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Newman and Modernism

AN article entitled "Newman and the Catholic Modernist Movement" by Professor B. M. G. Reardon in the final issue of *The Church Quarterly* (July, 1971) prompted this attempt to discuss the same question and to add some more detail. John Henry Newman was not himself a Modernist and it would be wrong to revive the accusation or the claim that he was a Modernist before the event. The Letter to the Bishop of Limerick shows that Pius X was horrified at the suggestion that *Lamentabili* might be used to condemn a cardinal![1] At the same time, the importance of Newman's thought in the intellectual development of Father George Tyrrell or Baron Friedrich von Hügel is surely significant as are the personal links between Newman, Wilfrid Ward and von Hügel.[2] Some of the best discussions of Newman's theological significance at the end of the nineteenth century are by Ward who described W. J. Williams' *Newman, Pascal, Loisy and the Catholic Church* (London, 1906) as "the work of a man who has got a deep and absorbing hold on the more profound qualities of Newman's mind", and who welcomed Alfred Loisy's *L'Evangile et l'Eglise* as showing "a consummate knowledge of what Newman wanted and aimed at".[3]

Professor Reardon himself rightly begins by pointing out that the later works of Loisy or Tyrrell would have horrified Newman whose theological and biblical attitude was entirely orthodox and even traditional. But Reardon also illustrates that Léon Ollé-Laprune's doctrine of *moral certitude* provides a definite link between Newman and the philosophical Modernism of Maurice Blondel and Lucien Laberthonnière, and he argues that the Modernists propounded a new apologetic in a way that was anticipated by the author of the *Grammar of Assent*. According to Reardon, Newman was a forerunner of Modernism at least in this respect; his approach to dogma was thoroughly moralistic and he understood that religious consent must be *real* and not simply *notional*. Dogmas were not simply lifeless propositions or instruments of ecclesiastical authority, but possessed a vital significance of their own which an effective apologetic would reveal. Thus, on the question of the nature of faith, Reardon concludes that Newman anticipated an important and characteristic aspect of Modernism and actually influenced it.

At the same time, Reardon seems to underestimate the significance of Newman's distinction between the dogmatic principle and dogmatic formulas in this same context. According to Newman, the *Deposit of Faith* was not simply a list of articles or a series of propositions. The dogmatic principle was that supernatural truths were committed to human language and therefore imperfect, but necessary and definite

because divinely revealed.[4] The words expressed the idea and the idea represented the fact; dogma was the ecclesiastical expression of the fact which was to be believed. Christians were forced to speak as a result of heresy; their formulas were unfortunate necessities preserving the revealed truths, but though they were true, the Church was not commited to them.[5] Ecclesiastical confessions were true in so far as the human mind could embrace the truth, but they did not extend beyond the limited mind of man which expressed itself in views of aspects or relations. Consequently, dogmas were merely symbols of a divine fact which could not be adequately described or understood by a thousand propositions. Implicit knowledge was not "the explicit confession of the Divine Objects of Faith, as they are revealed to us under the Gospel".[6] Thus, Newman recognised the limitations of creeds and dogmas, while defending their validity and denying the theory that such formulas simply varied with time or place.

Reardon goes on to discuss an even more decisive element in Newman's thought as far as the Modernists were concerned, namely his theory of doctrinal development. Loisy and all the Modernists were originally influenced, as Buonaiuti pointed out, by Newman's conception of doctrinal development, though they later interpreted this in a more vital and dramatic way.[7] Reardon also mentions the significant fact that when Newman died in 1890, he was an aged and respectable cardinal whose name provided a safe patronage for younger scholars. These younger men could hardly have appealed to Ignaz von Döllinger or the older Liberal Catholics, whereas Newman was now beyond reproach and his example could be appealed to with safety. Be that as it may, by December 1896, Loisy was reading Newman "with enthusiasm" and described him as "the most open-minded theologian to have existed in the Church since Origen". He regarded Newman as "the great doctor of which Catholic theology in our day has need" and considered his approach to doctrinal development to be superior to that of either Adolf von Harnack or Auguste Sabatier. Of course, the Modernists went far beyond Newman in their understanding of doctrinal development to an extent which would no doubt have horrified him, but as Reardon puts it, "Newman was a writer whose words had overtones of meaning for those with ears to hear".

