

NEWMAN AND THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM

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[The author's point of departure is the fact that both "liberals" and "conservatives" appeal to John Henry Newman to support their positions. However, Newman's attitude towards "liberalism" was much more nuanced than either party acknowledges. His own theology was characterized by a continual struggle to maintain a tensile unity between opposing tendencies and concerns. Hence, neither liberals nor conservatives can simply claim Newman as their own. In his quest for unity, Newman can serve as a model for our theologically polarized age.]

ONE OF THE MOST TELLTALE signs of John Henry Newman's complexity is the fact that he can be appealed to by men and women of nearly every shade of theological opinion. So-called conservative no less than so-called progressive Catholics can find in Newman's writings remarks that appear to serve their particular theological agendas.¹ This is not a new phenomenon. Already during Newman's lifetime, there was confusion about precisely where he belonged on the theological spectrum. And this

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¹ A recent example of a conservative reading of Newman is Stanley L. Jaki, *Newman's Challenge* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 2000). In his study, *Newman, Outstanding Christian Thinkers* (New York: Continuum, 2002), Cardinal Avery Dulles offers a much more guarded view than Jaki, and he acknowledges that, "Modernists, liberals and theological conservatives can all find texts from his writings to support their preferred theses" (164). As the remainder of my article suggests, however, it would seem that Dulles overstates his case when he speaks of Newman's "antidemocratic sentiments" and suggests that Newman would have been "disappointed by certain trends reflected in Vatican II," including "the desirability of adaptation to the modern world, and the superiority of democratic or participatory systems of government" (164).

confusion was perhaps, unintentionally, aggravated by Newman himself, particularly in view of his insistence, in 1879, that his whole life had been dedicated to resisting “the spirit of liberalism in religion.”²

In our day, the word “liberal” is more or less synonymous with “progressive” and its opposite is undoubtedly “conservative” (or perhaps even “reactionary”). Of course, we cannot simply equate our use of the term liberal with Newman’s. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that there would have been such a shift in the meaning of the term that its usage in the 19th century would be wholly unrelated to its usage in the 20th or the 21st century. If then, Newman was, by his own admission, anti-liberal, how did it come about that he was regarded as “the symbol of the hope of English Liberal Catholics” around the time of Vatican Council I,³ and as the “the veritable father of the more liberalizing developments of the 20th-century Catholic Church,”⁴ particularly as these came to expression in Vatican Council II? Assuming that the word liberal did not indeed undergo a total metamorphosis of meaning, the most likely conclusion is that Newman did in fact display sympathy for at least some aspect(s) of what passes for liberalism. If this is the case, then it might be fair to say, as one commentator has done, that while Newman was “an anti-liberal in his terms [he was] a liberal in ours.”⁵

In what follows, I attempt to clarify Newman’s position with respect to liberalism and to reflect on the lessons he has to teach us about our response to it, especially as regards the practice of theology.

LIBERALISM: THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

In a much-neglected article, Adrian Hastings provides a careful analysis of the evolution of Newman’s attitude toward liberalism, an analysis supported by some interesting reflections on the appearance of the term

² Newman made the remark in the course of his *biglietto* speech in 1879. The text of the speech is contained in Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman: Based on His Private Journals and Correspondence*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1912) 2.459–62, at 460.

³ J. Derek Holmes describes Newman in this way in “Newman’s Attitude to Ultramodernism and Liberal Catholicism on the eve of the First Vatican Council,” in *Bishops and Writers*, ed. Adrian Hastings (Wheatthampstead: A. Clarke Books, 1977) 16. Quoted in Adrian Hastings, *The Theology of a Protestant Catholic* (Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1990) 117. See Edward Norman, “Newman’s Social and Political Thinking,” in *Newman after a Hundred Years*, ed. Ian Ker, Alan G. Hill (New York: Oxford University, 1990) 153–73, at 168. Norman speaks of “Newman’s always unclear affinity with the Liberal Catholics’ various positions,” and observes that “Newman was never really a Liberal Catholic himself.”

⁴ Hastings, *Theology of a Protestant Catholic* 117.

⁵ *Ibid.* 118.

throughout Newman's career.⁶ In his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), Newman acknowledged that the content and program of liberalism varied, depending on the time and circumstances.⁷

It is important to bear this in mind when one reflects on Newman's attitude toward liberalism and on his understanding of the implications of liberalism for the discipline of theology. For Newman, liberalism was not, in the first place, a party or a movement within the Church, if by movement we mean a well-organized group with a well-defined program. (Perhaps the closest Catholic parallel is Modernism, which also was not a movement in the proper sense of that term.)⁸ Liberalism, it seems fair to say, is perhaps best understood as a state of mind, a fundamental attitude that may exist without an individual even being aware of it. It would, therefore, be dangerous to begin to define it in terms of the adherence to specific doctrines, though it is the case that this attitude—if consistently unfolded—will issue in the denial of many doctrines.⁹ However, as Newman pointed out, men and women are not consistent in their reasoning and are often not aware of

⁶ Adrian Hastings, "Newman as Liberal and Anti-Liberal," in *The Theology of a Protestant Catholic* 116–32.

