

NEWMAN, GOD, AND THE ACADEMY

DANIEL CERE

Concordia University, Montreal

SOME OF ALLAN BLOOM'S most trenchant critics concede that his controversial study, *The Closing of the American Mind*, continues to set the terms of debate over higher education.¹ In part this is reflected in the growing concern about the decay of substantive discourse on fundamental questions in the academy.² For Bloom, this distressing feature of the modern university is due to the dominance of forms of relativism which have narrowed and flattened the range of moral vision and debate.³ Bloom argues that respect for subjective moral convictions has been ridden too hard, generating a bias towards moral relativism. This has stifled the possibility of serious discourse about "common goods." Furthermore, openness to the diversity of cultures has been blown into an ideology of cultural relativism which shelves discussion about universal dimensions of human nature. Such developments restrict the range of debate by silencing questions which have been foundational for the life and heritage of the academy.

However, Bloom's study implicitly raises, then delicately begs, another type of fundamental question, the question of the "supreme good" or the "universal end." His failure to attend to this concern is, I suspect, a mark of how thoroughly it has been suppressed.⁴ John Rawls notes our profound unease with such questions and writes: "Although to subordinate all our aims to one end does not strictly speaking violate

¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). See Benjamin Barber, *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America* (New York: Ballantine, 1992) 154. There have been some grudging complaints that Bloom's best-seller was a popular rehash of earlier studies by his colleagues at Chicago. See George Anastaplo, "In re Allan Bloom: A Respectful Dissent," *The Great Ideas Today* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1988) 253-73; Mortimer Adler, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1989) xiv, xix-xx, 263-64.

² For philosophical and historical accounts of the "cramped" character of modern intellectual culture that are arguably more satisfying than Bloom's, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1989) esp. Part 1, "Identity and the Good"; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988).

³ Bloom, *The Closing*, Introduction and Part 1.

⁴ MacIntyre notes this problem in his discussion of the thought of Aquinas (*Whose Justice?* 165-66).

the principles of rational choice . . . , it still strikes us as irrational, or more likely as mad.⁵ Rawls argues that Aquinas and Ignatius of Loyola manifest this disturbing intellectual bent.⁶ Their “mad” quest for a “dominant end” was theistic and driven by a tradition of theological inquiry which, until recently, had considerable intellectual stature within the academy. Aquinas maintains that theology has a “twofold office” which bears directly on any debate over basic “ends” or “goods.”⁷ It provides a constructive inquiry into the nature of the “supreme good” as well as a tough-minded analysis of flawed conceptions of global human good and fulfillment.⁸ Bloom’s exploration ignores the tradition of theology and begs the questions it raises.⁹

This oversight, I would argue, is connected to another peculiar feature of Bloom’s study—the absence of any reference to one text widely regarded as the “classic” book on the university, Newman’s *Idea of a University*.¹⁰ Newman’s book is deliberately structured as a response to two fundamental developments in the modern academy: first, the suppression of the tradition of theological inquiry; second, the dismantling of the liberal arts tradition.¹¹ Newman argues that the marginalization of theology is a crucial factor in the deformation of academic

⁵ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1971) 554.

⁶ *Ibid.* 553–54.

⁷ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. A. C. Pegis (New York: Image, 1955) 1.1.1.

⁸ *Ibid.* 1.1.4.

⁹ MacIntyre offers a good discussion of the collapse of theistic discourses in the academy in his essay “The Fate of Theism,” in Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, eds., *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University, 1969).

¹⁰ For Bloom, Plato’s *Republic* is “the book on education” (*The Closing* 381). He offers an “Interpretive Essay” in his translation, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). Bloom translated another educational classic, Rousseau’s *Emile* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

¹¹ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, edited by Martin J. Svaglic, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1982), The “two questions” which “form” his study are: “first, whether it is consistent with the idea of University teaching to exclude Theology from a place among the sciences . . . next, whether it is consistent with that idea to make the useful arts and sciences its direct and principal concern, to the neglect of those liberal studies . . . in which it has heretofore been considered mainly to consist” (*Idea of a University* 14). The question of theology is treated in discourses 2 to 4. His defense of the liberal arts tradition is found in discourses 5 to 7. Bloom’s book focuses on the second question. While his argument would find support in Newman’s defense of liberal education, nevertheless there are some discrepancies in the two approaches. First, Bloom’s emphasis on a “humanities” approach to liberal education contrasts with Newman’s more traditional accent on the importance of an interdisciplinary formation in the seven liberal arts (*ibid.* xliv–xlv, 194–96). Second, for Bloom, moral formation is central to the task of the university. In contrast, Newman begins his study warning us that the “object” of the university is “intellectual, not moral.” He has a more cautious view of the role of education in moral and religious formation (*ibid.* xxxvii, 86–93).

debate. Given Bloom's insistence on the critical function of the "Great Books" in expanding the horizons of intellectual debate, it seems strange to omit *The Idea of a University* from his discussion. "The failure to read good books," Bloom writes, "both enfeebles the vision and strengthens our most fatal tendency—the belief that the here and now is all there is."¹² Bloom's own book may be a telling illustration of this axiom.

BLOOM ON NIETZSCHE, RELIGION, AND THE ACADEMY

Bloom argues that Nietzsche and his descendants have played a critical role in the collapse of any meaningful discourse on the good within the academy. Nietzsche's "war on the university" engages the two formative traditions of Western intellectual culture, Athens and Jerusalem.¹³ These traditions envisage the possibility of defining the good through reason alone or through "faith seeking understanding." In subverting these traditions the university lost its intellectual bearings.

Bloom traces the current malaise of the academy to its wholesale repudiation of the Socratic tradition of philosophical inquiry. For Bloom, the "rich drama" of the life, teaching, and vision of Socrates represents "the soul of the university."¹⁴ The Socratic "drama" offers privileged access to a primitive philosophic experience which lays the foundations for the life of the academy.¹⁵ Bloom argues that this "theoretic experience" is not only irreverent, "freeing the thinker from fear of the gods," but also liberating, providing an "escape" from the ideological fetters of culture and community.¹⁶ However, theoretic critique and demystification are not the only functions of the academy. The Socratic demolition of mythic accounts of reality is based upon the conviction that philosophy is also "architectonic." It can discover meaningful order and construct "the best way of life" attuned to that order.¹⁷

Nietzsche launches a "radical attack" on this Socratic vision.¹⁸ He ridicules the hope that reason can ground values, characterizing the "Socratic equation reason = virtue = happiness" as the "bizarrest of equations."¹⁹ Philosophy, for Nietzsche, is devoid of the kind of "archi-

¹² *The Closing* 64, 51 f., 62–67, 344 f.

