The Rediscovery of Newman[1]

by J. H. Walgrave, O.P.

After the third international Newman-Conference of Luxembourg, it had been felt that it was time 'to bring Newman home'. This led to the first Oxford Newman Symposium at Oriel College (1966). The meeting at Newman's own college was something of an experience, most moving and inspiring, not only by reason of its significance as an ecumenical event in such an historic place, but also, and mainly, because of the things that were said and discussed. Carefully designed by the editors, and reconsidered after the discussion by the contributors, the whole collection of essays, although written by scholars of so different denominations and habits of mind, shows a remarkable convergence in the appreciation of Newman's place and importance in contemporary theology. It may be said, indeed, that it constitutes a milestone in the history of Newman scholarships and will for ever remain one of the most outstanding publications on the general subject of Newman's thought and influence.

Four capital points were made: 1, Newman is not only a great historic figure, a saint, a master of English prose, but one of the foremost theologians of his age and perhaps of all times. He did not enrich us with a new system, but he created a new spirit, a new way of putting theological questions. He opened new paths and brought theology back to its proper tasks and methods. 2, Newman's theology is a result and a most personal synthesis of various theological traditions. In the slow movement of his mind to self-realization he assimilated and integrated the best of Protestant Evangelicalism, Anglican divinity, patristic theology and Roman Catholic thought, uniting them all in a thoroughly scriptural and experiential view of God, Christ, Church and Salvation. Christianity as a whole did make him. 3, Hence his quiet but increasing influence on the further development of theological thought in Protestant and Anglican as well as in Catholic circles. Being a true son of all of them, he speaks to each of them and he has come to be considered as a common heritage and treasure. This fact rather than his sayings about Christian unity, defines his ecumenical significance. 4, Few theologians had deeper roots in tradition than Newman and yet no one perhaps was more open to the intellectual changes of the coming age. Plunging with heart and mind into the very springs of Christian faith and thought, he foresaw at the same time with prophetical

[1]John Coulson and A. M. Allchin, *The Rediscovery of Newman. An Oxford Symposium*, Sheed and Ward, London and Melbourne; S.P.C.K., London, 1967.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

clearness the problems ahead in the stream of its history. He knew its course and, in spite of his otherworldliness, he was very conscious of the direction in which the world's movement was flowing. Therefore he is one of the main living sources from which our own time is springing forth, being our intellectual contemporary in a deeper sense than many eminent theologians of our own days. Those who really know him will find a providential guide through the chaos created by recent developments in philosophy and theology. As Prof. G. Rupp has said in his striking way: 'On the continent let Hans Küng talk it out with Karl Barth, but in England let us begin with Newman and not the Bishop of Woolwich' (p. 212). But you have only to look at the evidence adduced by Dr Becker, and you will realize that Newman is as much a leading theologian in Germany as in England, or even more so. He is a *Doctor Communis* of Christian thought today. The introductory paper of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr A. M. Ramsay, was no less outspoken on that point than Bishop B. C. Butler's finishing paper on 'Newman and the Second Vatican Council'. It runs as a constant motif throughout the whole of the book.

This general review of the common points, made by the work as a whole, would be sufficient to make clear its first-rate importance and true significance. But it is difficult to refrain from some comments upon particular issues. Some of the best papers pointed to the fact that, according to Newman, the true source of faith and religion is an inward reality: the presence or indwelling of Christ or the Spirit in the individual believer and in the Church as a whole; something that cannot be apprehended from without or by mere introspection, but has to be realized under the influence of illuminating grace, through the engagement and active faithfulness of the whole person and in close community with the social body of Christ; something which is expressed to religious consciousness by synthetic inspiring images rather than by analytic and intellectualizing concepts. This 'method of personation', so akin to contemporary personalism, implies an anticipated reaction against the all-pervading subjectivism, so common in some kind of existentialist theology that seems to make human self-understanding rather than God and his action the object of theology, as Archbishop Ramsay suggested in a short comment on a splendid passage on Newman's *Lectures on Justification* (p. 7).