⁷ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, Green, 1902) 292.

⁸ James C. Livingston observes that while "*Pascendi Gregis* gives the impression that there was a highly organized school of thinkers with a clear intellectual platform . . . , Catholic Modernism was not a single movement but a general tendency among quite independent individuals who sought, in the words of Alfred Loisy, 'to adapt the Catholic religion to the intellectual, moral and social needs of the present time. What drew the Modernists together, as happened in some cases, was a common concern to adapt the teaching of the Church to the modern age.'" (*Modern Christian Thought*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997) 1.365.

⁹ For a comprehensive discussion of Newman's understanding of the genesis of the liberal point of view in an individual, see J.-H. Walgrave, *Newman the Theologian* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960) 148–63. What is at stake here is what Newman calls first principles, by which he means those propositions with "which we start in reasoning on any given subject matter." Newman observes that these are "very numerous and vary in great measure with the persons who reason, according to their judgment and power of assent, being received by some minds, not by others, and only a few of them received universally" (John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. Ian Ker [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985] 45). While Newman recognized that there is "no necessary connection" between the first principles determining one's intellectual and moral natures (such that cultivation of the intellect cannot ensure moral growth), he insisted that, in both cases, first principles "are the means of proof, and are not proved; they rule, and are not ruled. . . . They are our guides and standards in speculating, reasoning, judging, deliberating, deciding, and acting. . . . They are the conditions of our mental life; by them we form our view of events, of deeds, of persons, of lines of conduct, of aims, of moral qualities, of religions. They constitute the difference between man and man; they characterize him" (John Henry Newman, *The Present Position of*

the inherent contradictions in their own thinking.¹⁰ Liberalism, for Newman, is essentially a form of solipsism, a conviction that truth, especially in matters of religion, is ultimately a private affair.¹¹ This means concretely that so-called conservatives may in fact be as liberal at heart as avowed liberals. More importantly, however, it means that if one is to address the challenge posed by liberalism to contemporary Christianity, one should not begin by insisting on submission to particular articles of faith.

Newman's insight into the character of liberalism is reflected in his recognition that it was not, in the first place, an ecclesiastical or theological problem but was instead a social and cultural phenomenon.¹² He came to conclude that it was a phenomenon that the Church would have to learn to live with. It is helpful to look more closely at Newman's approach to both aspects of liberalism. I devote most attention to liberalism as a theological problem, and deal only briefly with its social dimensions. I begin with the latter.

LIBERALISM AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON

Writing in 1864, Newman observed that: "the Liberalism which gives a color to society now is very different from that character of thought which bore the name thirty or forty years ago. Now it is scarcely a party; it is the educated lay world." The liberal mindset, he continues, is characterized by

Catholics in England [London: Longmans, Green, 1899] 283–84). Frederick D. Aquino, *Communities of Informed Judgment: Newman's Illative Sense and Accounts of Rationality* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2004) 86–89 addresses the charges of relativism that have been leveled against Newman on this point. Newman makes an explicit link between liberalism and first principles in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* 288: "Now by Liberalism I mean false liberty of thought, or the exercise of thought upon matters, in which, from the constitution of the human mind, thought cannot be brought to any successful issue, and therefore is out of place. Among such matters are first principles of whatever kind; and of these the most sacred and momentous are especially to be reckoned the truths of Revelation." Note that Newman prefaces this remarks by insisting that, "Liberty of thought is in itself a good; but it gives an opening to false liberty."

¹⁰ "The multitude of men indeed are not consistent, logical, or thorough; they obey no law in the course of their religious views. . . ." (Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 321; see also 48–51).

¹¹ By liberalism, Newman "meant approximately what many today would describe as the privatization of religion and its reduction to private sentiment" (Dulles, *Newman* 14).

¹² "The Liberalism which gives a color to society now, is very different from that character of thought which bore the name thirty or forty years ago. Now it is scarcely a party; it is the educated lay world. . . . At present it is nothing else than that deep, plausible skepticism, of which I spoke above, as being the development of human reason, as practically exercised by the natural man" (Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* 261).

“deep, plausible skepticism,” the skepticism that is the inevitable consequence of “the development of human reason, as practically exercised by the natural man.”¹³ In other words, liberalism is essentially a way of thinking that operates without reference to the principles and doctrines of traditional religion (the natural man) and that is oriented to—and takes its lead from—the empirical order (i.e., reason as practically exercised by the natural man). Liberalism is nothing if not pragmatic. Hence, long before it has an impact on religion, it makes its presence felt in the social and political realms (a fact that explains the emergence of that paradoxical movement known as Liberal Catholicism).¹⁴ The young Newman resisted what he called liberalism at the moment that it encroached on the rights and the authority of the Established (Anglican) Church. That resistance found expression in his participation in the so-called Oxford Movement which sought to restore Anglicanism’s Catholic character. As he explained in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, Newman’s involvement in the movement was founded on a theological principle, namely, his conviction that the Church had been entrusted with a revelation and invested with the authority, as it were, to preserve, protect, and defend it.¹⁵ The proximate cause of the Oxford Movement was a perceived threat to the Church’s distinctive identity by an increasingly secular state. By the time he left the Anglican Church in 1845, Newman was convinced that it did not have within itself the power to resist the onslaught of liberalism. However, it is important to bear in mind that, even as an Anglican, Newman’s struggle was not so much *against* liberalism as *on behalf of* the Church. In other words, in his battle with liberalism Newman was, in the first place, championing a cause, not simply resisting change. And that cause was the idea of revealed religion. It is worth recalling that, in his celebrated *biglietto* speech upon his reception of the cardinal’s hat, Newman described himself as having “resisted . . . the spirit of liberalism *in religion*,” not liberalism as such.