¹³ *Ibid.* 309.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 268–69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 377.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 208, 307–08. See Nietzsche's discussion of "The Problem of Socrates," in *Twilight of the Idols* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 29–35.

¹⁹ *The Closing* 194–95; Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 268.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 271, 38, 264–65.

tectonic" power which Socrates ascribes to it. Meaning, order, good, and evil, are established by poets, myth-makers, and god-creators, not by theory makers. For Socrates, the academy is a space for a rational discourse freed from the spell of myth. In Nietzsche's philosophy the doors of the academy are thrown open to the mythic, the demonic, and the sacred. However, Nietzsche's fascination with the "religious" does not entail any interest in the claims of religion *per se*.²⁰ He asserts that what merits intellectual attention is the religious experience itself, not God, nor any transcendent absolute.²¹ Thus Nietzsche proclaims the "death of God." Theism can no longer provide a meaningful horizon for academic discourse.²²

In his discussion of Weber, Bloom explores the fundamental repositioning of religion that occurs in the post-Nietzschean academy.²³ The discipline of "religious studies" displaces theology as the major vehicle for the study of religion. Appeals to theological criteria for evaluating religious truth claims are repudiated since such claims are not amenable to rational debate. Carl Raschke argues that these developments have cramped modern academic discourse on religion.²⁴ Scholarship has shifted to descriptive and historicist accounts of religious experience and the questions raised by theology have been silenced. *Mythos*, human constructs of the sacred, has "supplanted" *theos* as the key "reference point" for the discipline.²⁵ Discourse on religion is no longer, in Hopkins's words, "charged with the grandeur of God, . . . like shining from shook foil." For Nietzsche, the death of God entails the elimination of any ontological or theological foil. Nihilism now becomes the dark foil for intellectual discourse, "a dangerous but a necessary and a possibly salutary stage in human history."²⁶ Nihilism reveals the creative void in which human discourse takes place—a field without certitudes or absolutes.²⁷ In being brought to this abyss, we face two alternatives: suicidal despair or a radically creative recon-

²⁰ *The Closing* 207.

²¹ *Ibid.* 210.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1960) 151, 167–69.

²³ *The Closing* 208–16.

²⁴ See Carl A. Raschke, "Religious Studies and the Default of Critical Intelligence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986) 132–33; Jonathan Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982) 102–120.

²⁵ Raschke, "Religious Studies" 133–34.

²⁶ *The Closing* 198.

²⁷ "There is no truth . . . there is no absolute constitution of things" (Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831–1933* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984] 167).

struction of a world of meaning.²⁸

Nietzsche, in the last analysis, is life affirming. However, there is no clear justification for his "yea-saying,"²⁹ Disciples of Nietzsche have shelved this side of his thought and have focussed on his powerful relativization of all moral affirmations. Good and evil are grounded in the assertions of the ceaselessly evaluating subject: "The evaluation 'I believe that such-and-such is the case' " is "the essence of truth."³⁰ For Bloom, this subjectivization of values represents a reversal of the Socratic vision of our relation to the good.³¹ Truth, meaning, or value are not intrinsic to reality, there to be discerned by reason or faith, but are imposed upon reality by an act of the will.³²

This has led to a strange silence about ultimate questions of good and evil, life and death, in the academy. Faced with events that beg for a response, we shuffle and glance aside. We express our pity for the children that died at Waco and puzzle over how the authorities handled the tragedy. As for the apparent mass suicide of the committed adults—well, that was their choice. Both Carl Raschke and Jonathan Smith maintain that the academic response to such events is significant in illustrating the cramped nature of our theorizing. The mass suicide of over 900 cult members at Jonestown has been described as an event "so bizarre that historians would have to reach back into Biblical times to find a calamity big enough for comparison."³³ Yet Smith notes that, for the academy, "it was as if Jonestown had never happened." No serious study of Jonestown appeared in any major journal or conference in the years immediately following the event. The silence reflects the fact that such primordial events raise a type of question the academy instinctively refrains from addressing.³⁴ However, one detects such an evasion even in Smith's attempt to correct this gap. Smith tries to make the Jonestown experience "familiar" by drawing parallels with ancient Dionysian cults and modern cargo cults. Nevertheless, the fundamental question raised by the "White

²⁸ *The Closing* 198.

²⁹ Charles Taylor refers to this "affirmation of good" as "the saving inconsistency of Nietzsche" (*Sources of the Self* 488–89).

³⁰ Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany* 167. Nietzsche maintains, "What is good and bad no one yet knows—unless it is he who creates them" (168).

³¹ Bloom writes that "we do not love a thing because it is good, it is good because we love it" (*The Closing* 197).

³² *Ibid.* 201. For Nietzsche "the evaluation itself is merely . . . will to power" (Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany*, 167).

³³ *Imagining Religion* 109.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 109, 111. Raschke sees this silence as a symptom of the "lobotomy" of critical intelligence in the study of religion ("Religious Studies" 136).

