

FROM IMAGES TO TRUTH: NEWMAN ON REVELATION AND FAITH

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BEFORE HIS DEATH one hundred years ago, on August 11, 1890, John Henry Newman asked that the words "ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem" be inscribed on his tombstone. This epitaph aptly summarizes both his aspiration to the higher world of the divine and his keen sense of its elusiveness. Many years earlier, in a lecture to students of medicine at the Catholic University of Dublin, Newman drew a contrast between the strong and obvious evidences that sustain the physical sciences and the "delicate, fragile, and almost evanescent" intimations that put us in touch with the divine. These "faint shadows and tracings," which can be so easily brushed aside by irreverent minds, were prized by Newman as reflections of the eternal.¹ As a young tutor at Oxford he had learned from Clement, Origen, and their Alexandrian successors to look on the exterior world of nature and history as "but the manifestation to our senses of realities greater than itself."² Nature, for him, was a parable; Scripture, an allegory; and pagan mythology, properly understood, a preparation for the gospel. The mysteries of Christianity, in Newman's view, were "but the expressions in human language of truths to which the human mind is unequal."³ These are some of the constant themes that underlie Newman's lifelong preoccupation with the questions of revelation and faith.

Newman's career was a long one, involving many changes of religious opinion. He wrote in different genres, and often with a view to answering particular adversaries. Thus it would be unrealistic to expect that his statements and terminology would be perfectly uniform. The remarkable thing, however, is the degree of consistency in the fundamental intuitions about revelation and faith pervading the whole Newman corpus.

REVELATION AS IDEA

Although Newman was convinced that revelation is "the initial and essential idea of Christianity,"^{3a} he nowhere gave a comprehensive treat-

¹ *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1982) 387.

² *Apologia pro vita sua*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 36.

³ *Ibid.* 37.

^{3a} *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, Preface to 3rd edition (1877) 1 (London: Longmans, Green, 1911) xlvii.

ment to the theme. Indeed, some scholars have deplored what they consider to be his lack of an adequate theology of revelation.⁴ One might be tempted, on the basis of particular statements here and there, to think that Newman regarded revelation as an inner experience, or as a matter of historical fact, or as identical with the teaching of Scripture, or as a system of dogma. None of these answers, in my opinion, is fully accurate. Most characteristically, Newman speaks of revelation either as an "original impression" made on the mind by God or as an "idea" that God gives of Himself.

When he calls revelation an impression, as he occasionally does in his Anglican writings,⁵ Newman's terminology is evidently influenced by David Hume, who meant by an impression an immediate datum of experience, more vivid and forceful than ideas generated in reflection. In applying this term to Christian revelation, Newman presumably wishes to indicate that as sense impressions correspond to material objects from which they arise, so the perception that God gives of Himself in revelation is original, divinely produced, and conformed to the object it represents.

When he speaks of revelation as an idea, as he does increasingly after 1840, Newman is using the term "idea" in a rich but fluid sense, somewhat personal to himself.⁶ At one point he describes an idea as follows: "An idea, a view, an invisible object, which does not admit of more or less, a form, which cannot coalesce with anything else, an intellectual principle, expanding into a consistent harmonious whole,—in short, Mind, in the true sense of the word."⁷

In his 15th Oxford sermon and his *Essay on Development* Newman explains more fully what he means by an idea. He makes it clear that by an idea in this context he means an invisible principle that takes hold of the mind and becomes an active force leading to ever-new contemplation

⁴ Paul Misner, "Newman's Conception of Revelation and the Development of Doctrine," *Heythrop Journal* 11 (1970) 32-47, esp. 46-47. See also Nicholas Lash, *Newman on Development* (Shepherdstown, W.Va.: Patmos, 1975) 98.

⁵ *Newman's University Sermons: Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford 1826-43*, with introductory essays by D. M. MacKinnon and J. D. Holmes (London: SPCK, 1970) 320, 330, 334. The Oxford University Sermons are hereafter referred to as *OUS*.

⁶ John Coulson in his *Newman and the Common Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970) points out the similarities between Newman's use of the term "idea" and the earlier use of the term by Coleridge: "In speaking of the Christian *idea*, of the *idea* of the Church, or of the Trinity, Newman is using the term in a way which is strikingly similar to Coleridge's use of it as a realizing principle to which we must first make a fiduciary response as a whole before we can fully understand its implications" (61).