Indeed, as Hastings points out, “by the 1860s, [Newman] could see that the liberal society had come to stay,” and “his political anti-liberal phobia had almost completely disappeared: it might remain as a verbal whimsy but

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ The paradoxical character of Liberal Catholicism is well-reflected in James C. Livingston’s description of the movement’s goals as “Ultramontaniam in the service of liberty.” See Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 1.150. The essentially social and political character of liberal Catholicism is evident in H.-F. R. de Lamennais’s summary of its six essential themes, namely, liberty of conscience and religion, freedom of education, freedom of the press, liberty of association, universal suffrage, and decentralization of government. Livingston, therefore, rightly describes the movement’s program as “the charter of a new social movement in the Church” (1.151–52).

¹⁵ Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* 48–58.

in practical politics he now normally preferred the liberal opinion.”¹⁶ Hence, speaking in 1879, Newman declared that, in a democratic and religiously plural society, “the liberal principle is forced on us from the necessity of the case. . . . We cannot help ourselves.” Moreover, he points out that “there is much in the liberalistic theory which is good and true; for example, not to say more, the precepts of justice, truthfulness, sobriety, self-command, benevolence.” The problem is not the principles of liberalism as such, but the invocation of these principles in an attempt “to supersede, to block out, religion.” When that happens, Newman states, “we pronounce it [liberalism] to be evil.”¹⁷

For Newman, then, liberalism, in and of itself, was not an evil. Indeed, as a social and cultural phenomenon, it had much to commend it, particularly in an age in which “the apparent unity of Church and society was breaking down under the pressure of rational enquiry, political efficiency and de facto pluralism.”¹⁸ In such an age, the liberal virtues of tolerance, democracy, and freedom (both political and intellectual), are essential to the preservation of society.¹⁹ Newman recognized as much and he recognized too that any thought of a return to the authoritarian and monolithic tradition of the past was simply unrealistic.

Newman, it would seem, realized that to be credible in a liberal society the Church could not afford to be seen as “illiberal,” i.e., opposed to liberal standards in political and social life. This is not to suggest that Newman was particularly interested in political theory for its own sake. His interests clearly lay elsewhere.²⁰ But, as will be seen in what follows, he was concerned that the Church’s exercise of its own authority—within the limits imposed on it by its distinctive mission—be reasonable and judicious. He was also aware that where this was not the case, the cause of Christianity suffered. This was clearly reflected in his understanding of the practice of theology and of the role of the theologian in the Church.

¹⁶ Hastings, *Theology of a Protestant Catholic* 123.

¹⁷ Ward, *Life of Newman* 2.462. It is good to bear in mind that liberalism is not by definition devoid of religion. Instead it substitutes the religion of civilization for Christianity. See Terrence Merrigan, “‘One Momentous Principle Which Enters Into My Reasoning’: The Unitive Function of Newman’s Doctrine of Providence,” *Downside Review* 108 (1990) 254–81.

¹⁸ Hastings, *Theology of a Protestant Catholic* 119.

¹⁹ Norman, “Newman’s Social and Political Thinking” 163, 164, 166, 167–68. “Although Newman gave a lifetime to opposing the influence of liberalism in religion—to attacking the ‘the anti-dogmatic principle and its developments’—his political sensibilities were not untouched by a practical acceptance, if not of the values, at least of the actual arrangements which political liberals in his day promoted” (166).

²⁰ Norman, “Newman’s Social and Political Thinking” 172.

LIBERALISM AS A PROBLEM FOR THEOLOGY

The Theological Dimension of Liberalism

During his lifetime, Newman made no claim to the title of theologian. Today, however, there is no real debate about whether or not Newman merits the title, particularly if theology is defined as “a self-clarification of faith by all the relevant means of intellectual reflection.”²¹ What does Newman have to tell us about the nature and practice of theology in a liberal age? Of course, Newman did not address this question directly. To gain some insight into the lessons he might have to teach us, we must search through his scattered and occasionally aphoristic remarks on the topic. First, however, we must recall Newman’s observations on the precise threat liberalism poses to Christian faith.

Newman’s most succinct and perhaps most celebrated definition of liberalism is contained in the *Apologia* where he describes it first as the “anti-dogmatic principle and its developments,” and goes on to specify that it is “false liberty of thought, or the exercise of thought upon matters, in which, from the constitution of the human mind, thought cannot be brought to any successful issue, and therefore is out of place.”²² One must be very careful when one reads this description. First, Newman is not objecting to liberty of thought, but to *false liberty of thought*. Secondly, Newman is not suggesting that the exercise of thought should ever be restrained. He is simply insisting that we need always to be aware of the *limitations of our reasoning faculties*.