Night," the religious justification for communal suicide, is completely suppressed in his analysis.³⁵

Could this kind of question be tackled in an academic inquiry? Classical theological discourses have attempted to do so. Augustine devotes over ten chapters to this problem in *The City of God*.³⁶ His argument grapples with pagan criticisms of the failure of Christian women to take the honorable way out (suicide) when faced with rape during the Sack of Rome in 410. Augustine's analysis of inconsistencies in the ethical arguments for suicide are insightful. However, the real force of his discourse lies in his theological reflection: first, he provides a theological critique of the various background ontologies which justify suicide by erroneously grounding ultimate human good and fulfillment "in this life"; second, he defends theism as the most coherent definition of the "supreme good" for humankind.³⁷

Such theological accounts would barely receive a hearing in current debates. Nietzsche's philosophy unveils a new context: since "God is dead," it is the self, not God, which becomes the fulcrum that gives meaning to existence.³⁸ However, there are varieties of "self-centeredness." Nietzsche's version, Bloom contends, is "profound."³⁹ It is an aggressive and world-changing self-centeredness that rejoices in the destruction of commonplace moralities and revels in re-creation. But there is also a shallower and better known variant of self-centeredness, a vulgarization of Nietzsche which leads to a relaxed scepticism.⁴⁰ The great and difficult goods are debunked—at last! The creative tension and commitment involved in the pursuit of such values could be greeted with self-righteous indifference. One can morally relax, take the world as it is, and by means of instrumental reason pursue the comfortable life with all its superficial gratifications and diversions.⁴¹

Bloom argues that these varieties of subjectivism, both the dark, Dionysian, nihilistic side and the bland, suburban, relativistic side, represent the subversion of the rational soul of the university as we

³⁵ Jonathan Smith, *Imagining Religion* 112–20.

³⁶ Augustine, *The City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 1.17–27; cf. also 19.4.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 19.1. The contrast between their accounts is telling. For the women who spoke up during the critical communal debate on the "White Night" and who groped for arguments to rebut Jones's stance on "revolutionary suicide" Augustine's ancient text could have enlarged the range of debate and provided far more forceful lines of attack than the very restricted lines of argument documented in the transcripts of this fateful meeting. Smith's account would have offered them nothing apart from making the strategy of suicide "familiar" by situating it in a broader tradition of revolutionary religious violence.

³⁸ *The Closing* 173–79.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 200.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 227–40.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 82–88, 227–40.

have known it. Bloom's analysis of the deformation of the academy is marked by a pessimistic tone. Charles Taylor suggests that Bloom's critique is too loaded and fails to appreciate the moral resources of modern culture.⁴² However, the tone of pessimism may also be due to the fact that Bloom never fully breaks out of the dilemma that Nietzsche poses. There is a profound ambivalence about the "death of God" in Bloom's study.⁴³ He appreciates the Bible as a "great book" embodying moral wisdom, but that seems to be about as far as he is willing to go in affirmation of the heuristic value of religion.⁴⁴ He notes the repositioning of religion in the academy but does not offer any clear directives about how this should be corrected. This is hardly surprising since Bloom's understanding of the Socratic philosophical experience is one of liberation from the gods.⁴⁵ Bloom is convinced that a return to the "Socratic way" is "the one thing most needful" for a renewal of academic discourse.⁴⁶ However, his attempt to save Socrates while sacrificing theism may condemn him to continue to squirm under the shadow cast by Nietzsche. Nietzsche has warned that we cannot expunge "God" from our grammar and expect that things will go on as before. Athens needs Jerusalem since metaphysical reason cannot stand without a universal ground. Therefore, the "death of God" is the final blow to the Socratic philosophic vision. Thus Bloom's attempt to retrieve the Socratic quest for the good without resurrecting theism may fail to face the full thrust of Nietzsche's critique. On this score, despite Bloom's contempt for the weight of popular opinion and fashion in academic life, he still is part of a very wide and deep consensus. Theology has been thoroughly marginalized as a major force within modern intellectual debate and Bloom's study uncritically accepts this state of affairs.

NEWMAN ON THE SUPPRESSION OF THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

In the opening chapters of *The Idea of a University* Newman argues that the complex movement leading to the marginalization of theological discourse represents one of the fundamental developments in the

⁴² Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ont.: Anansi, 1991) 15.

⁴³ There is also an ambivalence to Nietzsche. In part Bloom appreciates the seriousness of his assault on the Western tradition of philosophy since it clarifies the essential contours of debate (*The Closing* 309–311). At times Bloom seems to share in Nietzsche's revelry over the new expanse opened by his nihilistic critique (*ibid.* 228–29). Bloom's ambivalence is noted by Benjamin Barber (*An Aristocracy for Everyone* 171–72). Bloom refers to Nietzsche as "his teacher" (*Giants and Dwarfs* [New York: Simon and Shuster, 1990] 12, 17).

⁴⁴ *The Closing* 54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 270–1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 310.

modern academy. He insists on the need for critical examination of the rationale for sidelining this longstanding tradition of inquiry and for careful scrutiny of its repercussions in the intellectual life of the university.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the success of this movement has even penetrated scholarly interpretations of *The Idea of a University*. His opening argument may be the most neglected part of Newman's classic. For some critics this discussion merely underscores the essentially dated, Victorian, and Oxonian character of his treatise.⁴⁸ However, even Newman's admirers tend to politely ignore the concerns raised in these discourses. Perhaps the most striking example of this is Jaroslav Pelikan's recent reexamination of the issues raised by Newman.⁴⁹ Pelikan is one of the preeminent historical theologians in the academy. Yet, in his analysis of the relevance of *The Idea of a University* to contemporary debates, Pelikan completely sidesteps Newman's discussion of the role of theology in the university. However, the sense of the irrelevancy of these concerns to our situation may be mistaken. If, as Nietzsche argues, the "death of God" has cast such a long and disturbing shadow over the academy then the theological concerns mapped out in this first part of Newman's study may be far more relevant to our situation than they appear at first glance.⁵⁰

Newman approaches the question of the university with more historical balance than Bloom.⁵¹ Bloom offers a fairly one-dimensional view of the heritage of the Western university. Bloom's ideal of higher learning is so completely defined by the Greek Socratic tradition that he ignores the foundational role of the Christian tradition in the development of the university.⁵² Newman's bifocal view of the Greek and

⁴⁷ *Idea of a University* 14–16. Newman attempted to document various strategies employed to marginalize theology from the mainstream of higher education; see "A Form of Infidelity of the Day—Its Policy" (ibid. 294–303).

⁴⁸ Roy Jenkins accuses Newman of throwing "stardust" into the eyes of his audience by attempting to connect religion and the academy ("Newman and the Idea of a University," in *Newman: A Man for Our Time*, ed. David Brown [Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 1990] 155).

⁴⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1992).

⁵⁰ Michael J. Buckley underlines the similarities between Newman and Nietzsche in their appreciation of the enormous importance of the marginalization of the God-question for modern intellectual culture (*At the Origins of Modern Atheism* [New Haven/London: Yale University, 1987] 28–30).

