

suspicion that he had wished to act as Superior of both Oratories; and although the background to the dispute was unknown to the present duke, and Newman knew he would not understand and might think him touchy, still he refrained from explaining for fear of lowering Faber in his esteem. Sensitive? No doubt; but sensitiveness kept under the control of a reason illumined by faith, hope and love, so that it took on the hues of heroic charity. Newman's action was deliberate; and the mental agony that went with it was the price he had to pay for that rare gem of intellectual integrity which it seems to have been his vocation to bring before us, not only in his writings, but in the details of his everyday life.

The essential question, then, is this: did Newman use his temperament for God's honour and glory, loving God and his neighbour with heroic constancy; or did he allow it to lead him into sin and away from God?

## Literature and Theology: A Discussion with L. C. Knights

Professor L. C. Knights, Winterstoke professor of English at Bristol University, recently gave a paper on the relation between literature and theology at a symposium held at Downside in April 1963. The paper itself, together with the other papers of the symposium, will be published in April 1964 by Darton, Longman & Todd under the title, *Theology and the University*. After the paper, Professor Knights, in a recorded discussion with two theologians, went on to develop certain ideas which are valuable and worth publishing independently. The original language of dialogue has been slightly edited to help continuity. The other paper alluded to, which in dealing with the teaching of literature to children held common ground with Professor Knights, will also appear in the published book.

THEOLOGIAN: It seemed to me, while listening to Professor Knights showing us how to look at a text of poetry, that at the back of my mind all the time I was thinking of the way in which a theologian ought to be

looking at a text of scripture, of the way in which he ought to be listening to the text, not bringing to it the kind of Mandarin attitude that so often theologians seem to bring. But I also felt that this was not merely a matter of parallel procedure; in listening to Professor Knights talking about the text of poetry I was listening to something that was in itself deeply theological. And it seems to me that this links up with the kind of paper we had earlier, on the way in which a school teacher can see the significance, the relevance of theology for his work among school-children in a comprehensive school in the depths of a city.

There too he can show them and find for himself something of the meaning of religion by simply looking at texts with them which are valid, which are real, and relating these to the reality of their life. Here we had a very practical demonstration of the kind of thing that as theologians we ought to be doing.

I've always wanted to say to Professor Knights that I feel that the critical method which he practises and the views which he puts into practice strike me as being very similar to those of the theologians because they involve humility before the text, and reverence for it, and that the work of the critic, as Professor Knights has put it forward in his own works on Shakespeare, is to do more than merely make technical analyses; he is discovering something about himself in the process of making his discoveries about the text, and this is where the great teachers of literature can help the people who are themselves studying religion and literature to understand something about their religion. I don't know if Professor Knights would agree with what I have been saying.

**KNIGHTS:** Naturally I'm very pleased indeed to find the kind of response that my paper got from an audience predominantly Catholic, and all of whom were concerned with religion, theology, and the relation of theology to other intellectual disciplines. I think what I want to say can be put in this way. In many respects I am rather an outsider where theology is concerned, and I think one of the things that is a little disconcerting to the outsider is to find that many statements made by theologians and religious people seem to engage only rather indirectly with what one knows about life as one experiences it most fully. That to some extent it lacks a dimension: you seem to be entering the realm of the gods of the copy-book headings. I have learned from this meeting that there is obviously a very important movement going on that I knew nothing about, that is attempting to make the great religious documents reveal themselves in ways analogous to the ways in which I try to

encourage a pupil to come to terms with a given bit of literature. Might I go on from there? What does that mean? What do you do when you've a pupil and a poem, and he says, 'I don't think there's much in this', and you say, 'Well—just—just listen'; and then you prod and you prompt, and you get to a certain pitch of activity by just pointing to what's going on in the poem. The aim is not, of course, that he should take over from you a message from the poem, but that he should respond to all the complex elements that go to make it up: its rhythm, its sense, the connotations of the words, the suggestions of the imagery, and so on, so that through the lens of the poem he sees a particular bit of experience in its depth and fullness, in its presentness, I would say. I think that's why the teaching of literature or the understanding of poetry has what I should call a religious significance; it makes us aware of the presentness of other people, and of the world, and indeed of our own selves, in ways which more abstract studies can hardly hope to do.

THEOLOGIAN: Then you are saying something like this, that you're responding in a poem to the pressure of many meanings held in focus. Now this would explain, I suppose, why in the Bible you find many of the ways in which our Lord teaches are in fact in literary or in poetic form, that this form has something about it which enables a message of great importance to be more dynamically communicated than in mere plain prose, and you quoted, if I remember, a remarkable saying of Blake's.

