
The Benedictine Beda Mayr (1742-1794) was an important practitioner of an Enlightenment Roman Catholic monasticism which has frequently been omitted from accounts of the period. That the two works edited in this volume were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books certainly contributed to the neglect of Mayr’s work, as did their publication in the year of the French Revolution and the rise of Ultramontane Catholicism. However, as Ulrich Lehner points out, his contemporaries valued Mayr as ‘a keen, enlightened, and pious thinker’ (p. xii). Lehner’s introduction (written in English) offers a brief account of the spread of Enlightenment ideas into Catholic circles, and places Beda Mayr in that context. Mayr was a well-qualified theologian who turned down offers of professorships at Dillingen, Ingolstaft and Salzburg, preferring to continue in his parish ministry and, later, as prior of his monastery. He became notorious in 1778 when a private letter to a friend was published without his knowledge under the title *The First Step towards the Future Reunification of the Catholic and Protestant Churches.* The pamphlet was placed in the Index of Prohibited Books in 1783. Despite the considerable scandal resulting from this pamphlet, Mayr continued to teach theology and went on to publish homilies, plays, and some short theological works, which found a favourable reception. His three-volume work, *Defense of Natural, Christian and Catholic Religion, according to the Needs of our Time,* was published between 1787 and 1789. The first two parts of this work were well received; the third, which incorporated a revised version of the *First Step* pamphlet, aroused considerable opposition and was also placed on the Index. It is this third part of Mayr’s major work (written in German) which Lehner has edited in this volume.

Lehner believes Mayr to have been ‘the first Catholic who tried to disprove the anonymous author of the *Wolfenbüttler Fragmente*, Hermann Samuel Reimarus. Mayr also sought to refute the works of Karl F. Barhdit and Andreas Riems (pp. xxvi-xxvii), and argued his case against Lessing (although Lehner suggests that Mayr fundamentally misunderstood Lessing; p. xlv). Lehner could have done more to unpack the import of Mayr’s *Defense* for readers unfamiliar with the themes of the German Enlightenment (simply translating the German titles of the key works to
which he refers might be a help for a non-German-speaking reader. He seems to assume that his readers will understand that the points at issue were early historical critical approaches to the teachings of Jesus, and in particular the status of the miraculous accounts found in the biblical text.

To conclude his introduction, Lehner offers a comprehensive summary of the third volume of Mayr’s Defense, that is, of the volume that he has edited (pp. xlv-lxxiii), but strangely with scarcely any indication of the content of the first two volumes (and irritatingly with cross references only to the pagination of the original text and not to the pagination of his edition). The single hint as to the content of the first two volumes is an aside that the second volume had proved Christianity to be the only true religion, and that the third volume develops that question, enquiring ‘whether there is only one authentic Christian denomination and whether membership in this one true Church is necessary to achieve salvation’ (p. xlvii; edition p. 25). Mayr’s focus in addressing this question is on the need for an infallible authority or judge in matters of faith, which he argues to be essential, given that hermeneutics can never yield certainty. Mayr thus privileges the Catholic principle that there must be an authoritative teacher with divine legitimacy over the Protestant principle that the sole source of authority is Scripture. To argue otherwise is to suggest, for Mayr, that ‘God left an important part of his revelation open to arbitrary interpretation’ (p. xlix; edition p. 39). It is also to argue a-historically, ignoring the importance of the living testimony about true faith which was offered by the Apostles and which continues to be offered by their successors. For Mayr, then, tradition is a vital aspect of discovering the correct interpretation of scripture.

However, Mayr does not equate tradition with doctrinal content, but with authentic witness. Following Vincent of Lérins, he affirms that tradition ‘is what all men have at all times and everywhere believed’ (p. liii; edition p. 81 and cf. p. 112). He then considers how the need for an infallible judge can be proved both from reason and from revelation. On the way, he pauses to reject the idea that the canonization process was infallible. Lehner points out that Mayr had no concept of doctrinal development; instead he argued that traditions must be given up if they did not conform to the criteria of Vincent of Lérins. The infallibility which is derived from revelation, however, is related to the Church: Mayr believed that as a corporate body the teachers of the Church (and here he does not seem only to be referring to bishops) could not fall into error, and that the Church could not err in matters of salvation. To this extent Mayr views the Church as infallible: its infallibility, since its aim is the certainty of salvation, ‘cannot