⁵¹ Newman explores both the Greek and Judeo-Christian roots of the academy ("Rise and Progress and Universities," in *Historical Sketches* 3 [London: Longmans, Green, 1899] 1–251; also *Idea of a University* 198–99).

⁵² This is particularly disconcerting given the fact that the institution of the university has its roots in the Middle Ages. See Hastings Rashdall's classic study, *The Uni-*

Judeo-Christian heritage of the academy alerts the reader to the critical role of theology in the emergence of the European university and in the evolution of Western academic discourse.⁵³

A unique feature of Newman's discussion of theology is his emphasis on the essentially theistic character of the discipline.⁵⁴ It is a tradition of inquiry focused on the God-question.⁵⁵ In some ways Newman's description of theology as the "science of God" and his overview of main lines of theism may appear to be a very flatfooted reassertion of the traditional Christian doctrine of God. Bernard Williams condemns as "crude" any attempt to position academic inquiry by appeals to theistic doctrine.⁵⁶ For Williams, a "sophisticated" academic account of the good must be autonomous and independent of any relation to religious claims.⁵⁷ Theology can only have a voice if its traditional ontic claims are silenced. Williams acknowledges that this presumption of methodological atheism reflects the Nietzschean repositioning of religion in the academy.⁵⁸

versities of Europe in the Middle Ages, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1936); A. B. Cobban, *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organization* (London: Methuen, 1975); Anders Piltz, *The World of Medieval Learning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

⁵³ *Idea of a University* 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 45–50.

⁵⁵ This account of theology tends to deviate from current definitions of the discipline. Andrew Louth argues that the contemporary justifications for theological studies often tend to be utilitarian. Theology merits attention for its importance in understanding major intellectual and historical developments. This "inevitably pushes theology to the periphery, to be studied not for itself, but for some usefulness that can be claimed for it" (*Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1983] 23). I would put the issue in a different way. Contemporary "theological studies" are, in large part, an exercise in intellectual history: the study of various "theologies" rather than Newman's "science of God." The discipline tends to dovetail in on itself. These explorations of the "doctrinal dimension" of religious traditions fit comfortably within the discipline of religious studies.

⁵⁶ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1985) 32–33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 33. Others allow for some substantive discussion of theological claims insofar as they can be shown to support an autonomous moral discourse. Ronald M. Green develops this Kantian line of argument in *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University, 1978). While Newman resists any attempt to collapse theological discourse into this type of moral argument, nevertheless he is sympathetic with actual insights generated by this approach. His discussion of "conscience" in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 70–83 presents a moral argument for theism.

⁵⁸ Arguments supporting this methodological atheism are largely based on appeals to the modern ideal of human autonomy as well as the Enlightenment appreciation of the essential autonomy of nature; see Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 20–46.

However, Newman's insistence on a theistic definition of theology may be less crude than it appears. In Discourse 2, Newman insists on the need for a close scrutiny of the arguments put forward to justify the marginalization of this tradition of inquiry. Newman does not see this development as grounded in the advent of a radically secular and atheistic culture, which, for Nietzsche, defines the horizons of the modern academy. He points out that many members of the academy support the marginalization of theological discourse while they continue to believe in God.⁵⁹ This compliance with a suppression of theological debate in spite of a persistence of theistic belief indicates a state of affairs more paradoxical than Nietzsche suggests. Such compliance is evoked by the appeal of a number of widely held, but flawed, assumptions which entrench a stance of methodological atheism in the academy.

First, there is the view that religious truth claims represent a type of knowledge that cannot be appropriately handled within the university.⁶⁰ He notes the emergence of attempts to exclude theological inquiry on the basis of some narrowly defined and typically indefensible theory of what constitutes a "scientific" discourse. Newman argues that the various disciplines in the university differ in their methodologies. He wonders how the "boundary lines" of knowledge are to be so defined as to exclude theology? He argues that such strategies are inherently problematic and arbitrary. They involve an insistence on definitions of academic inquiry that place unwarranted restrictions on the range of debate and ineluctably bear upon more disciplines than theology alone.⁶¹ In *An Essay on the Grammar of Assent* Newman provides a more substantial critique of narrow and skewed accounts of rationality.⁶² The nature of human reason, he argues, is "complex, indirect and recondite" and cannot be reduced to a neat and monolithic "science of reasoning."⁶³

Second, Newman argues that pietist and evangelical movements in modern religious culture have tended to undermine our apprehension of the cognitive dimension of religious faith.⁶⁴ "The religious world, as it is styled, holds, generally speaking, that Religion consists, not in knowledge, but in feeling or sentiment."⁶⁵ These subjectivistic conceptions of faith in popular religious culture provide tacit support for the repositioning of religion in the academy. Doctrinal claims are not to be

⁵⁹ *Idea of a University* 20. Taylor notes this resistance to articulations and exploration of foundational beliefs. He points out that there is frequently "a lack of fit between what people as it were officially and consciously believe" (*Sources of the Self* 9).

⁶⁰ *Idea of a University* 18–19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 19–20.

⁶² *Grammar of Assent*, Part 2, chap. 8.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 226.

⁶⁴ *Idea of a University* 20–25.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 20–21.

taken seriously and subjected to rational debate. Rather they are to be classified and dealt with as expressions of subjective experience, private conviction, or articulations of the human need for meaning. For Newman, this understanding of religion is a variant of Bloom's "toothless old circus lion."⁶⁶ It represents the failure to appreciate the cognitive fangs of religious belief. The dogmatic dimension is an integral dimension of religious traditions.

It will not do to tell them that whatever they at present hold as true, is enough. They want to be assured that what seems to them true, is true. . . . They have an instinctive feeling that there is an external, eternal truth which is their only stay; and it mocks them, after being told of a Revelation, to be assured, next, that Revelation tells us nothing certain, nothing which we do not know without it, nothing distinct from our own impressions concerning it, whatever they may be—nothing such as to exist independently of that shape and colour into which our own individual mind happens to throw it. . . . Religion cannot but be dogmatic; it ever has been.⁶⁷

The disposal of religious truth claims as noncognitive subjective assertions represents a facile dismissal of the intellectual convictions entailed in such claims.

