



Catholic Theological Association 2010 Conference Papers

The Theology of John Henry Newman

Introduction

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Because there had been doubts that a process for the canonisation of John Henry Cardinal Newman might progress expeditiously, the question was asked at one time, apparently, whether he could be declared a Doctor of the Church without him first being declared a saint. The answer, it seems, was that he couldn't. The fact is that he clearly has been a doctor of the church for some time, even if he does not yet get the capital letters that would signify an official title, and it was entirely appropriate that the British Catholic Theological Association should discuss aspects of Newman's theology at its annual conference in the year of his beatification (in the week before the promulgation and at a location about to be visited by Pope Benedict).

It has been suggested that Newman had all his most creative and original ideas while he was a member of the Church of England and he spent the second half of his life showing that those ideas had their proper home in the Catholic (in the sense of Roman Catholic) Church. The opening paper by the Anglican Bishop Geoffrey Rowell looks at Newman as an Anglican. He shows where Newman's theological concerns are to be found in his Anglican writings and also warns that the Catholic tradition in the Church of England is in danger of losing Newman's inheritance.

Newman has always been known as a patristic scholar and Michael Lang explores the influence of the early Church Fathers on his theology from his first systematic reading of the Fathers in 1828. Newman had espoused the idea of the Church of England as the *via media*, holding the middle ground between what he saw as the doctrinal excesses of the evangelical Protestantism of his youth and Rome. It was looking into the Arian controversy, the subject of his first book of 1833, that first made him doubt this theory. In his *Apologia*, Newman explains that while the Anglican idea is that Rome has diverged from a traditional orthodoxy and can no longer be followed

in doctrinal matters, he discovered that in the Arian controversy of the fourth-century Rome was then what it is now, that is at the centre not the periphery. Newman tested his theory of doctrinal development against the Fathers but if he can now be seen to have a weakness, it is that he had not absorbed the historical consciousness of the Enlightenment, for he read the Fathers simply as his contemporaries in the nineteenth-century.

Anthony Kenny looks at how Newman responded to the growing secularization of Victorian society by seeing how he dealt with the religious doubt of his contemporaries. Kenny traces a story of two pairs of brothers: John Henry and his younger brother Francis, and the Arnolds, Matthew and Tom, the latter of whom finished a Catholic (not washed away on Dover Beach). After an early unpleasant response to Francis's defection from the Church of England, John Henry learnt to accommodate unbelievers like Matthew Arnold without ever relishing their company.

Eamon Duffy and John McDade share a critical discussion about the importance of the Preface to the third edition of *The Via Media of the Church of England*. This two-volume work began life as *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church*, published in 1836 while Newman was still in the Church of England. As a Roman Catholic, he republished it in 1877 and wrote a new and quite long Preface to this its third edition. Far from being a repudiation of his earlier criticism of Rome, he shows that his earlier ecclesiology, properly understood, finds its home in his new Church. Both authors hint that Newman's ecclesiology, while framed during the pontificate of Pius IX, is not distant from issues in the present pontificate.

Newman was certainly out of sympathy with the Ultramontanism that influenced the First Vatican Council and thought that papal infallibility would have been better left undefined. This left him under the suspicion of unorthodoxy in some quarters and it was thought that the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*, published by Pope Pius X in 1907, seventeen years after Newman's death, had the English Cardinal as its intended target. Stephen Bullivant suggests that this was an idea put about by George Tyrrell and, by looking at journals and papers of the time, he shows that there was no campaign against Newman in the Curia at the time Modernism was rearing its head. Intriguingly, Bullivant suggests that Newman's most influential supporters were Pius X himself and Cardinal Merry del Val.

Anthony Kenny suggests in passing that Newman's understanding of conscience is unconvincing for those in a post-Freudian age. Charlotte Hansen offers a more detailed exploration of 'conscience' in Newman and traces its influence in his moral thinking and in his theology. Newman saw conscience as the voice of God. He would have had no sympathy with a modern subjective understanding of it offering moral justification for personal whims. Newman took it

that having a conscience is evidence of our being subject to a higher authority and, in this respect, he can be related to Kierkegaard who saw conscience linking the individual with God.

Newman continues to be much read for his ideas on university education, though his evaluation of liberal education has little political influence at the present time. Gerard Loughlin gives an account of Newman's ideas on education, not from *The Idea of a University* of 1873, but from the less well-known 'Rise and Progress of Universities' published the previous year. Loughlin tells a story centred on 'wonder', and he wonders where wonder might find a suitable educational home now.

Nicholas Lash argues briefly but trenchantly that, contrary to a much put about view, Newman had no *direct* influence on the Second Vatican Council at all. It was a case of the Church finally catching up with Newman. Andrew Meszaros tries to show that Newman might have had some *indirect* influence through Yves Congar who, it is widely accepted, had a hand in writing Section 8 of *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.

Finally, Roderick Strange, author of a recent widely praised study of Newman, moves away from theology to consider Newman the pastor, the parish priest, the preacher. He shows that through the various stages of Newman's career, the pastor always had the care of souls, as it were, as his central concern.

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