⁷ Newman, *My Campaign in Ireland* (1852) 250, as quoted by Lash, *Newman on Development* 169 n. 4.

of itself.⁸ Christian revelation as an idea, for Newman, has three leading attributes: it is comprehensive, living, and real.

In the first place, it is *comprehensive*. "Creeds and dogmas," he writes, "live in the one idea which they are designed to express, and which alone is substantive; and are necessary because the human mind cannot reflect upon that idea except piecemeal, cannot use it in its oneness and entirety, nor without resolving it into a series of aspects and relations."⁹ The unitary idea of Christianity underlies all its expressions, whether in doctrine, worship, or behavior. The "master vision," for Newman, "unconsciously supplies the mind with spiritual life and peace."¹⁰ Such is the idea, for Newman, that constitutes revelation itself.

Secondly, Christianity is a *living* idea. It takes hold of the minds in which it lodges. It establishes itself by entering into relations, whether friendly or hostile, with the prevalent opinions, principles, and institutions of the communities in which it dwells. It runs the risk of contamination from intercourse with human cultures, but is capable of remaining true to itself and of expanding through trial and error. In this connection Newman enunciates his famous axiom: "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."¹¹

Thirdly, Christian revelation is a *real* idea. As a Christian Platonist in the Alexandrian tradition, Newman rebelled against the conception that ideas are simply products of the mind. For him, the idea pre-exists. "The mind," he writes, "is below truth."¹² Through the appearances of nature and the symbols of Scripture, liturgy, and dogma, God communicates mysterious and heavenly truth to which the human mind is receptive but nevertheless unequal. The Christian idea is the living impression on the human mind made by the truth that, without change or alteration, communicates itself in various ways.¹³

The constant and essential element of Christianity, for Newman, is the image or idea of Christ, which Christ himself, through his preachers and witnesses, imprints on the minds of the faithful. In response to Edward Gibbon, Newman contends that the real cause of the success of the Christian movement in the Roman Empire was "the Image of Him who fulfils the one great need of human nature, the Healer of its wounds, the Physician of the soul."¹⁴ This central image, rather than the organi-

⁸ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green, 1906) I.1.4. References to this work are to chapter, section, and subsection numbers.

⁹ *OUS* 331-32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 322.

¹¹ *Development* I.1.7.

¹² *Ibid.* VIII.1.1.

¹³ Cf. *Apologia* (Svagic 36-37).

¹⁴ *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. Ian T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 299.

zation or the doctrinal system, was the vivifying idea of the Christian body and of individual believers, and the source of that zeal which Gibbon, the historian, so poorly comprehends.

REVELATION AND DOGMA

Newman amplifies his thought about the importance of submission to the revealed object when he discusses the "dogmatical principle."¹⁵ A passionate attachment to dogma is one of the constants of Newman's entire religious career. Recalling his conversion experience at the age of 15, he writes in the *Apologia*: "I fell under the influence of a definite creed, and received into my intellect impressions of dogma which, through God's mercy, have never been effaced or obscured."¹⁶ Some pages later he reflects:

From the age of fifteen dogma was to be the fundamental principle of my religion: I know of no other religion; I cannot enter into the idea of any other sort of religion; religion, as a mere sentiment, is to me a dream and a mockery. As well can there be filial love without the fact of a father as devotion without the fact of a Supreme Being.¹⁷

His lifelong battle, as he describes it in the *Apologia*, was with liberalism, by which he means "the antidogmatic principle and its developments."¹⁸ In his biglietto speech at Rome, when he received the office of cardinal, he summarized his life work as opposition to liberalism, or to the doctrine that "Revealed Religion is not a truth but a sentiment and a taste."¹⁹

Dogmas, for Newman, are not the essence of revelation; they are not to be confused with the idea itself. Nor are they, strictly speaking, additions to the idea. They articulate aspects that were already precontained implicitly in the idea. Because revelation always involves a dimension of tacit awareness, its contents can never be clearly and comprehensively spelled out. "The idea is not enlarged if propositions are added, nor impaired if they are withdrawn."²⁰ Dogmas are necessary in order to mediate the revelation to believers, and to give unity and direction to the community of faith. Newman deduces this necessity from the nature of revelation seen in relation to its human recipients. In *Tract 85* of the *Tracts for the Times*²¹ he reasons that God, if He gives a revelation, must

¹⁵ *Development VIII.1.1.*

¹⁶ *Apologia* 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Quotation from Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 721.

²⁰ *OUS* 336.