However, Reardon is also careful to point to important differences between Newman and the Modernists, and these would include his sense of respect for ecclesiastical authority and his more traditional theological approach as well as his more cautious attitude towards doctrinal development. Yet it is possible that Reardon again underestimates the importance of Newman's not-uncritical attitude towards the Roman authorities especially on questions of theological scholarship as well as ecclesiastical administration. It would seem worthwhile recalling some of Newman's remarks, especially since Doctor

Vidler appears to suggest that to be " extremely critical of papal and clerical authoritarianism " is a mark of the Modernist.[8]

In due course, Newman adopted a very critical attitude towards Rome; although the Rock of St. Peter enjoyed a pure and serene atmosphere on its summit, there was a great deal of Roman malaria at its foot.[9] English Catholics during the nineteenth century were suffering for the historical scandals in the Church which had been guilty of unfaithfulness, cruelty, hypocrisy, profligacy, mistaken policies, ill-advised measures, timidity, vacillation, inhumanity and narrowness.[10] Newman claimed that Catholics in England were under the " arbitrary, military power " of Propaganda which acted like a man of business with a civil service. Its attitude made any attempt to solve contemporary problems like fighting under the lash or with a chain on the arm.[11] Newman also feared that the attitude of the Ultramontanes might lead to hasty, inadequate or even ignorant ecclesiastical decisions and have a restricting effect on the Church itself. This last danger was described as a sort of " Novatianism ", an attitude of hopeless despair " trembling at freedom of thought ".[12]

Reardon regards Modernism as primarily a *critical* movement and he claims that Newman knew little of scientific biblical criticism. It is certainly true that Newman was not and could not have been as well informed in this sphere as some of his later contemporaries and the younger Modernists. But it would again be wrong to suggest that Newman failed to recognise the importance of biblical and historical criticism or the significance of new discoveries in science or history. Newman was never prepared to reject the findings of science or history, even when the Vatican Council defined the notion of biblical inspiration more precisely than before and considerably restricted the freedom which Catholics had previously enjoyed in dealing with biblical questions.[13] It was for this reason that Newman's essays *On the Inspiration of Scripture* were welcome by J. B. Hogan and Baron von Hügel, Maurice d'Hulst and Louis Duchesne. Hogan taught and influenced many of those involved in the Modernist crisis, while the correspondence between von Hügel and Father Ignatius Ryder following the publication of Newman's essays shows that at least at this time, both these men, if in different degrees, appreciated the writings of Loisy.[14]

A further point might also be made, though with some caution and hesitancy. There always seems to have been something of a liberal temper in Newman's theological attitude or approach in spite of his opposition to *liberalism* as such. This might simply result from his own intellectual honesty or sensitivity to other peoples difficulties, but it might also be the result of something more. Thus, he himself was accused of " liberalism " even before 1845 by more conservative divines[15] and he was uncomfortably conscious of the fact that some of his former disciples became " liberals ". Of course, one important reason for this was the fact that Newman's departure from

Oxford left a void and as Principal Shairp remarked, " Soon they began to look this way and that for new teachers, and to rush vehemently to the opposite extremes of thought ".[16] Nevertheless, in spite of considerable differences, there are, for example, some interesting similarities between Newman's theological attitude and that of the Liberal Anglicans, not least in their reaction to the optimism, utilitarianism and individualism of the preceding century, their opposition to French liberalism and a *rational* religion of *evidences,* and the common influence of Edmund Burke or S. T. Coleridge.[17] It is in this context that Newman's own distinction between the dogmatic principle and dogmatic formulas, and his recognition of the sacramental principle assume such importance.

Newman suspected the theological and historical attitudes of the Liberal Anglicans because of his commitment to the dogmatic principle and his understanding of Christianity as essentially historical. But as Professor Culler has pointed out, Newman was less severe in his criticisms of Dean H. H. Milman, for example, than many of his contemporaries and his criticisms were also based on different grounds.[18] Newman did not necessarily disagree with Milman's report of the facts but with his method of reporting them. This recalls Professor Chadwick's comment, that while Newman as a theologian vehemently distrusted the new school of historians, the historian in him could not help learning from them.[19] Newman also criticised the approach adopted by J. Abbott in *The Corner-Stone* which again emphasised the human aspect of Christ and resulted in a Socinian bias in his picture of Our Lord.[20] For apologetic reasons, both Milman and Abbott reduced the sacred history to the level of a human record, seeing the truth merely in its external aspect and with the eyes of an unbeliever.

