

“God in the Nineteenth Century”

5. John Henry Newman

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Fenton John Anthony Hort was as indubitably a Cambridge man as John Henry Newman was an Oxford one. Since Hort admired and revered Newman, his reaction, in a letter to his wife, to the news of Newman’s death, rather takes the breath away: “I suppose there is no distinguished theologian in any church, or of any school, whom I should find it so hard to think of as having contributed anything to the support or advance of Christian truth”.¹ He went on to say that “but for his indestructible sense of God’s reality and presence, he *must* have early become a thorough-going unbeliever”.

On this latter judgement, Hort seems to me right on the mark. The passage which we heard from the *Apologia* leaves one in no doubt of Newman’s sense of the pervasiveness of pain, and suffering, and disaster, in the world. In a University Sermon preached in Oxford in 1839, on “Faith and Reason, Contrasted as Habits of Mind”, he had said: “It is indeed a great question whether Atheism is not as philosophically consistent with the phenomena of the physical world, taken by themselves, as the doctrine of a creative and governing Power”.² And he went on: “But, however this be, the practical safeguard against Atheism in the case of scientific inquirers is the inward need and desire, the

¹ Hort, A. F., *Life and Letters of Fenton John Anthony Hort* (2 vols, London, 1896), Vol. ii, pp. 423-4. See David Thompson, *Cambridge Theology in the Nineteenth Century. Enquiry, Controversy and Truth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 135-6.

² John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892), p. 194.

inward experience of that Power, existing in the mind before and independently of their examination of His material world”.³

Newman’s lifelong commitment to sound argument in the quest for truth is not in question. In my study, his published works cover more than five foot-run of shelf space, and the thirty-one volumes of his letters much the same. He wrote copiously but never, I think, carelessly. He was profoundly suspicious of the *glibness* of religious rationalism – as deaf to the darkness and complexity of the world as to the mystery of God. In another University Sermon, on “The Usurpations of Reason”, he remarked that it is “as absurd to argue men, as to torture them, into believing”.⁴

Not many years ago, there was a Cavendish Professor of Physics in this university who is said to have actively discouraged his doctoral students from having anything to do with philosophy. Newman, notwithstanding that he is one of the outstanding philosophers of the nineteenth century would not, I think, have been wholly unsympathetic. In the sermon on “Faith and Reason Contrasted as Habits of Mind”, from which I quoted earlier, he said: “Faith is a principle of action, and action does not allow time for minute and finished investigations. We may (if we will) think that such investigations are of high value; though, in truth, they have a tendency to blunt the practical energy of the mind, while they improve its scientific exactness; but, whatever be their character and consequences, they do not answer the needs of daily life”.⁵

Whether in regard to the knowledge of God, or of each other and of the world of which we form a part, Newman is tirelessly insistent on the inseparability of head and heart, of the mind and the affections. “As

³ Loc. cit.

⁴ *Fifteen Sermons*, p. 63.

⁵ *Fifteen Sermons*, p. 188.

hunger and thirst, as taste, sound, and smell, are the channels through which this bodily frame receives pleasure”, he said in a sermon in 1840, “so the affections are the instruments by which the soul has pleasure. When they are exercised duly, it is happy; when they are undeveloped, restrained, or thwarted, it is not happy. This is our real and true bliss, not to know, or to affect, or to pursue; but to love, to hope, to joy, to admire, to revere, to adore. Our real and true bliss lies in the possession of those objects on which our hearts may rest and be satisfied”.⁶

“On which our hearts may rest”, echoing the first page of Augustine’s *Confessions*: “Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee”. Newman goes on: “Now, if this be so, here is at once a reason for saying that the thought of God, and nothing short of it, is the happiness of man; for though there is much besides to serve as subject of knowledge, or motive for action, or means of excitement, yet the affections require a something more vast and more enduring than anything created. What is novel and sudden excites, but does not influence; what is pleasurable or useful raises no awe; self moves no reverence, and mere knowledge kindles no love. He alone is sufficient for the heart who made it”.

Newman’s sermons, taken on their own, might give an impression of almost uninterrupted solemnity. But they are, after all, *sermons*: neither in the nineteenth nor the twenty-first century is the preacher expected to be a stand-up comedian. Nevertheless, Newman is not seriousness alone. He could be extremely amusing and had an almost Swiftian gift for irony.

I suppose that one of the best-known passages in his writings is the portrait of the “gentleman” in his Dublin lectures on *The Idea of a*

⁶ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. V (London: Rivingtons, 1868), p. 316.

University. I never cease to be astonished by the number of people commenting on this passage who fail to notice that it is deeply ironic. He is, after all, describing what he calls “the lineaments of the ethical character, which the cultivated intellect will form, *apart from religious principle*”.⁷ They are, he says, “seen within the pale of the Church and without it, in holy men and in profligate; they form the *beau-ideal* of the world; they partly assist and partly distort the development of the Catholic”.

The portrait begins: “Hence it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain. This description is both refined and, as far as it goes, accurate”. Newman then begins to turn the screw: the gentleman “is mainly occupied in merely removing the obstacles which hinder the free and unembarrassed action of those about him; and he concurs with their movements rather than takes the initiative himself”. Then comes my favourite bit: “His benefits may be considered as parallel to what are called comforts or conveniences in arrangements of a personal nature: like an easy chair or a good fire, which do their part in dispelling cold and fatigue, though nature provides both means of rest and animal heat without them”.⁸ I love the “easy chair”!

Newman died in 1890, Nietzsche in 1900. Where the eclipse of God in European culture is concerned, they might, at first sight, not seem to have too much in common. Yet Michael Buckley, in his magisterial study of the origins of modern atheism, sees them as the two men who, to a greater extent than any of their contemporaries, grasped the full weight and import of the “massive shifting of religious consciousness” which was taking place in the nineteenth century. In 1887, in the fifth book of

⁷ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*, edited I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 180-1, my stress.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

The Gay Science, Nietzsche said that “The greatest event – that ‘God is dead’, that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least ... some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt”.⁹

Twenty years earlier, in that same chapter of the *Apologia* from which our reading was taken, Newman compared the fading of religious knowledge in the pagan world of ancient Rome, two thousand years ago, with what was happening in the Europe of his day. “And in these latter days, in like manner”, he says, “things are tending – with far greater rapidity than in that old time ... to atheism in one shape or another. What a scene, what a prospect, does the whole of Europe present at this day! and not only Europe, but every government and every civilization throughout the world, which is under the influence of the European mind”.¹⁰

“What Nietzsche and Newman foresaw”, says Michael Buckley, “was that religious impotence or uninterest would not remain a private or an isolated phenomenon ... that its influence would eventually tell upon every routine aspect of civilization. Both Nietzsche and Newman, albeit with vastly different evaluations, gauged the enormous importance of what was taking place, and in their assessments they stand as prophetic figures within the twilight of the nineteenth century”.¹¹

⁹ Quoted from Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 28.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, 1885), p. 244.

¹¹ Buckley, op. cit., p. 29.