²¹ Reprinted in *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects* (new ed., London: Longmans, Green, 1891) 109-253.

communicate something intelligible, transmissible, and binding on the conscience of believers. The latitudinarian view that Christian faith does not involve the profession of a definite creed conflicts with the clear intent of Scripture to proclaim an imperative message and with the tenaciously dogmatic character of primitive Christianity.²²

But what precisely does Newman mean by dogma and how is it related to truth? In the *Essay on Development* he defines the principle of dogma as meaning "supernatural truths irrevocably committed to human language, imperfect because they are human, but definitive and necessary because given from above."²³ As this definition suggests, Newman was acutely conscious of the limitations of human language. It is a crude and fragile instrument, subject to many misinterpretations. But language is necessary, Newman held, because without it the impressions of divine truth could not be perpetuated and transmitted.²⁴ By an act of mercy comparable to the Incarnation itself, "the Almighty has condescended to speak to us so far as human thought and language will admit, by approximations."²⁵ But the truth is not identical with the language in which it is embodied. The most thoroughly received doctrines, for Newman, are the truth "only in as full a measure as our minds can admit it; the truth as far as they go, and under the conditions which human feebleness imposes."²⁶ "The mind," Newman wrote, "is more versatile and vigorous than any of its works, of which language is one."²⁷ Thus Newman was far from absolutizing the language of dogma.

It might be thought that Newman, with his acute sense of the frailty of language and of the historical mutations of doctrine, might embrace a relativistic position, allowing dogma to be totally recast as the Christian message entered into new cultures. Some of our contemporaries apparently wish that he had held this.²⁸ Newman, in fact, seems to have briefly entertained this possibility in an essay of 1839, but in re-editing it in 1871 he insisted that he had not advanced this hypothesis as his own, committed as he was to the view that doctrine develops "out of certain original and fixed *dogmatic truths*, which were held inviolate from first to last."²⁹

²² Cf. Robert E. O'Donnell, *Newman on Faith and Dogma: The Anglican Years* (unpublished STD dissertation, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1972) 338-39.

²³ *Development* VII.1.4.

²⁴ *OUS* 333.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 269.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 350.

²⁷ *Grammar of Assent* 232.

²⁸ Cf. Misner, "Newman on Revelation" 47 n. 1; also Lash, *Newman on Development* 99-101.

²⁹ *Essays Critical and Historical* 1 (5th ed., London: Longmans, Green, 1885) 288, note appended to 1871 edition. See also Robert G. Simons, *The Personal Realization of the Religious System: Revelation in Newman's Anglican Sermons, 1839-1843* (unpublished STD dissertation, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1976) 274-75.

Newman's reverent adherence to dogma coexisted always with a vivid realization of the mysterious character of revelation. "No revelation," he wrote, "can be complete and systematic, from the weakness of the human intellect; so far as it is not such, it is mysterious. When nothing is revealed, nothing is known, and there is nothing to contemplate or marvel at."³⁰ In other words, the mysteriousness of the divine grows in direct proportion, and not in inverse proportion, to the completeness of revelation.

In his early book *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833) Newman applied these principles to the doctrine of the Trinity. "The systematic doctrine of the Trinity," he maintained, "may be considered as the shadow, projected for the contemplation of the intellect, of the Object of scripturally-informed piety; necessarily imperfect, as being exhibited in a foreign medium, and therefore involving apparent inconsistencies or mysteries."³¹ The term "Son," when predicated of the Second Person in the Godhead, does not apply in its literal or material meaning, which implies physical generation, but it does express something properly true and should not be reduced to the purely metaphorical sense of "adoption."³²

Newman was acutely conscious of what is known today as the hermeneutics of dogmatic statements. Dogmas, in his view, can only be understood as articulations of the revealed idea, which they represent under partial aspects. They are, as he puts it, enlightened and, as it were, inhabited "by the sacred impression which is prior to them, which acts as a regulating principle, ever present, upon the reasoning; and without which no one has any warrant to reason at all."³³ As a living idea, revelation continually gives birth to new dogmatic insights. Thus "the Catholic dogmas are, after all, but symbols of a Divine fact, which, far from being compassed by those very propositions, would not be exhausted, nor fathomed, by a thousand."³⁴

As an Anglican Newman made an interesting distinction between two types of dogma. The "high doctrines" of the Trinity and the Incarnation, he maintained, are simply parts or aspects of the original revelation, whereas others, such as the doctrines of penance for postbaptismal sin, are developments. They too belong to revelation insofar as the revealed idea demands that its own consequences be affirmed.³⁵ The legitimacy of some of these secondary developments, such as the doctrine of purgatory, was, he noted, a point of controversy between the English Church and

³⁰ *Essays Critical* 1:41.