In what follows, I consider the way in which these two caveats are reflected in Newman’s understanding of theology. My aim is to demonstrate that Newman defended the rigorous exercise of thought on religious matters, but that he was also always profoundly aware of the fact that religion is more than a matter of the intellect. Indeed, much of Newman’s greatness and his significance for today consist precisely in his ability to maintain a healthy balance between apparently contradictory impulses and tendencies. In short, Newman can serve as a model for contemporary theologians whose task it is to exercise their intellects in the service of faith, while remaining aware that the object of their reflections ultimately resists intellection.

²¹ J.-H. Walgrave, “The Nature and Scope of Theology,” *Louvain Studies* 4 (1972) 3–12, at 3; Terrence Merrigan, “Newman on the Practice of Theology,” *Louvain Studies* 14 (1989) 260–84.

²² Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* 288.

Newman on Theology as a Rational Exercise²³

Newman's most explicit treatment of the discipline of theology is contained in his discourses and lectures on university education. There he is quite insistent that what distinguishes theology from the natural sciences is its methodology. While the latter proceed by induction, theology employs the "argumentative method of . . . a strict science," that is to say, deduction. Hence, while the natural sciences take their lead from "the phenomena which meet the senses," theology does not begin with "any sensible facts [or] phenomena" but with "Cause and Source of all things." As Newman puts it, theology begins "at the other end of knowledge, and is occupied, not with the finite, but the Infinite."²⁴

Today, Newman's neat distinction between the natural sciences and theology seems curiously antiquated. Moreover, and this is perhaps most perplexing, it does not seem to square at all with Newman's own practice of theological science, particularly as that is manifest in his most creative theological work, the *Essay on Development* (1845). Newman's "personal theological style" has been variously described as "inductive," "synthetic," "tentative," and "hermeneutical."²⁵ One author has described it as involving an "imaginative synthesis of what is at first disparate and random data."²⁶ F. M. Willam wrote that Newman's lifelong quest was to insure induction its rightful place in theology, and Thomas Norris speaks of "an explicit parallel between the method of the [*Essay on*] *Development*, and the positive scientific method."²⁷

Norris explains the discrepancy between Newman's actual practice of theology and the theory of the *Idea* by referring to the context in which the university discourses were delivered. Speaking as the rector of the nascent Catholic University of Ireland, Newman felt obliged to "approach the

²³ I have discussed Newman's understanding of theology in *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts: The Religious and Theological Ideal of John Henry Newman*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 131–68. See also Merrigan, "Newman on the Practice of Theology" 261–62. The references contained in the text are taken from John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London: Longmans, Green, 1921) 432, 434.

²⁴ Newman, *Idea of a University* 434.

²⁵ John T. Ford, "'Dancing on the Tight Rope': Newman's View of Theology," *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings*, 49 (1985) 424–41, at 441; Nicholas Lash, "Was Newman a Theologian?" *Heythrop Journal* 17 (1976) 322–25, at 324; David Hammond, "Imagination and Hermeneutical Theology: Newman's Contribution to Theological Method," *Downside Review* 106 (1988) 17–34, at 24.

²⁶ Hammond, "Imagination and Hermeneutical Theology" 24.

²⁷ Franz M. Willam, *Die Erkenntnislehre Kardinal Newmans: Systematische Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Bergen-Enkheim bei Frankfurt/M: Gerhard Kaffke, 1969) 216.

question of method ‘from the ordinary standpoint of Catholic theology’.” His point was that revelation can only be “made more explicit, but never added to.”²⁸

There is, clearly, much truth in this view. There is, however, another explanation of the discrepancy, one that has been succinctly put by Nicholas Lash. According to Lash, “between 1852 and 1878, there is a shift in Newman’s conception of theology that corresponds to Lonergan’s observation, a century later, that ‘theology was deductive, and it has become largely an empirical science’.”²⁹ Lash acknowledges Newman’s concern to display his loyalty to the traditional vision, but he insists that this understanding of theology was in fact “alien to [Newman’s] whole mentality, even though he could appreciate its strengths.” According to Lash, Newman’s experience of the Irish hierarchy’s resistance to advancing cultural pluralism, and the rise of conservative ultramontanist, taught him “to appreciate the need for theological creativity and freedom of research.” This shift is reflected in “several of the changes introduced into the revised [1878] edition of the *Essay on Development* . . . [such as] a new emphasis on theology as ‘investigation’, and on the duty of that ‘loving inquisitiveness’ which is the life of the ‘Schola’.”³⁰

Lash insists, however, that Newman continued to be aware of one essential difference between the methodology of the positive sciences and the sort of historical research he had undertaken in the *Essay on Development*.

²⁸ Thomas J. Norris, *Newman and His Theological Method: A Guide for the Theologian Today* (Leiden: Brill, 1977) 82, 205–6.