Third, Newman attacks a tacit deism that continues to linger within the academy. Deistic strategies, for Newman, erode theology from within by channeling serious theological reflection into largely vacuous tributaries of inquiry. It is a complex maneuver whereby theology becomes a well-meaning but marginal exercise of reading tentative theological inferences into the conclusions of leading discourses within the academy.⁶⁸ Newman argues that the theological conclusions of deistic approaches are shaky, shallow, and "parasitical."⁶⁹ Theology becomes "but a name" since it is fundamentally positioned and continually repositioned by the fluctuating theories of other sciences. If the concept of a Supreme Being must be "coincident with the laws of the universe, then He is but a function, or correlative, or subjective reflection and mental impression, of each phenomenon of the material or moral world, as it flits before us."⁷⁰ In the deistic method of correlation, theological discourse becomes "a mode of viewing" reality that is "commensurate" with the "material or moral" world.⁷¹ If this is so, then theology is merely a "supplemental process" which provides a kind of "poetic" veneer to "complete and harmonize" the findings of leading scientific or philosophical discourses.⁷² It adds nothing of real sub-

⁶⁶ *The Closing* 216.

⁶⁷ *Essays and Sketches* (London: Longmans, Green, 1948) 1.222–23.

⁶⁸ *Idea of a University* 25–31.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 26–29.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 29.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 30–31. See Taylor's comments on Deism in *Sources of the Self* 167.

⁷² *Idea of a University* 29–31.

stance to intellectual debate.⁷³ Newman maintains that theology is a discourse which moves the God question, the question of the "supreme good," to center stage. Justifications of theological inquiry in the light of their capacity to support a secular discourse subvert the unique intellectual contribution it alone can make. Newman noted that David Hume, "that acute, though most low-minded of speculators," welcomed deistic modes of thought as a way of domesticating theological inquiry and fitting it into the tacit methodological atheism of the academy.⁷⁴

Newman argues that deism was updated and revised, not supplanted, in the nineteenth century. He finds variants of the deistic marginalization of theology in liberal strategies which purport to immanentize theological discourse and correlate it with human experience.⁷⁵ Such approaches involve the employment of "a whole circle of theological truths" in the construction of a philosophical view of human experience.⁷⁶ Religious doctrines become "manifestations" of a "leading idea." They are integrated into a conceptual "scheme" or a "system" that provides a coherent interpretation of human experience.⁷⁷ The act of faith becomes an exercise in philosophical hermeneutics. However, in this revised deism the subject still "does not go to God, but . . . God must come to him."⁷⁸ Assent to God is gently elbowed to one side in the modern turn to the subject. As religious faith is "hewn and chiselled into an intelligible human system" it is "mutilated."

Instead of looking out of ourselves, . . . throwing ourselves forward upon Him and waiting on Him, we sit at home bringing everything to ourselves. . . . Nothing is considered to have an existence except so far forth as our minds discern it. . . . in a word, the idea of Mystery, is discarded.⁷⁹

This delicate repositioning of theistic claims in the light of the critical role of the subject plays itself out in the moral life. Morality is "aestheticized."⁸⁰ The vocation of self-surrender to God is replaced by the

⁷³ *Ibid.* 29.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 30–31.

⁷⁵ Newman argues that this is a characteristic of the critical turn in modern theology promoted by Schleiermacher in Germany and Erskine in England; see "On the Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Revealed Religion," in *Essays, Critical and Historical* 1 (London: Longmans and Green, 1890). Stephen Thomas provides a critical discussion of this tract in *Newman and Heresy: The Anglican Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991) 108–39.

⁷⁶ *Idea of a University* 160.

⁷⁷ "On the Introduction of Rationalistic Principles" 40.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 34.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 34–35.

⁸⁰ A term used by Alasdair MacIntyre which accurately captures Newman's point (*The Religious Significance of Atheism* 52).

pursuit of "self-respect."⁸¹ Fear of God is swallowed up in a "self-reproach" obsessed with "what is fitting and becoming."⁸² Virtue becomes "one kind of beauty" and vice a "deformity." The dictates of conscience are replaced by moral "taste" and "moral sense," and sin is no longer "an offense against God, but against human nature."⁸³ These redefinitions reflect patterns of "intellectual culture" dislodged from any meaningful personal "assent to the Being of a God."⁸⁴

Theology must involve more than a learned attunement of theological categories to secular discourses. Deistic reconstructions attempt to address the concerns of secular culture. But it is often secularists who are most critical of the theologically impoverished character of these approaches.⁸⁵ Simply put, they would like to be offered something more than they already have. For Newman, the modern appreciation of the autonomy of self or nature cannot ultimately quarry or reposition the rock of theism. Faith in God is not analogous to an affirmation of some key value or good. Such commitments can be seen as expressions or extensions of the self. Faith, on the other hand, is a recognition of the "Other," a transcendent "Other" who is crucial to human self-identity. Newman's faith experience led him to "rest in the thought of two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator."⁸⁶ From this perspective he stresses the "radical difference" between an intellectual culture which is grounded in this "vivid assent," and an intellectual culture which, however "noble and beautiful," is not.⁸⁷

THEOLOGY WITHIN THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

In the next two discourses Newman turns his attention from critique in order to provide a more constructive account of the role of theology in academic discourse. He grounds his discussion of the place of theology in the university on a theory of knowledge. This is part of a broader strategy which connects his discussion of problems in educa-

⁸¹ *Idea of a University* 145–46.

⁸² *Ibid.* 145.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 145, 150–51.

⁸⁴ *Grammar of Assent* 71.

⁸⁵ See MacIntyre's critique of existentialist theologians such as Tillich, Bultmann, and Robinson, "The Fate of Theism," in *The Religious Significance of Atheism*; also Jürgen Habermas's critique of the theological employment of critical theory, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in This World," in *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, ed. Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 226–48.

⁸⁶ J. H. Newman *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, ed. M. J. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 18.