³¹ *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (new ed., London: Longmans, Green, 1895) 145.

³² *Ibid.* 229-30; cf. 209.

³³ *OUS* 334.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 332.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 329-30.

the Church of Rome, but both churches could affirm the principle of development itself.³⁶ In the *Essay on Development* Newman devotes an entire chapter to developments of this consequent character, among which he ranks papal primacy and some beliefs concerning Mary.³⁷ In calling attention to the special problems surrounding dogmas of this second type, Newman raised substantially the same question that scholastic theology has discussed under the rubric of the definability of virtually revealed truths as dogmas of the faith.

REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE

Newman drew a sharp contrast between the ways in which revelation is contained respectively in dogma and in Scripture. As an Anglican he accepted the thesis that all truths necessary to salvation are to be found in Scripture, and as a Catholic he acknowledged that the whole of revelation is in some sense contained in Scripture.³⁸ But even in his Anglican period he considered it necessary for Scripture to be supplemented by tradition. "I would not deny as an abstract proposition," he wrote, "that a Christian may gain the whole truth from the Scriptures, but would maintain that the chances are very seriously against a given individual."³⁹ For Newman Scripture is one of the principal media, and in some sense the primary medium, through which the revealed idea comes to the believer, but it is not the sole medium. The book, for Newman, is effective as an instrument in the hands of the believing community, "the Inspired Word being but a dead letter (ordinarily considered), except as transmitted from one mind to another."⁴⁰

In his book on the Arians Newman made the point that the language of Scripture does not satisfy the intellect, and that such is not its purpose. The biblical text is "addressed principally to the affections, and of a religious, not a philosophical character."⁴¹ It does not satisfy the intellect's "clamorous demand for a formal statement concerning the Object of our worship."⁴² Creeds and conciliar definitions are necessary to express in more intellectual terms what was antecedently grasped on a prereflexive level through the concrete language of Scripture. In his attack on latitudinarianism in *Tract 85* Newman concedes that one finds little dogmatic teaching in Scripture, but he insists that Scripture was never intended as a manual of doctrine. The inspired authors communicate their intimations of an unseen world by means of language that is

³⁶ Ibid. 320.

³⁷ *Development* IX; cf. IV.2-3.

³⁸ Günter Biemer, *Newman on Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967) 162.

³⁹ *Via Media* 1:158; cf. Lash, *Newman on Development* 89.

⁴⁰ *OUS* 94.

⁴¹ *Arians* 146.

⁴² Ibid.

not analytic and descriptive but allusive and evocative.⁴³ The Christian world of thought, Newman says elsewhere, is “the expansion of a few words uttered, as if casually, by the fishermen of Galilee.”⁴⁴ Prayerfully read, Scripture can impress on the reader a powerful realization that is fruitful in true judgments.⁴⁵ In his *Essay on Development* Newman argues at some length that the mystical interpretation of Scripture, as opposed to the literal, is the very badge of Catholic orthodoxy. If the whole Catholic faith is to be found in Scripture, he maintains, it cannot be found on the surface, nor can it be gained from Scripture without the aid of tradition.⁴⁶

Scripture, then, may not be taken alone as the source of Christian belief. Tradition is for Newman equal to Scripture both in dignity and importance; it stems from the apostles as inspired teachers and has existed in the Church from the beginnings.⁴⁷ “The systematic doctrine of the Trinity,” Newman asserts, “was given to the Church by tradition contemporaneously with those apostolic writings which are addressed more directly to the heart,” that is to say, the Scriptures.⁴⁸

CHRIST AS CENTER

Both as an Anglican and later as a Catholic, Newman held firm to the principle that “since Christ came no new revelation has been given.”⁴⁹ God, he grants, continues to speak to His people, but only to stand by what He has previously imparted and to assist the Church in its task of applying and explaining what had been given once for all.⁵⁰

Christ, while he may not be for Newman the sole mediator of revelation, brings together in himself all that God has been pleased to manifest of Himself in a diffuse way through other media of revelation even outside the biblical dispensation. The life of Christ, according to Newman, “collects the scattered rays of light which, in the first days of creation, were poured over the whole face of nature.”⁵¹ The incarnation of the Son of God, as attested by the Gospels, is the article of faith by which the Church stands or falls.⁵² Newman does not hesitate to speak of the Incarnation as the “central aspect of Christianity,” from which all other aspects of its teaching take their rise.⁵³ But Newman appends the caution that no leading principle, even the Incarnation itself, should be allowed to obscure the others. “There is no one aspect deep enough to exhaust

⁴³ *Discussions and Arguments* 147.