²⁹ Lash, “Was Newman a Theologian?,” p. 323 quoting B. J. F. Lonergan, *A Second Collection: Papers* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974) 58.

³⁰ Lash, “Was Newman a Theologian?” 322, 323. Lash does not explain precisely how Newman’s Dublin experience encouraged his appreciation of the need for theological creativity. Some clue might, however, be provided by John Coulson when he observes that, though Newman certainly became disillusioned with the Irish project in view of Irish episcopal interference, he was, in any case, convinced that a plural and secular society was irresistibly emerging. In such a society, theology could only hold its own by becoming relevant to the age. See John Coulson, “The Place of Theology in Newman’s University,” in *John Henry Newman: Theologian and Cardinal: Symposium 9–12 October 1979*, *Studia Urbaniana* 10 (Rome: Urbaniana University, 1981) 33–48, at 44. In an article comparing Newman’s and Lonergan’s view of theology, Coulson elaborates on this: “The reason why a purely systematic theology is no longer possible lies in the existence of the plural society, which has as many ways of life as there are meanings and values. The culture which has been superseded was static, normative, and classicist . . . The Word of God can only be known as it is translated in the new context, and the task of theology becomes . . . to speak the word . . . in ever new contexts and therefore in ever new ‘translations’.” See John Coulson, “Front-Line Theology: A Marginal Comment on Newman and Lonergan,” in *Looking at Lonergan’s Method*, ed. Patrick Corcoran (Dublin: Talbot, 1975) 187–93, at 188.

That difference consists in the role played, in historical research, by the predispositions and prejudices (in the original sense of that term, as elaborated by H.-G. Gadamer³¹) that characterize the researcher. Later, in the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman would speak of the “ethical character . . . [that] system of first principles, sentiments and tastes . . . which is formally and normally, naturally and divinely, the ‘organum investigandi’ given us for gaining religious truth.”³² Perhaps he did not feel the need to insist on such a preparation for theological inquiry when he was addressing an exclusively Catholic audience in 1852.

However, in the years that followed, Newman was increasingly dismayed by the prevailing theological conservatism, especially in the face of the intellectual crisis generated by 19th-century scientific advance. To meet the challenge of the age, Newman came to believe, what was needed was the creative re-appropriation of the Christian inheritance. Theology must respond to the needs of its own age. Newman’s deepened awareness of this fact is reflected in his juxtaposition of “experimental science, historical research,” and “theology” as classes of “concrete reasoning” in the *Grammar*³³ and in his admission, in a letter of 1870, that theology required a “‘Novum Organon’.”³⁴ It was the task of the theologian to confront honestly whatever data modern scientific and historical research brought to bear on questions of faith, and not to shy away from contemporary challenges to even the most long-cherished convictions and opinions. “A new question needs a new answer,” Newman wrote,³⁵ and, we may add, new answers can only be developed where there is a degree of flexibility, a willingness to leave well-trodden paths however serviceable they may have proved themselves to be.³⁶

The plea for intellectual freedom, as a condition for the adequate de-

³¹ For a discussion of Newman and Gadamer, see Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993) 39–40, 52, 116, 154–56. See also Thomas K. Carr, *Newman and Gadamer: Toward a Hermeneutics of Religious Knowledge* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996).

³² Newman, *Grammar of Assent* 321.

³³ *Ibid.* 231.

³⁴ *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. C.S. Dessain et al. (New York: T. Nelson, 1961—) 25.56. See Nicholas Lash, *Newman on Development: The Search for an Explanation in History* (Shepherdstown, W. Virg.: Patmos, 1975) 24–25.

³⁵ J. H. Newman, *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Biblical Inspiration and on Infallibility*, ed. J. Derek Holmes (New York: Oxford University, 1979) 105. Lash, *Newman on Development* 160 n. 5 notes the difference between this remark of Newman’s and a remark in the *Idea* 223 to the effect that “if we would solve new questions, it must be by consulting old answers.”

³⁶ “Our theological philosophers are like the old nurses who wrap the unhappy infant in swaddling bands or boards, put a lot of blankets over him and shut the windows that not a breath of fresh air may come to his skin—as if he were not

fense of the faith in his own day, was a leitmotif of Newman's Catholic career. Christopher Hollis observed that Newman was a "rare Catholic" in his day since he was possessed of "a most profound belief in liberty," a belief "that truth was many-sided and only likely to emerge out of an atmosphere of free discussion."³⁷ In the same vein, Newman's first biographer, Wilfrid Ward, described Newman as resisting a "theological narrowness" that seemed to effect "an apparent alliance between orthodoxy and obscurantism."³⁸

The place Newman accords the *scola theologorum*, i.e., "the bodies of theologians throughout the world, or . . . the Schools of the Church viewed as a whole," in his ecclesiology, was a far cry from the subservient role allotted them in Ultramontane thinking. It was, too, in his day, very much an ideal to be realized. Newman lamented the centralization of the Church in his day, the directness with which *Propaganda fide* intervened in theological discussions, and the absence of "the exercise of the intellect" in the conduct of theological life.³⁹

As Ian Ker has pointed out, Newman's mature ecclesiology satisfied neither Liberal Catholics nor Ultramontanes. The former "were annoyed at Newman's insistence on the prerogatives of the Holy See and the bishops," the latter "resented the emphasis placed upon the role of theologians." Ker concludes that, "for Newman, it is not finally a choice between theological freedom and an omnipotent magisterium but of a perennial and necessary conflict between theology and the magisterium, the result of which paradoxically is not the victory of one over the other or a stalemate—

healthy enough to bear wind and water in due measures. They move in a groove, and will not tolerate anyone who does not move in the same" (*Letters and Diaries* 24.316; see also 27.70).