KNIGHTS: Well, yes, this is, I think, very relevant indeed. I should say that the parables, and many of the stories in the Old Testament, are poetry. I don't want to be misunderstood on this point, because one of the phrases I hate is the Bible 'designed to be read as literature', which means to emasculate it, and to take all the meaning away. Both Blake and Coleridge can help us. There is that famous remark of Coleridge about the poet described in ideal perfection bringing the whole soul of man into activity. And it is the activity of the apprehending intelligence and imagination that Coleridge insists on all the way through his critical work. And it seems to me that there is one of our fundamental critical principles. What is it that makes the difference between Bach and cinema music? It is that Bach prompts to a far greater activity of apprehension. Now what is important is this activity, the individual's imaginative, intellectual understanding of what's put before him. In connection with the parables, I think I quoted a remark of Blake's in a letter of his

to Dr Trusler where he said 'the wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too explicit as the fittest for instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act'. That's what I mean by saying that parables are poetry; and that's why I think it's so disastrous to have the Bible told to children in simplified language.

**THEOLOGIAN:** And this, of course, ties in completely with our other paper about the teaching of children. That you must always give them that which is first-rate, you must always give them that which is immediate to their experience, in order that you as a teacher may never falsify the experience to aid your particular religious system, or whatever system it may be.

**KNIGHTS:** Yes, I'd qualify a little bit there, of course, about giving them what's immediate to their own experience. They're not quite sure what is relevant to their experience sometimes until you give it to them. But I would indeed say, feed them on what is first-rate. They're never too young to begin to understand Blake or Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Keats' *Ode to Autumn*, or for that matter, *Macbeth*.

**THEOLOGIAN:** That is where we come back to the absolute necessity for the theologian to return to what he considers to be, indeed, the Word of God, but which is to any understanding something absolutely first-rate.

**KNIGHTS:** But presumably when you regard it as the Word of God you mean something capable of unfolding with terrific power in relation to the actual lived life of each individual, not something to be learned up, not something to be enshrined in a moral code, but something deeply nutritive of life.

**THEOLOGIAN:** Indeed, and this is what theology has to gain from taking place in the university, because in the university there are teachers of literature holding views such as your own, producing analyses in this manner, and this is something which theology would have to learn, surely.

**KNIGHTS:** Well, again one has to be a little bit careful. In teaching literature I don't want to produce an analysis. I think you know as well as I do that when the teaching of literature was revolutionised twenty or

thirty years ago, by people like Richards, and Leavis, and some others, the revolution consisted in substituting for the teaching of the history of literature, 'with fossilized opinions masquerading as facts', as Leavis says,—in substitution for that some direct response to literature of the past which is still living in the present. Well now, that is magnificent, but all depends on the chap who does it. It has more recently become a rather mechanical method so that almost anybody can 'do an analysis', and the poem is in danger of being killed in that way, just as it was in danger of being killed by an overdose of scholarship thirty years ago. But it all depends on the man, on his having that genuine concern not to get between his pupil and the poem, but to make the poem transparent.

THEOLOGIAN: He has got to remain open—and openness is always difficult and you have always got to fight for it in each generation. I suppose that's the point, isn't it? And there's a moral here for the theologian. If the theology does lie, therefore, well away from a place where he might be exposed to influences that kept him open, then the chances that his theology might become an arid system would be very high. In a university the chance is much less, and the same, surely, Professor Knights applies to a teacher of literature; that if he taught his literature well away from a university he might become a seer rather than a teacher.

KNIGHTS: Well, yes (there again—you're bringing up such important points, aren't you) I'm most profoundly convinced that when thinking through some kind of a dialogue—it may be an interior dialogue, it may be the sort of dialogue you hold between yourself and the author of a book—the wider the conversation gets, the better. And, you see, this relates to what Simon Clements was describing about the way in which he gets children in a comprehensive school talking about a particular bit of experience so that they come to see what it really means for them, how far they can shed the conventional opinions of their group, such as that it's rather manly to get away with a bit of skulduggery of some kind, to seeing what it might mean in terms of discomfort and awkwardness, and so on. And it's there that it seems to me that I should use the word 'spirit'—I should say the spirit comes alive in such circumstances. The enemy all the time is dogmatism, of course, or the narrow self-assertive point of view.

THEOLOGIAN: Yes, 'for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life'.