⁴⁴ *OUS* 317.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 318.

⁴⁶ *Development* VII.4.4.

⁴⁷ O'Donnell, *Newman on Faith and Dogma* 220.

⁴⁸ *Arians* 145.

⁴⁹ *OUS* 303.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 27.

⁵² *Ibid.* 35.

⁵³ *Development* I.1.3.

the contents of a real idea."⁵⁴ Thus we must return again to our original thesis, that revelation in its essential nature is not a fact or a doctrine but a real, living idea.

THE INWARD IMPRESSION

Insisting as he does that revelation is objective and that it became complete in apostolic times, Newman might be suspected of falling into a kind of dogmatic positivism or "extrinsicism."⁵⁵ This charge, however, would overlook his equally emphatic assertion that God continues to speak His word today and that the revealed idea in the mind of any believer is an "inward manifestation,"⁵⁶ an "inward impression."⁵⁷ The impression, however, comes from outside. It is not a pure datum of consciousness. Since we have no faculties for immediately perceiving what is revealed, the object must be mediated to us by language, on the testimony of inspired witnesses, themselves the recipients of an extraordinary grace.⁵⁸ Newman, therefore, refrains from saying that revelation is a matter of experience or a state of consciousness. He makes his position clear when he depicts an imaginary interlocutor as protesting: "To see and touch the supernatural with the eye of my soul, with its *own experience*, this is what I want to do." To this Newman retorts: "Yes, it is—You wish to 'walk *not* by faith, *but* by sight.' If you had *experience*, how would it be faith?"⁵⁹

FAITH AS ASSENT

Newman's doctrine of faith, which here comes into view, may be treated somewhat briefly because it is, so to speak, the mirror image of his doctrine of revelation, already surveyed. His conception of faith, like his conception of revelation, emphasizes submission to the givenness of God's word. Commenting on the statement in Hebrews that faith is "the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1), he states in his *Lectures on Justification*:

As sight contemplates form and colour, and reason the processes of argument, so faith rests on the divine word as the token and criterion of truth. . . . By faith then is meant the mind's perception or apprehension of heavenly things, arising

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Misner, "Newman on Revelation" 47; cf. Lash, *Newman on Development* 101-2.

⁵⁶ *OUS* 177.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 328.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 333.

⁵⁹ From Newman's letter of April 29, 1871, to William R. Brownlow, in *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. C. S. Dessain and T. Gornall, S.J. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) 25:324. On the basis of texts such as this I would prefer to avoid saying, as does O'Donnell, that for Newman "the faith experience results in an altered state of consciousness in which God is known experientially" (154; cf. 464).

from an instinctive trust in the divinity or truth of the external word, informing it concerning them.⁶⁰

In his *Essay on Development* he maintains the parallelism between faith and dogma. Many of the texts setting forth the doctrine of the Incarnation, he holds, implicitly teach "the principle of faith, which is the correlative of dogma, being the absolute acceptance of the divine Word with an internal assent, in opposition to the informations, if such, of sight and reason."⁶¹

For Newman it was highly important to establish that faith, notwithstanding its dogmatic character, was no mere notional assent. For it to be a real assent, involving conviction and commitment, its objects must be such as to "kindle devotion, rouse the passions, and attach the affections."⁶² Even though the believer does not directly experience the contents of faith, those contents must be presented in a concrete way accessible to the imagination.

In a crucial section of the *Grammar of Assent* Newman attempts to show how the contents of Christian faith can meet these criteria. He argues, first, that the feeling of conscience can impress the imagination with the picture of God as a supreme governor and judge.⁶³ He then goes on to show how the terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are for the believer concrete terms, adapted to excite images.⁶⁴ The Scriptures and the creeds, in which the Trinitarian faith is set forth, are addressed more to the imagination and to the affections than to the intellect.⁶⁵ Finally he shows how the Catholic, in assenting to the dogmas of the faith, is really submitting to the Church as the infallible oracle of truth.⁶⁶

Faith, therefore, may be defined as "the acceptance of what our reason cannot reach, simply and absolutely upon testimony."⁶⁷ As a reflective and critical thinker and as an apologist, Newman had to face the question whether it was reasonable and responsible to accept as true that which reason could not verify. Putting the objection as strongly as possible, Newman several times quotes John Locke to the effect that it is not only illogical but immoral to "entertain any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built on will warrant." Any "surplusage of assurance" beyond "the degrees of that evidence," Locke maintained, cannot be due to the love of truth.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1966) 252-53.