Newman, on the other hand, believed that the great characteristic of Revelation was addition or substitution; things might look the same as before while in fact being very different. God could use the existing system of this world as the means of spiritual influences. A divine polity would not be established in isolation from the external world, God would use an already existing and developing one. He would not interfere with its natural development or dependence on the visible world but direct or modify the ordinary laws of nature and society. If He worked miracles, it would be without superseding the ordinary course of things. Within this sphere of divine providence, normal causes, political arrangements or the march of events could be seen as truly and clearly, or shown as convincingly, as if, in the case of the Israelites, the Angel or pillar of cloud had not been with them.

For Newman, to deny a spiritual agency in demoniacal possession because the facts could be explained by physical causes might easily lead to the denial that a doctrine was from Christ because it could be traced to a human origin. Both positions were based on the assump-

tion that the historically human could not be doctrinally divine, whereas Newman held the opposite. By confusing the external process with the hidden providence, natural instruments precluded the operation of grace, angels were described as mental impressions and Catholic truths were found to be platonic dogmas. Newman, on the other hand, was convinced that the supernatural could act through the natural. Thus, the rites or ceremonies of the chosen people might be paralleled, but their ordinances were divine and the others were not. He accepted the parallels between revealed and contemporary religions without difficulty and even argued that one of the ways in which God revealed Himself had been by giving the Church in the Old Testament, the power of receiving truths from alien peoples or other religions, and the ability to correct their errors or supply their defects. Furthermore, Newman admitted that the extent of this process was a historical question.

When Newman wrote the *Apologia*,[21] he also discussed the development of his notion of the mystical or sacramental principle, that the historically human could be doctrinally divine and an external appearance hide an internal reality or significance. The physical and historical world was the manifestation to the senses of realities greater than itself. Nature was a parable and scripture was an allegory. There had been a divine dispensation granted to the Jews, but there had also been a dispensation in favour of the Gentiles. Pagan literature, philosophy or mythology, properly understood, were a preparation for the Gospel. First one disclosure and then another led to the full manifestation of the whole evangelical doctrine and there would be further or deeper disclosures of truths still under the veil of the letter, to be revealed in their time. The visible world was still without its divine interpretation, but the Church in the sacraments and hierarchical appointments would remain until the end of the world as a symbol of those heavenly facts filling eternity; its mysteries being but the expression in human language of truths to which the human mind was unequal.

As Wilfrid Ward pointed out, for Newman, what was directly known in this world of appearances was merely the shadow and sign of the whole Reality which could only be known in part. The rites, dogmatic formulas and external organisations of the Church were the shadows and signs of an objective reality embodied in an existing system with its own laws of development. In order to fully obtain the Catholic *ethos* and to share in the Catholic life, it was necessary to be part of the historical Church. Membership of the Church was essential to inheriting its past and influencing its future. Institutions had a quasi-personality and formative character of their own which was separate from, though conveyed through, their living institutions and which tended to impress its counterpart on the members. This spirit was created by and communicated to individual personalities, but was preserved by external rules or rites, formulas and traditions. This

external framework was the visible *umbra et imago* of the founder's invisible spirit. The Real was the personal or quasi-personal essence behind the sensible framework.

The recipient of personal influence through channels only partially capable of analysis, gained in turn a power of perception defying analysis. Newman regarded the faith of the Christian and the grasp of the educated man as such a result. He compared them to the action of the mind on sensible impressions, converting a multitude of sensations into a coherent whole to which bodily unity was ascribed. Faith realised an objective whole in a mass of religious impressions. The illative sense regarded a field of knowledge as a combined unity, not as isolated aspects. In each case, the individual was made aware of the whole beyond the sum of impressions, passing on to the Reality which the combined impressions merely suggested and were but the shadows or signs.[22]

These and similar passages would seem to provide further evidence in support of Reardon's conclusion that "Newman was a writer whose words had overtones of meaning for those with ears to hear". But a basic difficulty in discussing a subject like "Newman and Modernism" results from the fact that neither Newman nor the Modernists were monolithic thinkers. There were several different and distinct forms of Modernism — "biblical", "theological", "philosophical", "historical", "political" and "institutional", and it was possible to accept one and reject another. Professor Jemolo believed that the only common elements were a rejection of that unconditional obedience in all things which the Roman authorities had come to expect and an over-confidence in contemporary developments;[28] Newman might well be expected to sympathise with the former position, but he would certainly have rejected the latter. Newman's ultimate significance in the history of Modernism should probably be seen within the wider context of the significance of nineteenth century Liberal Catholicism, and it could be that the basic point of agreement between Newman and the Modernists, as well as between some of the Modernists themselves, was in their common desire for a more "open" Church.