⁸⁷ *Idea of a University* 144–45.

tion to a set of epistemological concerns.⁸⁸ One critical issue that he forwards is the question of the cognitive function of the university itself. What is the heuristic function of the university in relation to the contributions of the various sciences? Why should the various sciences be brought together into one learning community rather than allowing them to pursue their inquiries independently of one another? Newman argues that the interdisciplinary context of the university is not of a mere functional significance or historical circumstance. Rather, it provides a unique cognitive context for scientific discourse.⁸⁹ The significance of this cognitive context can only be appreciated by recognizing the limits of scientific discourse. The diverse sciences are "various partial views or abstractions, by means of which the mind looks out upon its object."⁹⁰ The various abstract perspectives that they have on reality are true "as far as they go, yet at the same time separate and partial."⁹¹ It "follows" that they need "external assistance, one by one, by reason of their incompleteness."⁹² The interdisciplinary nature of the university provides a unique forum in which the various sciences are forced to work in a contextual field. In this forum the specific "take" or "view" of reality provided by any one science is checked, balanced, corrected, complemented, and completed by the contributions of other disciplines within the academy.⁹³ Only when "viewed together," within an interdisciplinary context, can they "approximate to a representation or subjective reflection of the objective truth."⁹⁴

Newman argues that the particular characteristics and limitations of any academic discourse also apply to theology. This point is crucial to a proper interpretation of his approach to the role of theology in the university. Newman underscores the fact that theology is a longstanding tradition of academic discourse that has worked within the evolving canons of critical rationality as defined by the academy. It is not a

⁸⁸ Newman spells out his epistemology more fully in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. In *The Idea of a University* he makes this connection quite spontaneously and without much fanfare. Because of this fluid integration of epistemological concerns in the discussion one might be tempted to miss its significance. Plato, Locke, and Rousseau recognized the need to ground their educational theory in a coherent epistemology. This problematic is seldom addressed adequately in current debates about the nature of the university.

⁸⁹ This point was argued out in an original fifth discourse, "General Knowledge Viewed as One Philosophy," which was omitted in subsequent editions of his book. It is included as an appendix in Ian Kerr's edition of *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

⁹⁰ *Idea of a University* 34.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 35.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Idea of a University* (Kerr edition) 419.

⁹⁴ This "representation" is constantly developing with the evolution of the various disciplines (*Idea of a University* 35).

“shapeless aggregate” of religious opinions and beliefs, “no accident of particular minds,” “not the fashion of a season,” but a developing tradition of academic inquiry that is “precise and consistent in its intellectual structure.”⁹⁵ However, this does not imply a scholastic understanding of theology as a static deductive science. Newman contends that the complex developmental nature of theological inquiry makes this “path of thought rugged and circuitous above other disciplines.”⁹⁶ “Theology,” he claims, “is like dancing on the tightrope,” striking a dialectical balance between conflicting claims.⁹⁷ Furthermore, he rejects the scholastic elevation of theology as the “science of sciences.” It does not possess some radically privileged status but competes on the same playing field with other sciences despite the unique nature of its subject matter.

I am claiming for Theology nothing singular or special, or which is not partaken by other sciences in their measure. As far as I have spoken of them, they all go to make up one whole, differing only according to their relative importance. Far indeed am I from having intended to convey the notion . . . that Theology stands to other knowledge as the soul to the body, or that other sciences are but its instruments and appendages. . . . This would be, I conceive, to commit the very error, in the instance of Theology, which I am charging other sciences, at the present day, of committing against it.⁹⁸

Theology has a “place” in the academy. Accordingly, it does not exist in isolation but must engage critical developments in philosophy and the sciences.⁹⁹ It positions, and is positioned by, other scientific discourses.

The contextual nature of knowledge in the university underscores

⁹⁵ Ibid. 50–51.

⁹⁶ *Grammar of Assent* 227.

⁹⁷ On this point, see Gerard Magill, “Moral Imagination in Theological Method and Church Tradition: John Henry Newman,” *TS* 53 (1992) 466–67.

⁹⁸ *Idea of a University* (Kerr edition) 427–28. This passage reveals the reason for the omission of this section. Newman’s position flies in the face of a Papal Brief on higher education published in 1854. Pius IX asserted that Catholic doctrine is the form, the soul, of the university. Newman notes that his discourses on university education, “especially the original 5th discourse,” were based on “a different idea” (quoted from the “Introduction,” *ibid.* xxxiv). In the original fifth discourse he argues that the diverse sciences can only be “kept in check” and given “a centre and an aim,” a “form,” through the intellectual breadth and balance that is nurtured by the university setting (*ibid.* 419, 423–24). The university maintains a creative equilibrium between the truth claims of the various sciences. Newman contends that “the only guarantee of truth is the cultivation of them all. And such is the office of a university” (*ibid.* 419). This position is core to the unique vision of the university that Newman was putting forward to the Irish Catholic community. However, his most explicit statement of this thesis was dropped, probably to disarm Catholic critics who were suspicious of his project and ready to jump on any apparent inconsistencies with papal teaching.

⁹⁹ *Idea of a University* 39.

the danger of eliminating any key discourse from the family of sciences. This fundamentally disrupts and deforms the character of academic discourse. It entails a "virtual denial" of the significance of the "facts and relations" which that science explores.¹⁰⁰ The effective marginalization of a major discourse such as theology or ethics narrows the range of inquiry and leads to "bias."¹⁰¹ The discipline of theology ensures that there is a substantive debate about the question of the supreme good within the academy. Newman insists on the importance of an articulation of this crucial background ontology in intellectual debate.¹⁰² First, theistic claims, Newman argues, are of particular significance because of their massive weight in the religious experience of humankind. Religion for Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and Judaism is theistic—"it has been received by minds the most various, and in systems of religion the most hostile to each other."¹⁰³ Despite the fact that the academy is "elaborately silent about it," theism continues to be the implicit ontological account of reality for many in Western and non-Western cultures.¹⁰⁴ Second, Newman underlines the importance of the God-question for any discourse about the nature of human fulfillment and the limits of knowledge. Theology is a type of inquiry that is "transcendental" in a traditional sense since it raises questions which "enter into" other fundamental concerns about goodness, beauty, and truth. It is also transcendental in the modern sense since it grapples with the "conditions" for human knowing.¹⁰⁵ Third, for Newman the "death of God," or to use his less loaded term, the "virtual denial of God," signifies a profound restructuring of the traditional contours of academic debate. Attempts to "slur over" the God-question, to deflect attention from it, impose closures on intellectual debate that are without any sufficient warrant.¹⁰⁶ He attacks this

¹⁰⁰ See "The Bearing of Theology on Other Branches of Knowledge," *ibid.* 32–53.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 35–45.