⁶¹ *Development* VII.1.4.

⁶² *Grammar* 64.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 70-82.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 87.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 90.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 98-102.

⁶⁷ *Essays Critical* 31.

⁶⁸ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) Book 4, chap. 19, "Of Enthusiasm," sec. 1; cf. Newman, *Development* VII.2.2-4; *Grammar* 108-9.

GROUNDS OF CREDIBILITY

One response to Locke's challenge was to maintain that the fact of Christian revelation could be rigorously proved by external evidences, such as prophecies and miracles. This was the course taken by the evidentialist school, typified by William Paley. Newman vigorously rejected this strategy because the proofs were in his judgment less than cogent, because the vast majority of Christians believed without being familiar with the proofs, and most of all because he considered that the search for rigorous proof generated a mentality inimical to faith. Faith, according to Newman, depended upon a religious attitude, involving earnest and heartfelt longing for the divine.⁶⁹

Approaching the question phenomenologically, Newman contended that faith presupposes certain moral dispositions. Only those with the requisite preparation of heart are in a position to judge the claims of religion. We are responsible for our faith because we are responsible for our likes and dislikes, our inclinations and repugnances.⁷⁰ Before we accept revealed religion we must be attentive to the voice of conscience, which brings us into communion with God as the one "to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear."⁷¹ To submit to the admonitions of conscience is already to go beyond the realm of the visible and the demonstrable and to tend by a kind of primordial faith to the unseen good.⁷² Newman even undertakes to spell out, on the basis of conscience, what he calls the creed of natural religion. It includes belief in a Supreme Power claiming our habitual allegiance, in a Judge to whom we are accountable, and in a future life with rewards and punishments.⁷³

Natural religion arouses sentiments and opinions that dispose us toward prayer, worship, and obedience to the divine. It begets in us a sense of our own guilt and need for forgiveness, and an eager hope of reconciliation.⁷⁴ One of the most important effects of natural religion, Newman adds, is the anticipation it creates that a revelation will be given.

It is difficult to put a limit to the legitimate force of this antecedent probability. Some minds will feel it to be so powerful as to recognize in it almost a proof without direct evidence, of the divinity of a religion claiming to be true, supposing its history and doctrine are free from positive objection, and there be no rival religion with plausible claims of its own.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ *Grammar* 272-75.

⁷² *OUS* 33.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 272.

⁷⁰ *OUS* 192.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 18-21.

⁷¹ *Grammar* 76.

⁷⁴ *Grammar* 269.

To explain the legitimacy of faith, therefore, Newman does not rely primarily on external evidences for Christianity such as prophecies and miracles. Preaching on the text, "We would see a sign from thee" (Mt 12:28), Newman warned against demanding evidence as a precondition of faith. "Let us venture to believe . . . and the evidence which others demand before believing, we shall gain more abundantly by believing."⁷⁶ "Evidences in general," he wrote in another place, "are not the essential groundwork of faith, but its reward."⁷⁷

In summary, then, faith depends very little on evidence. "It acts promptly and boldly on the occasion, on slender evidence, as if guessing or reaching forward to the truth, amid darkness or confusion."⁷⁸ The inquirer's antecedent desires and expectations color the evidence and give it a force not perceptible to those who treat the Almighty with dispassionateness, acting as judges rather than as suppliants.⁷⁹ Natural religion and supernatural grace may combine to produce within us a kind of instinct for discerning the truth of revelation. Faith is a venture insofar as the believer goes beyond what is demonstrable. The evidence, though not probative, is sufficient for those who are drawn by the cords of love. Thus Newman can say, "We believe because we love,"⁸⁰ and, several pages later, "Love, not reason, is the eye of faith."⁸¹ By "love" in these texts he does not mean the theological virtue of charity, which presupposes faith, but a devout inclination toward the source and goal of heavenly life.⁸²

Submission to this divinely given attraction does not depend, in Newman's estimation, on a prior proof that the inclination comes from on high. Even in matters of daily experience people rely confidently upon the dictates of common sense or upon spontaneous insights that defy logical analysis. "A peasant who is weather-wise may yet be simply unable to assign intelligible reasons why he thinks it will be fine tomorrow."⁸³ A military genius such as Napoleon is able to foresee the consequences of a maneuver without going through the calculations that others would require. Such clear presentiments of the truth, for Newman, are achieved by instinct, a term which he explains as meaning "a perception of facts without assignable media of perceiving."⁸⁴ The act of mind by which the simple believer submits to the gospel is "analogous to the

⁷⁶ *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) 1248.