Here, indeed, we touch the core of Newman's theology, the starting point of his own answers to the major problems of fundamental theology that are puzzling so many Christians of our own day: the nature of revelation and faith, the dogmatic principle, the nature of theological statements, the development of doctrine, the logic of religious language, etc. The bearing of that central insight upon the understanding of dogma and theology is powerfully stated by Coulson and Davis, and its relation to the problem of development is made conspicuous by Butler, Cameron and others.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Newman and the Empiricist Tradition

On Prof. Cameron's lecture, we have to say a few words more. It is one of the most interesting contributions to the symposium and it perhaps touches the crucial point of Newman's significance today. He starts with the paradox of empiricism, namely that it robs us of our familiar world by considering that all empirical statements are logically doubtful, while on the other hand it restores it to us by stating that our philosophizing makes no difference to how we take the world, how we talk about it or act in it; he then considers the influence of such an empiricism on Newman's mental attitude. We may roughly state his conclusions as follows. Newman took from Locke and Hume the empiricist model of perception, as caused by 'sense impressions', and he applied it analogically to the process of revelation, that leads to faith by impressing on our minds images of heavenly things. The model was altogether wrong, but this did not invalidate the truth of what Newman intended to say when he applied it to revelation: namely that the apprehension and acceptance of revealed truth is altogether personal and inward; that faith has no foundation external to itself; that rational presumptions and historical evidence are only probabilities, incapable of proving anything apart from the inwardness of the believer, giving to the facts of nature and history a connexion which they have not from themselves; that mere reason or history, left to themselves, can only lead to scepticism; that the content of revelation transcends our capacity to say what it is, that religious communication is indirect; that in relation to divine truth the forms of human thought and language are historical and limited and therefore open to endless development.

All this may be true . . . as far as it goes. But does it tell us the whole story? Does it leave sufficient room for the 'dogmatic principle', the motto of Newman's lifelong battle against religious liberalism? Does it square with his concern for a true rational justification of faith? Where to trace the exact line of demarcation between liberal theology and Newman's fierce anti-liberalism? Is the difference between inward sight and mere sentiment the only rule of discrimination? Anyhow, Newman was convinced that dogmatic propositions, inadequate as they may be, truly represent to our minds the heavenly things which they stand for; that, once true, they are true for ever, although always perfectible and open to corrective theological formulation; that for religion the dogmatic principle was a question of to be or not to be; that all personal faith should have a sufficient rational justification; that indeed all believers, however unlearned and simple, did possess it, at least implicitly; that it was valuable apart from will or sentiment, although it supposed a kind of reasoning which started from principles, rooted in conscience and ruled by the personal illative sense; that this kind of reasoning could itself be justified by reason, because conscience is a common gift of our nature, as the working of the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

illative sense is a common condition of all reasoning in matters of ethical value and conduct. Although this method of apologetic reasoning was surprisingly new, Newman was more exacting in those matters than Albert the Great, Bonaventura and even Thomas Aquinas. To speak of Newman's 'hostility to formal logic' (79) is not wholly exact. He admired it, but he was aware of its limitations and tried to restore it its proper place and function within the broader process of personal reasoning with its own complex logical structure. Newman's genius was one of comprehensiveness. Just as in his theological view he tried to comprehend the various traditions of the Christian world, so he tried to do justice to the ways of our reasoning faculty as well as to the supernatural claims of faith and divine presence.

I do not mean, of course, that Prof. Cameron would deny all this. He develops a view—and a very interesting one—of a certain aspect of Newman's theological personality, and has to leave in the dark other sides of that complex mind. But the omission did strike me and I cannot help thinking that, on the whole, his view could be somewhat misleading, particularly in our day when the mood of undogmatic faith so strongly prevails.

It may perhaps help to add a few remarks on Prof. Cameron's comparison between Newman and Pascal. Here again he made some very interesting points. The genius of Newman was no doubt akin to that of Pascal, just as, in the light of recent investigation, it becomes increasingly clear that, all differences put aside, his basic conceptions are not far from those of Kierkegaard. But, in spite of his opposition to Descartes, Pascal, like Port Royal, was just as much dependent on the spirit from which Cartesianism was born as Newman was influenced by Locke or Hume. Pascal scorned at the idea of proving God's existence from the facts of sense perception but, no less than Arnauld or Nicole, he was convinced that the truth of Christian revelation must and could be proved by reason, arguing from the nature of man, the condition of his existence and the facts of history. In the same way as Newman, he devised against Descartes a method of historical proof through the convergence of probabilites and his *Pensées* are the torso of the first great enterprise of a rational demonstration of Christian truth. It may seem a paradox, but it could easily be proved that Port Royal—and Pascal was its faithful spokesman—has been the nursery of modern rational apologetics, although the genius of Pascal surpassed from the start the high and dry rationalism of his successors. The famous *Il faut parier* has an entirely different meaning in the thought of Pascal and in that of Newman. To Pascal, who wrote for unbelievers, the *pari* was no more than an introductory *captatio benevolentiae*, an invitation to take seriously the claims of Christian faith and to pray God that He may purify the heart so that reason, freed from dimming passions, could perceive the credibility of the Christian message. This was a

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

basic assumption of Jansenism. For Newman, on the contrary, the necessity of a fundamental choice is a kind of first principle: in ruling your conduct you may go by mere extrovert reason, accepting the testimony of sense perception and the impersonal common assumptions of the world as your only guides; or you may stick to the testimony of your inward conscience, pointing to faith, and refuse to be led astray by your senses or the slogans of the world. You have to choose. Your choice for conscience will gradually lead you to see the justification of its ways. But there is no common logical device to solve your problem before all commitment.