¹⁰² Charles Taylor contends that there is a need for an exploration and "articulation" of the various background ontologies that are presupposed in moral argument both for the sake of a more substantive academic discourse about morality as well as for the health of our moral and spiritual life itself (*Sources of the Self* 8–11, 75–90).

¹⁰³ *Idea of a University* 51. Newman claims that theistic insights and anticipations can even be uncovered in explicitly nontheistic traditions and in philosophical traditions (*ibid.* 49, 51).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 296. The silence of the Western academy on the God-question is a barrier to a more substantive dialogue with Islam. The deeply secularist bent of the Western academy is a source of frustration for Muslims; see Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future* (London: Mansell, 1985).

¹⁰⁵ *Idea of a University* 19–20, 52–53. These two uses of the term "transcendental" are derived from Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Idea of a University* 45, 294–303.

imposition of methodological atheism on the academy as ultimately grounded in nothing more than subjective "bias."¹⁰⁷

Discourse 4 explores another major danger entailed in the marginalization of theology. Newman warns that disciplines are subject to an internal intellectual deformation when they attempt to advance accounts of reality which are unchecked by reference to other critical discourses that bear upon the problem being explored.¹⁰⁸ The human mind tends spontaneously to forge a connected view of reality.¹⁰⁹ If the contributions of a key discipline are effectively marginalized, then its critical questions and concerns will be appropriated and fundamentally repositioned by other sciences.

[T]his exorbitance is sure to take place, almost from the necessity of the case, if Theology be not present to defend its own boundaries and to hinder the encroachment. The human mind cannot keep from speculating and systematizing; and if Theology is not allowed to occupy its own territory, adjacent sciences, nay, sciences which are quite foreign to Theology, will take possession of it.¹¹⁰

Not all scientific discourses "will be equally effected by the omission," but for some, such as history, ethics, or philosophy, the impact can be considerable.¹¹¹ These "encroachments" and "usurpations" can result in quite global reductionistic theories of human nature or religious experience. The tendency will be to forward explanatory theories which rule out critical theological or moral concerns.¹¹² Disciplines, Newman insists, must know their limits. Theoretical approaches in specific disciplines "must not be ridden too hard"—"their deductions must be compared with other truths, . . . in order to verify, complete and correct them."¹¹³ Where particular theoretical accounts are predicated on the effective repression of other viable lines of inquiry, then the range of academic discourse becomes arthritic and cramped. When ethics is marginalized, the exploration of the dynamics of free moral agency is gradually shelved. This leads to a "radically false" and "one-sided" discourse about human nature.¹¹⁴ Inherently deterministic portraits emerge. Political economists who attempt to advance moral conclusions on the basis of their science without reference to various accounts in ethics or moral theology invariably provide skewed interpretations of the problems they are addressing.¹¹⁵ When theology

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 44–45.

¹⁰⁸ See "Bearing of Other Branches of Knowledge on Theology," *ibid.* 32–53.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 56.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 73.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 54.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 74.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 71.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 43–44.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 64–71.

is marginalized, the question of God and the complex issues surrounding the God question fade into academic oblivion. This not only narrows but actually distorts academic discourse about religion. A methodological atheism is imposed on scholarly interpretations of religious experience.¹¹⁶ Particular theoretical insights generated by such approaches may be “true” but they are “not the measure of all things.” Theories which are pursued “inordinately, extravagantly, . . . in spite of other sciences, in spite of Theology” are “sure to become but a great bubble, and to burst.”¹¹⁷ The predominance of such reductionistic metatheories subverts the cognitive function of the university, marginalizes fundamental questions, excludes lines of inquiry, and cramps our view of reality.

NEWMAN AND POSTMODERNIST RETRIEVALS OF THEOLOGY

Recently there has been a tendency to try to prove the continued relevance of Newman’s approach by conflating it with more fashionable postmodernist themes in theology.¹¹⁸ Indeed, the set of concerns raised in Newman’s opening discourses do seem to correspond quite closely to those raised by one notable postmodernist theologian, John Milbank, in a brilliant but controversial study.¹¹⁹ Milbank is deeply concerned about the repositioning and marginalization of theology by other discourses within the academy. He argues that if theology does not seek “to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology.” In this repositioning, theology is “bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy.”¹²⁰ Despite a common concern, however, there are a number of fundamental ways in which Newman and Milbank part company.

First, Milbank’s postmodern theology is a “meta discourse” that seeks to position, yet not to be positioned by other discourses. He attributes to theology a mythic character that effectively dislodges it from its more situated place within the academy. Newman on the other hand insists that theology is a tradition of academic inquiry. Theology, like any other science, is an abstract take on reality. As such, it is inherently incomplete. Theology positions other sciences by its contri-

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 44–45.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 71.

¹¹⁸ See Stephen Thomas, *Newman and Heresy* 255–56; Walter Jost, *Rhetorical Thought in John Henry Newman* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1989).

¹¹⁹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* 1.

butions while being positioned by their contributions. Theology does not reign over the academy as a sovereign “queen” but takes her place as a legitimate “sister” in the “goodly family of sciences.”¹²¹

Second, Milbank’s postmodernism underscores the specifically Christian character of theology and repudiates the notion of a “natural theology.” Religious traditions are specific and incommensurable. While Newman recognizes that theism is rooted in specific faith traditions, he also contends that it has a dialectic towards universality.¹²² He notes that theistic discourses have an appeal that transcends specifically “Christian” theologies. In this sense Newman argues that theological discourse is not, “strictly speaking,” “Catholicism,” nor “Physical Theology” (deism), nor “Christian evidences” (apologetics), nor “Christianity,” nor is it the study of Scripture.¹²³ He insists that theology means “none of these things,” but simply means “the Science of God, or the truths we know about God put into a system.”¹²⁴ This account opens the door to a theological discourse on the God-question that is essentially interreligious in character. However, this inquiry is not based upon some concept of a “common core” or “general religion.” Newman condemns these “latitudinarian” theories as truncated and impoverished. Theological inquiry would have to respect the integrity of the distinct theological traditions (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, etc.) in their approach to the God question.¹²⁵ Newman recognizes that universal claims forwarded by these different traditions may, in the final analysis, be competing claims. However, this cannot be an excuse for retreat into fideism or relativism. Newman argues that theological traditions must engage in dialectical encounter: “No traditions have a claim upon us which shrink from criticism, and dare not look a rival in the face.”¹²⁶ The development of theology as a tradition of inquiry is based on this openness to dialectical contestation. Recently, Alasdair MacIntyre has proposed an account of the importance of tradition similar to Newman’s.¹²⁷ Milbank has firmly

¹²¹ *Idea of a University* (Kerr edition) 421.