⁷⁷ *OUS* 294.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 292-93.

⁷⁹ *Grammar* 274.

⁸⁰ *OUS* 236.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 238.

⁸² *Ibid.* 236 n. 4, appended to 1871 ed.; *Discussions and Arguments* 251-52, with note appended to 1872 ed.

⁸³ *Grammar* 214.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 216.

exercise of sagacity in a great statesman or general, supernatural grace doing for the uncultivated reason what genius does for them."⁸⁵

Newman meditated long and hard on the relationship between faith and reason. His progress toward a definitive position may be traced in his successive Oxford University Sermons, preached over the years from 1826 to 1843. As Newman noted in his preface to the third edition of these Sermons (1871), the question is differently answered according to the sense in which one is using the term "reason." Broadly speaking, three senses may be distinguished. If reason is taken in the first sense to mean inference based on secular maxims, reason and faith may be said to contradict each other. If reason means, in the second place, logical proof based on evident data, faith and reason are not contradictory, but faith goes beyond reason, since it rests more on presumptions than on evidence. Finally, if reason is taken to mean the process by which the mind advances legitimately from things known to new knowledge, faith may be called an exercise of reason. In coming to faith the mind makes inferences based upon "holy, devout, and enlightened presumptions."⁸⁶

After Newman became a Roman Catholic in 1845, he had to face the question whether his views on faith and evidence (as well as on other points, such as the development of doctrine) were consonant with the current teaching of the Holy See and with Roman university theology. According to the prevalent theories, unaided reason could achieve, prior to the act of faith, a firm judgment of credibility based on external signs, such as miracles and prophecies. In 1847, during his stay in Rome, Newman composed 12 theses on faith, in which he attempted to reconcile his Oxford Sermons with the Roman approach. These theses, supported by numerous quotations from Suarez, de Lugo, and other scholastic theologians of the Baroque period, do not represent an advance in Newman's thinking, but rather a defensive maneuver in which he clothed his thought with an ill-fitting suit of scholastic armor. Here Newman defines faith in a purely intellectualist way, as a certain, nonevident assent to divine truth (Thesis 1). He adopts the view of Suarez that faith itself is absolutely certain on its own account, and in no way on account of the antecedent deliberations—a position that cannot, I think, be found in the University Sermons (Thesis 4). The prudence of the act of faith is now rooted not in the spontaneous desires and presentiments of the heart, as previously, but in external arguments of credibility (Theses 6-7), seen as necessary preconditions of the act of faith (Thesis 5).

These theses, fortunately, do not represent a real shift in Newman's own thinking, for in the *Grammar of Assent* he was to revert essentially to the approach taken in the Oxford Sermons. Newman's Roman theses,

⁸⁵ OUS 218.

⁸⁶ OUS 239; cf. 223.

never intended for publication, were not printed until long after his death.⁸⁷

About the same time, early in 1847, Newman composed in Latin a preface intended for the French edition of his Oxford University Sermons. It is not known why he wrote it in Latin, a language in which he lacked facility, but perhaps this was to alleviate the task of the translator, since Newman's friend John D. Dalgairns, who was in touch with the translator, had remarked that Newman's English was very difficult to render into French. The proposed preface attempted to clarify for Continental Catholic readers why so many members of Newman's English audience, to whom the Sermons had been originally addressed, would have suspected that faith was contrary to reason. Newman emphasized three grounds for this suspicion: first, that the principles of faith were contrary to the maxims of the world; second, that the justification of faith rests less on proofs, methodically expounded, than on presumptions spontaneously applied; and third, that the tenets of faith itself are contrary to the expectations induced by common experience. The Latin preface to the University Sermons was never translated, nor was it published until 1937.⁸⁸ Some of the same ideas, however, were included in the preface to the third edition of the Sermons in English (1871).