NOTES

[1] H. F. Davis, "The Catholicism of Cardinal Newman", *John Henry Newman: Centenary Essays* (London, 1945), pp. 38-39.

[2] See also, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, vol. XXXVIII no. 4, (October, 1971), pp. 348-57. Further personal links are also evident in the claim that John XXIII, who was himself suspected of Modernism, partly learnt of Newman's ideas through Italian Modernists like Ernesto Buonaiuti. F. M. Willam, *Vom jungen Angelo Roncalli zum Papst Johannes XXIII* (Innsbruck, 1967) pp. 64, 68, 77, 86, 151-2.

[3] A. R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (London, 1961), p. 184. *Dublin Review*, vol. 141 (1907), p. 13. See also, W. Ward, *William George Ward and the Oxford Movement* (London, 1889), pp. 380ff. *Problems and Persons* (London, 1903), pp. 283-300.

[4] H. M. de Achaval, " Theological Implications in the *Apologia* ", in, V. F. Blehl and F. Connolly, *Newman's Apologia: A Classic Reconsidered* (New York, 1964), pp. 133-4. H. F. Davis, " Newman and the Theology of the Living Word ", *Newman Studien*, vol. VI (1964), pp. 172-3. *Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1906), pp. 59-60.

[5] *Arians of the Fourth Century* (London, 1901), pp. 36-7, 146-50. *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (London, 1868), vol. II, pp. 27-9, vol. V, p. 145.

[6] *Oxford University Sermons* (London, 1906), p. 337: see also, pp. 64-5.

[7] C. Nelson and N. Pittenger (edd.), *Pilgrim of Rome* (Aberdeen, 1969), pp. 17, 32. On one occasion, Buonaiuti referred to Tyrrell as " almost a re-incarnation of Newman ", *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

[8] A. R. Vidler, *A Variety of Catholic Modernists* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 138.

[9] *Difficulties of Anglicans* (London, 1901), vol. II, p. 297.

[10] *Sermons on Various Occasions* (London, 1900), pp. 144-5, 202-3.

[11] W. Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (London, 1912), vol. I, pp. 560, 588.

[12] *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 127.

[13] *Annuarium Historiae Conciliorum* (1969), pp. 388-390.

[14] J. H. Newman, *On the Inspiration of Scripture* (London, 1967), pp. 36-7, 43. *Downside Review*, vol. 89 (1971), pp. 34-6.

[15] H. Tristram, " In the Lists with the Abbé Jager ", *Newman: Centenary Essays*, pp. 217-18.

[16] Ward, *Newman*, I, p. 77.

[17] D. Forbes, *The Liberal Anglican Idea of History* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 1.

[18] A. D. Culler, *The Imperial Intellect* (New Haven, 1955), pp. 249, 313.

[19] O. Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 100.

[20] T. Erskine, *Remarks on the internal evidence for the truth of Revealed Religion* (Edinburgh, 1820) and J. Abbott, *The Corner-Stone* (London, 1834) were discussed by Newman in *Tract 73*, reprinted in *Essays Critical and Historical* (London, 1919), vol. I, pp. 30-99. His review of Milman can be found in vol. II, pp. 186-248. See also, *Tract 85*, reprinted in *Discussions and Arguments* (London, 1891), pp. 109-253.

[21] *Apologia pro vita sua* (London, 1905), pp. 26-30. See also, *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 32 (1970), pp. 532-35.

[22] *Problems and Persons*, pp. 260-82.

[23] A. C. Jemolo, *Church and State in Italy* (Oxford, 1960), p. 113.

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(*Continued from page 334*)

[16] *Ibid.*, 14.

[17] *Ibid.*, 31.

[18] *Ibid.*, 32 ff.

[19] *Ibid.*, 40.

[20] *Ibid.*, 51.

[21] G. Gould, *op. cit.*, 319.

[22] E. A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers, op. cit.*, 81.

[23] *Ibid.*, 83.

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