¹²² Newman also argues that the concept of “natural religion” is a viable one (*Grammar of Assent* 251–63). See Lee H. Yearley, *The Ideas of Newman: Christianity and Human Religiosity* (University Park/London: Pennsylvania State University 1978).

¹²³ *Idea of a University* 45–6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* 46.

¹²⁵ Newman provides a discussion of this problem in his original fifth discourse, *Idea of a University* (Kerr edition) 430–33, as well as in *Grammar of Assent* 162–64. Yearley raises a few critical questions concerning limitations in Newman’s approach to non-Christian religions (*Ideas of Newman* 128–41).

¹²⁶ *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (London: Longmans, Green, 1889) 9.

¹²⁷ MacIntyre acknowledges a “massive debt” to Newman (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* 353–54).

distanced himself from MacIntyre.¹²⁸ Milbank resists such an attempt to situate theological discourse within a wider normative tradition and he repudiates the notion of a meaningful dialectical encounter of traditions. However, the reentry of theology into academic discourse on Milbank's terms triggers serious frustration since it is often perceived, and I believe correctly, to be a highly arbitrary and idiosyncratic form of discourse—one more loose cannon in the postmodernist academy. The theologian stands as an intellectual *Übermensch* who can redefine the theological agenda in a fairly uncontextualized “rhetorical” way.¹²⁹

Finally, in one sense, Milbank deliberately condemns himself to live under the shadow of Nietzsche in his passionate commitment to postmodernism. Milbank defends a freakish theism in the sense that he obstinately follows Nietzsche in his rejection of universal reason and foundationalism, as well as his affirmation of contingency, arbitrariness and relativism “as the real natural good.”¹³⁰ Milbank is deeply concerned about the positioning of theology by modern social theories. Yet, he has, in effect, totally repositioned Christian theology by a particular postmodernist philosophy. The glory of Christianity appears to be its capacity to be fitted into a postmodernist agenda. “Christianity,” Milbank writes, “can become internally postmodern in a way that may not be possible for every religion or ideology.”¹³¹ Major Christian doctrines, such as the resurrection, atonement, ecclesiology, and creation, are reinterpreted along postmodernist lines. Concepts quite central to the tradition of theological inquiry, “the good,” the “true,” and the “immutability of God,” are critiqued and pushed aside for their failure to reflect this agenda. This approach gives far too much weight to the postmodernist perspective. In particular, it fails to take seri-

¹²⁸ See his critique of MacIntyre, “Difference of Virtue, Virtue of Difference,” in *Theology and Social Theory* chap. 11. Milbank complains that MacIntyre is not “sufficiently relativistic or historicist” (327).

¹²⁹ Against such readings of doctrinal history Newman raises a set of key questions. Can we talk about traditions as meaningful historical entities which extend through time? If the concept is meaningful, then by what criteria do we account for the coherence and continuity of any historical tradition? How do such traditions develop? How do they engage countertraditions? How are current debates positioned by traditions? Milbank's approach tends to close the door to this line of questioning. He appeals to postmodernist themes in his critique of these concerns. However, his frustration may also reflect his own commitments to a tradition of Anglo-Catholicism which firmly repudiated the line of discussion developed by Newman in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

¹³⁰ John Milbank, “‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism’: A Short *Summa* in Forty-Two Responses to Unasked Questions,” *Modern Theology* 7 (1991) 225–26.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 227.

ously the implications of the affirmation of God as universal ground, as well as the universalist claims in the tradition of theological inquiry. In Newman, as in MacIntyre, there is a recognition of the ways in which Christian thought has retrieved and continued the debate inaugurated by Greek philosophy. Because of this connection, Nietzsche insists that the decay of Christian theism profoundly subverts the tradition of metaphysical thinking in the West. It is hard to see how Milbank's postmodernist insistence on a "rhetorical" approach to Christian truth claims and his repudiation of all forms of "foundationalism" can "do justice" to the Fathers and the scholastics.¹³² Newman's approach to theology as a tradition of rational inquiry is more in keeping with the philosophical stance of classical traditions of theology.

Milbank's work makes a unique contribution and provides an admirable example of the way in which an aggressive theological analysis can help identify and critique distortions in academic discourse. However, postmodernist attempts to retrieve a more positive role for theology in the academy are often construed in such a way that they tend, for many, to confirm suspicions that the original reasons for the marginalization of theology may have been correct. Newman's account seems to avoid some of these pitfalls. Accordingly, it may provide a more fruitful line of argument in a reconsideration of the ways in which theology can play a constructive role in the academy. His thought underscores the fact that the shrivelled and cramped soul of modern academic discourse may need more than Bloom's Socrates or, for that matter, a baptized postmodernism, to correct and enlarge its scope. Newman insists on the need for a serious reexamination of underlying assumptions which support the marginalization of theology. He also insists on a thorough exploration of the impact of this suppression upon academic discourse. Finally, Newman argues that the renaissance of a more enriched and substantive debate on the question of the good is dependent upon one crucial requirement—the revival of a vibrant theistic discourse within the academy. In the busy, frantic, and demanding atmosphere of modern academic debate, attention to this tradition of inquiry and meditation upon its fundamental concerns continues to be, in Jesus' words to a distracted Martha, "the one thing necessary."¹³³

¹³² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* 328.

¹³³ John Henry Newman, "The Good Part of Mary," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons* 3 (London: Longmans, Green, 1901) no. 22, quoting Luke 10:41.