³⁷ Christopher Hollis, "Newman the Man: Freedom and Love," *Wiseman Review*, no. 492 (Summer 1962) 182–90, at 186, 188.

³⁸ Wilfrid Ward, "Introduction" to *On the Scope and Nature of University Education*, by Cardinal Newman (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1955; first ed. 1915) ix.

³⁹ Consider the following remarks by Newman in a letter written in 1863: "This age of the Church is peculiar,—in former times, primitive or medieval, there was not the extreme centralization which now is in use. If a private theologian said anything free, another answered him. If the controversy grew, then it went to a Bishop, a theological faculty, or to some foreign University. The Holy See was but the Court of ultimate appeal. *Now*, if I, as a private priest, put anything into print, Propaganda answers me at once. How can I fight with such a chain on my arm? It is like the Persians driven to fight under the lash. There was true private judgment in the primitive and medieval schools,—there are no schools now, no private judgment (in the religious sense of the phrase), no freedom, that is, of opinion. That is, no exercise of the intellect. No, the system goes on by the tradition of the intellect of former times" (*Letters and Diaries* 20.391–92; see also 20.426, 447; 21.48–49; 27.212).

but the preservation and vitality of each.”⁴⁰ Here one finds an excellent example of Newman’s vision of the kind of tensile balance needed for theological progress to be made. However, as we shall see immediately, theological progress depends on more than the free and critical exercise of reason alone.

Newman on the Limitations of Theology

Newman’s growing recognition of the place of induction in theology does not so much represent the abandonment of his belief in theology’s properly deductive character, as its readjustment. Even in the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman describes theology as “the exercise of the intellect upon the ‘cre-*cre*nda’ of revelation,” and, accordingly, as a process of deduction.⁴¹ What Newman realized, however, and what many of his contemporaries in the Catholic Church did not, was that the process whereby those *cre-cre*nda are established is by no means clear-cut. Far from being a matter of rigid demonstration, the delineation of the “essence” of Christianity (what Newman calls the Christian “idea”) requires the consideration of the multifarious contours of Christian life and practice, as these unfold themselves in history. The idea of Christianity, understood as an object of knowledge, comes to expression in a whole range of social forms, including ethical codes, systems of government or thought, ritual practices, and so forth. These, in turn, impact on the idea, influencing its development for better or worse as the case may be. So Newman could write that Christianity had first appeared “as a worship, springing up and spreading in the lower ranks of society. . . . Then it seized upon the intellectual and cultivated class, and created a theology and schools of learning. Lastly it seated itself, as an ecclesiastical polity, among princes, and chose Rome for its center.”⁴² The Christian idea is, therefore, a complex, comprehensive fact of history. The investigation of its historical manifestations is most surely a work for theology, and just as surely a work involving processes of induction.

However, as Newman pointed out, “theology, so far as it is relative to us, or is the Science of Religion . . . [is not excluded] from the law to which

⁴⁰ Ian Ker, “Magisterium and Theologians,” in *Geweten—Theologie—Leergezag: Verantwoordelijkheden in de kerk volgens John Henry Newman* (Nijmegen: Dispuutgezelschap H.O.E.K., 1981) 33–46, at 46. See also Ian Ker, “Newman and the ‘Orphans of Vatican II,’” *Louvain Studies* 15 (1990) 119–35, at 133–35. For an extended discussion of the Newman’s understanding of the dynamic character of the Church’s ongoing life, see Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts* 240–51; Avery Dulles, “The Threefold Office in Newman’s Ecclesiology,” in *Newman After a Hundred Years*, ed. Ian Ker & A. G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 375–99.

⁴¹ Newman, *Grammar of Assent* 98.

⁴² John Henry Newman, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1899) I.xli.

every mental exercise is subject, viz., from that imperfection which ever must attend the abstract, when it would determine the concrete."⁴³ In view of this fact, Newman is able to warn that theology can provide "no analysis . . . subtle and delicate enough to represent adequately the state of mind under which we believe or the subjects of belief, as they are presented to our thoughts."⁴⁴

It is illuminating to note that only a year before his plea for the creative- (theological) reappropriation of the Christian tradition, Newman had pondered its essentially poetic, and hence, its essentially "impenetrable, inscrutable, [and] mysterious" character. Writing in 1858, he said of poetry that it "does not address the reason, but the imagination and affections."⁴⁵ It is the stuff of what Newman would describe in the *Grammar of Assent* as real apprehensions (and assents).⁴⁶

In an 1858 essay, Newman insisted that the Church requires both the

⁴³ Newman, *Idea of a University* 52.

