the quantum measurement problem establish that consciousness creates physical reality, that contradiction is permissible in theological reasoning, or that all interpretations are equally warranted. To draw any of those conclusions would be to violate the very epistemic accountability that CSR demands. The philosophical value of the analogy is therefore limited to the distinction between an investigated reality and the conceptual resources by which investigators attempt to describe it. It illustrates the possibility of revisable understanding; it does not supply a scientific warrant for doctrinal truth.

10. Objections, Methodological Risks, and the Burden of Validation

A first objection concerns revelation and authority. If a community believes that a teaching is divinely revealed and irreformable, the demand for corrigibility may appear to place human reason above divine truth. The response is not to deny revelation in advance but to distinguish a claimed revelatory reality from the human acts by which a community identifies, formulates, and applies it. Even the judgment that a proposition has been irreformably taught requires interpretation of its content and scope. The CSRTDD therefore examines human judgments about revelation without claiming to sit in judgment over divine reality itself. This distinction does not resolve every conflict, especially where an institution identifies its interpretation with the content of revelation. It does, however, prevent the appeal to divine authority from automatically ending philosophical inquiry into what has actually been asserted.

A second objection concerns relativism and the alleged universality of the method. If all knowledge is historically situated, why should CSR's preferred criteria be privileged over those of a rival tradition? The answer must be argumentative rather than declarative. Coherence, accountable reasoning, and responsiveness to criticism are proposed as norms that permit the comparison and correction of claims, not as propositions exempt from debate. Their applicability must be demonstrated in difficult cases, including those where competing metaphysical commitments are deeply entrenched. A third objection concerns ethical bias. Giving moral consistency the highest weight may import contemporary ideological preferences into the evaluation of older teachings. The safeguard is to require the explicit defense of normative premises, to distinguish moral argument from popularity, and to test the robustness of conclusions under alternative weights. No score should conceal a disputed account of human dignity or justice.

A fourth objection concerns false precision. An additive index can lend numerical authority to interpretive judgments that remain contested and partly ordinal. A score of 85 does not mean that a

proposition has an 85% chance of being true, and a high degree of agreement among evaluators would establish procedural reliability rather than correspondence with reality. The appropriate response is to present scores as provisional decision aids, preserve the arguments supporting them, and report uncertainty. A fifth objection is more fundamental: a coherent, ethically appealing, and historically continuous doctrine may still be false. This objection succeeds against any claim that the CSRTDD is a sufficient truth detector. It does not succeed against the narrower claim that the framework can distinguish more and less responsibly justified proposals and can clarify the grounds upon which scholars disagree.

The next phase of research should therefore examine reliability before making stronger claims about the framework's validity. Independent scholars in historical theology, philosophy, ethics, and comparative religion could evaluate the same contested cases using a shared rubric, with the evidential record and weighting assumptions specified in advance. Their assessments could be compared for inter-rater agreement, disciplinary patterns, sensitivity to criterion definitions, and susceptibility to double counting. Historical studies should also test whether the framework distinguishes clarification, legitimate reform, substantive contradiction, and insufficiently supported innovation in ways that illuminate rather than merely reproduce prior commitments. These investigations would not yield a mechanical demonstration of metaphysical truth; they would establish whether the proposed method improves the transparency, consistency, and critical quality of doctrinal judgment.

11. Conclusion

The enduring problem of doctrinal development is not that human beings change their minds about ultimate matters. It is that communities committed to truth must decide when such change represents a more adequate apprehension of their object and when it compromises what they have reason to preserve. Augustine and Aquinas make intelligible the distinction between reality and finite understanding; Vincent and Newman illuminate continuity amid historical transformation; Congar and Lonergan draw attention to reform, institutions, and responsible judgment; and critical realism clarifies why objective reference need not imply conceptual finality. Critical Synthetic Realism seeks to hold these insights together without collapsing truth into institutional authority or historical novelty. Its principal methodological contribution is the claim that the minimum conditions of responsible judgment must be distinguished from the comparative considerations through which developmental strength is assessed.

The CSRTDD therefore requires coherence, accountable justification, and corrigibility before it permits historical, interdisciplinary, ethical, and explanatory considerations to be weighed. Its numerical procedure is deliberately subordinate to the interpretive argument that sustains it, and its classifications remain provisional until supported by rigorous case studies and independent evaluation. Its broader ambition is neither to abolish the authority of tradition nor to enthrone contemporary opinion, but to cultivate the intellectual conditions under which a tradition can preserve what is defensible, correct what has been inadequately understood, and acknowledge what remains uncertain. Fidelity to truth cannot be reduced to the preservation of inherited words; neither can progress be identified with the substitution of new ones. Authentic doctrinal development, if the term is to retain philosophical force, is disciplined growth in understanding under the claims of reality, reason, historical responsibility, and human dignity [27-29].

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