ASSESSMENTS OF NEWMAN

Until the time of Vatican Council II neo-scholastic theologians continued to accuse Newman of unduly emphasizing the subjective dispositions of the believer to the detriment of the objective grounds of credibility. Some found in the Latin introduction to the University Sermons a welcome correction of this imbalance.⁸⁹ But others continued to object that even in his Roman period Newman failed to recognize the necessity of a demonstration of credibility that would remove all danger of error. They noted that modern scholastic theologians, unlike those of the 13th and 16th centuries, had seen that the fact of revelation was to be demonstrated, not believed. Newman, they explained, had overlooked this important theoretical advance and had misread statements of the earlier scholastics about the credibility of particular dogmas, as though

⁸⁷ Henry Tristram, ed., "Cardinal Newman's *Theses de fide* and His Proposed Introduction to the French Translation of the University Sermons," *Gregorianum* 18 (1937) 219-60; Latin text of the *Theses*, 226-41.

⁸⁸ For Latin text see *ibid.* 248-60. Newman's hesitations about the French translation of his Oxford University Sermons are discussed on pp. 241-45. See also Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University, 1957) 175-80.

⁸⁹ See Philip Flanagan, *Newman, Faith and the Believer* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1946) chaps. 4 and 5.

they were dealing with the modern apologetical problem. For this reason Newman, according to these critics, was tainted with fideism.⁹⁰

The Modernists at the turn of the century reinforced this suspicion. Alfred Loisy, George Tyrrell, Henri Bremond, and Ernest Dimnet, among others, attempted to justify their own subjectivism by appealing to Newman's observations on the personal dispositions required for faith. But in their zeal to find an ally in Newman, they overlooked his concern for the supremacy of the revealed object, the intellectual character of faith, and the inviolability of dogma.⁹¹

Early in the 20th century Pierre Rousselot made some use of Newman to defend his own doctrine that love confers the "eyes of faith" by which the true force of the rational grounds of credibility can be perceived. Rousselot was pleased to find in Newman the idea that the will, under the attraction of grace, prompts the intellect to believe. But he was dissatisfied by Newman's tendency to speak of the will as though it had to supply for the deficiencies of the evidence rather than to enable the intellect to recognize proofs that were stringent in themselves.⁹² On this point, as on many others, Newman stands closer to Thomas Aquinas and the older scholastic tradition than do his modern critics.

In our generation it must be asked whether Newman's theology of revelation and faith is consonant with transcendental theology. A satisfying answer to this question would require a careful examination of the writings of Rahner, Lonergan, and their respective disciples. For present purposes it may suffice to remark that, although Newman recognizes the importance of grace in the approach to faith, he does not teach that interior grace, as a self-communication of God to the human spirit, is itself revelation. He does not hold that God makes Himself known by a "transcendental revelation," in sheer interiority, prior to any "categorical revelation," nor does he suppose that revelation comes by an "inner word" that precedes all "outer words." For him the revealed idea must be externally mediated, except perhaps in rare and privileged cases. Revelation always has a definite content that can be, to some extent, expressed in dogmatic statements. Newman's system, then, should not be regarded as a deficient precursor of transcendental theology but as a serious alternative, to be judged on its own merits.

⁹⁰ See Jacques de Blic, "L'Analyse de la foi chez Newman," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 24 (1948) 136-45.

⁹¹ See Roger Aubert, *Le problème de l'acte de foi* (2nd ed.; Louvain: Warny, 1950) 348-56 (on Dimnet and Bremond), 368-80 (on Loisy and Tyrrell).

⁹² See the discussion in Maurice Nédoncelle, Introduction to Newman, *Sermons universitaires*, in *Textes Newmaniens* 1 (Bruges: Desclée, 1955) 35-50.

Considered in the perspectives of the century that has elapsed since his death, Newman stands head and shoulders above many of his critics and would-be followers. His system still offers rich resources for dealing with the persistent problems regarding authority and freedom, experience and revelation, reason and mystery, thought and language, and historical relativity and permanence. Without purporting to offer a complete and polished system, he gathers material for a comprehensive theology of revelation and faith that respects the complexities of the subject matter. While maintaining the primacy of God's word and the obligatory force of dogma, he acknowledges the mysteriousness of the divine and the fragility of human language. While recognizing the full and definitive revelation of God in Christ, he allows for the universal availability of revelation and its discernibility through the intimations of conscience. While resolutely protecting the integrity of doctrine against the enthusiasm of experientialists, he avoids the rationalism of the evidentialist school and the authoritarianism of the ultramontane party. Personalist to the core, Newman gives their due to the will and the intellect, the imagination and the emotions in the total self-commitment by which the believer adheres to the living God of revelation. His words have the ring of authenticity not only because of his learning and eloquence, but even more because he possessed in his own person an intelligence quickened by love and guided by the attractions of grace.