⁴⁴ John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between A.D. 1826 and 1843* (London: Rivingtons, 1890) 267. For an analysis of the way in which this conviction shaped Newman's theological method, see Denis Robinson, "The Mother of Wisdom: Exploring the Parabolic Imperative in the Early Works of John Henry Newman," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002) 153–70, at 156–58.

⁴⁵ John Henry Newman, *Historical Sketches*, 3 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1872) 2.387.

⁴⁶ According to Newman, 'real apprehension' occurs when a proposition (for example, a religious doctrine) is 'regarded' as referring to 'some-thing' which can be experienced. In a paper written about 1860, Newman explained that by the word, 'regard', he meant "the active contemplation, by the mind, of those phenomena which come before it, with the attendant capacities to remember them when they are absent, to recognize them when they come again, to observe the order in which they come, to form them into separate wholes, and to trace that wholeness to a unity beyond themselves or external to itself and to give names to those assumed entities." See *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*, ed. Hugo M. de Achaval & J. Derek Holmes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 63. Henry Habberly Price pointed out that Newman used the word "real" in its etymological sense, as derived from the Latin *res* (thing)—a usage that would have been immediately understood by his 19th-century audience in view of their classical education. By "real," then, Newman "means something like 'thingish'," and "real apprehension" is quite simply the mind attending to one, concrete thing. See Henry H. Price, *Belief* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960) 317. 'Real assent' is the recognition that what the doctrine says is true, *in the sense* that it resonates with some aspect of our actual experience of life. See Terrence Merrigan, "Newman on Faith in the Trinity," in *Newman and Faith*, ed. Ian Ker & Terrence Merrigan, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 31 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 93–116, at 96–99. On the significance of Newman's understanding of imagination for Christian life and worship, see Terrence Merrigan, "Imagination and Religious Commitment in the Pluralist Theology of Religions," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002) 197–217.

poetical spirit (represented by St. Benedict) and the scientific spirit (represented by St. Dominic), as well as the spirit of pragmatism (exemplified in St. Ignatius of Loyola). "Imagination, Science, Prudence, are all good," Newman declares, and the Church "has them all." "Things incompatible in nature, coexist in her." "Her prose is poetical on the one hand, and philosophical on the other."⁴⁷

While the combination of the poetical and the scientific spirit is more difficult to achieve in the case of the individual, it is not impossible. Hence, Newman can claim, in the 1877 "Preface" to the *Via Media*, that the ideal toward which theology must aspire is the union of "clear heads and holy hearts,"⁴⁸ that is to say, the union of critical intellection and deeply felt personal faith. The one who is able to achieve this can do in theological matters what a "learned Aristotelian" can do in matters relevant to his or her own discipline, namely, to answer questions that did not occur in the age of the "Master" in a fashion consonant with the Master's vision. The "means" by which the disciple can do this, Newman observes, are twofold: by an "instinct" born of thoroughgoing familiarity with his or her Master's thought, and by "never-swerving processes of ratiocination."⁴⁹ This union of instinct and ratiocination is what Newman has in mind when he speaks of "the theology of a religious imagination."⁵⁰ Those who attain to it will denigrate neither religious devotion nor critical reflection. Instead, they will value both and strive to maintain a tensile balance between them.

One of the fruits of this achievement will be, on the part of the theologian, a profound sensitivity to the limitations of all theologizing, and the toleration of a certain element of ambiguity (and even contradiction) in doctrinal formulations.

In a letter to an agnostic correspondent, dated April 29, 1879, Newman wrote: "What then you say of mechanical science, I say emphatically of theology, viz. that it 'makes progress by being always alive to its own fundamental uncertainties'.⁵¹ The history of the Church's dogmatic tradition could be invoked to illustrate what is, in the final analysis, a methodological principle. So Newman, in a letter of 1871, ventured the view that "the Church moved on to the perfect truth by various successive declarations, alternately in contradictory directions, and thus perfecting, completing, supplying each other."⁵² Perhaps his most stirring statement of this principle can be found in papers preparatory to the *Grammar* which date

⁴⁷ Newman, *Historical Sketches* 2.369.

⁴⁸ Newman, *The Via Media*, 1.lxxv; see also 1.xlviii.

⁴⁹ Hugo M. de Achaval, "An Unpublished Paper by Cardinal Newman on the Development of Doctrine," *Gregorianum* 39 (1958) 585-96, at 593.

⁵⁰ Newman, *Grammar of Assent* 117.

⁵¹ *Letters and Diaries* 29.118.

⁵² *Ibid.* 25.310; see also 25.330.

from 1863. There, reflecting on the poverty of our language when it is called upon to express the “real thing”⁵³ which is the object of our religious profession, Newman lays down what might be described as a charter for the practice of theological science. The essence of that charter is the willingness to live with the limitations that inevitably accompany the science of God, and, even more, to see in them some clue to God’s very being. Newman writes as follows:

From the nature of the case, all our language about Almighty God, so far as it is affirmative, is analogical and figurative. We can only speak of Him, whom we reason about but have not seen, in terms of our experience. When we reflect on Him and put into words our thoughts about Him, we are forced to transfer to a new meaning ready made words, which primarily belong to objects of time and place. We are aware, while we do so, that they are inadequate, but we have the alternative of doing so, or doing nothing at all. We can only remedy their insufficiency by confessing it. We can do no more than put ourselves on the guard as to our own proceeding, and protest against it, while we do . . . it. We can only set right one error of expression by another. By this *method of antagonism* we steady our minds, not so as to reach their object, but to point them in the right direction; as in an algebraical process we might add and subtract in series, approximating little by little, *by saying and unsaying, to a positive result.*⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

From the very beginning, writers on Newman have been led astray by their fascination for Newman’s capacity for faith (his credulity as it is usually called). There has always been a tendency, and it is still with us, to see in Newman an unsophisticated *homo religiosus*, one never more content than “alone with the Alone,” a creature of religious sentiment for whom the highest virtue was loyalty to the institution which provided for his religious impulses. It would be absurd to deny the unmistakable religious dynamic operative in Newman’s life. Religion was the *leitmotif* of his existence. Indeed, for Newman, religious experience was coincident with the experience of one’s own existence—God’s self-revelation in conscience ranking among the constitutive acts of human consciousness. For Newman, experience is naturally religious, and growth to the fullness of Christian faith the natural issue of faithfulness to our own essential nature.⁵⁵

In Newman’s view, irreligion is the foreign body infecting human thought and culture, especially in its modern (liberal) form. The mind

⁵³ *Theological Papers on Faith and Certainty* 98.

⁵⁴ Newman, *Theological Papers on Faith and Certainty* 1.102. See Robinson, “The Mother of Wisdom: Exploring the Parabolic Imperative in the Early Works of John Henry Newman” 165–66; Roman Siebenrock, *Wahrheit, Gewissen und Geschichte: Eine systematisch-theologische Rekonstruktion des Wirkens John Henry Kardinal Newmans*, Internationale Cardinal-Newman-Studie, 15 (Sigmaringendorf: Glock & Lutz, 1996) 473–78.

⁵⁵ Merrigan, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts* 36–41.

spontaneously cogitates upon the “sensations” and “impressions” that are its meat and drink, so to speak; but it is, ideally, a mind informed by the most profound religious sentiment and carried along by basic moral principles that are very nearly self-evident. Thought, real human thought, is the thought of moral beings, beings conscious that the act of intellection is itself an ethical enterprise, one for which they are accountable before the Divine Judge. In Newman’s essential vision, there is no dichotomy between cognition and the religious imperative, no tension between faith and reason. In men and women as they are in the world, however, reason (so-called) nearly always tends to atheism. This is only possible because reason is truncated, uprooted from its true home in the soil of humanity’s ethical-religious consciousness. The exposure and redress of the operation of this falsely autonomous reason in the domain of religion was one of the great causes of Newman’s life, a cause easily misunderstood and susceptible of easy misrepresentation.

Newman was convinced that the religious given was intelligible and propo- nible. He realized, however, that it pertained to an order of experience which 19th-century “scientific” thought deemed inadmissible as an object of critical reflection. Moreover, he recognized that the whole framework of scientific rationality was inimical to the depth of commitment and the unconditional assent so essential to the act of faith, forbidding a priori anything beyond a measured assurance of the probability of a proposition. To meet this most subtle attack on the very foundations of Christian faith, Newman was forced to light on two fronts, as it were—to vindicate the claim of properly religious experience to legitimacy and to establish the essentially rational character of the faith act. This gives rise to a most striking admixture in his writings, especially in the *Grammar of Assent*: on the one hand, an unambiguous defense of religious experience which, he acknowledges, involves a highly imaginative component, and, on the other hand, the continual insistence on the truly rational character of that experience and of our assent to the articulations of it. This complex admixture calls for a very particular approach, one which does not confuse “distinction with division.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ All who engage in critical reflection would perhaps do well to heed the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) who remarked that: “The office of philosophical [we substitute ‘theological’] disquisition consists in just distinction; while it is the privilege of the philosopher [theologian] to preserve himself constantly aware, that distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical process of philosophy [theology]. But having done so, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity in which they actually exist; and this is the result of philosophy [theology].” See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Portable Coleridge*, ed. I. A. Richards (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1977) 520.

One who would understand Newman must not, then, be dismayed at the superficial discord his writings often evidence. Instead, very much aware of this element, one must attend to the way in which Newman strives to fashion (or refashion) a unity out of the discord he has created (or is undergoing). When Thomas Huxley declared that he could compile a “primer of infidelity” on the basis of Newman’s works, he was bearing unintended witness to this peculiar character of Newman’s mind. Like many others, however, he was working with only half the picture. The key to Newman’s complexity is his ability to hold in tensile unity apparently opposite tendencies and concerns. Indeed, it is in the attempt at synthesis that Newman is most truly revealed.