This leads to two final remarks on the subject of Newman's empiricism. Firstly, there is the question of the model of perception. That we are living in a real world of things and persons; that their bodily appearance exercises a physical influence on our own bodies and its receptive organs; that this influence has something to do with our perception;—these propositions may be questioned in the artificial situation created by the philosopher abstracting himself from his prereflective existential contact with reality. In the full living context of human experience, however, it cannot seriously be doubted. So far we agree. But the description of that influence in terms of 'impressions' is not specifically empiricist. It is common to western philosophy since the pre-Socratics. St Thomas spoke of *species* or *impressio* and after him the technical term became *species impressa*. It is true that such a description, taken as an explanatory model, 'has vanished into a limbo' (95). But as a purely descriptive and provisional model of common sense, it may still be used. The real question is: what has the occurrence, described in terms of physical science, to do with the fact of my consciousness. Perhaps the question is not soluble, but it cannot simply be put aside. Newman who used the terminology of 'impression-idea' in a purely descriptive way—as he always does—never said that the physical impression caused the perception. He only meant that the event, described in physical terms as 'impression', was accompanied by an event of consciousness which we call 'perception'. How both are interrelated is a question he refused to answer. But he was no less emphatic in his assertion that the proper object of human perception was not the mere counterpart of an impression of whatever kind, but real being, the perception of which somehow depended upon the physical event. He said neither that the physical event caused perception, nor that it only gave a practical limitation to our universal clairvoyance, as was suggested by Bergeson, and worked out for instance by M. M. Moncrieff in *The Clairvoyant Theory of Perception*. His was a painstaking faithfulness to experience as a whole or to radical descriptive empiricism. He refused to limit experience to sensualism. That you and I perceive real beings is as much an empirical statement as that we are aware of phenomenal qualities and forms. You can deny it only on the grounds of some previous sophistication.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

When we say this we do not mean that the critical problem is not a serious question. We only say that the 'intentionality' of the perceiving act is part of our consciousness of that act and that consequently it is an empirical fact.

Our second remark is about another dimension of radical empiricism. Man is an historical or cultural being. This means that he is always in the making, individually (the person) as well as collectively (humanity). Growth of experience and insight is the very law of human nature. All those statements are empirical, too. Once you are really aware of man's essential historicity, you cannot possibly deny it. Therefore, as Mgr Davis puts it: 'We have no right, said Newman, to take the universal reception of a source of truth as a criterion of its authenticity' (224). In other words, if deepening and broadening of real experience is a possibility and a vocation that defines the very nature of man, something that may happen or not happen according to our personal efforts and our fidelity to ourselves; and if philosophy is an attempt to account for the whole of human experience; then philosophy would be unfaithful to its own nature if it limited its domain to that which can be proved by devices of universal acceptance. It would betray man who is 'the proper subject of mankind'.

The history of human thought in general and of philosophy in particular, is man's gradual conquest of himself. In philosophy things are now becoming evident that were not so to past generations. And in the same way things become obvious in the process of deepening experience and elucidating thought that remain obscure in the twilight of unenlightened consciousness. Those things, as M. Blondel rightly argued, are no less 'objective' in the true sense of the word than the facts that can be proved by the common witness of mere sense-perception. Philosophy, starting with inarticulate experience, is a long journey of the intellectual being into itself, as Aristotle somewhere says. In the same way, theology, according to Newman, starts with inarticulate faith and is like a journey of devout understanding into the abiding presence of Christ. Human experience is to philosophy what faith is to theology. Both are subject to the same law of development and rooted in an abiding presence: the presence of man to himself which is the definition of natural consciousness, and the presence of Christ in us, which is a very good definition of grace, present to us in faith.

Of course, the growth of experience and consciousness entails a problem of language. All our languages are archaic, as Ortega y Gasset says. Our words are values of common currency. They are not fit to render those deeper meanings that beset our growing consciousness, asking for expression. We have to devise a subtle play of creative and imaginary language in order to voice them. But that game is not without strict rules. It is a fact that true poetry and true philosophy somehow succeed in communicating with a clearness of their own, at least to those who have the experience to be in contact.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

If man is bound to use odd words or to employ common ones in odd ways, it is because, as a speaking animal, he is an odd animal, too. A language that remains true to experience may very well rediscover those regions of consciousness that are meant by such terms as 'metaphysics'.

Newman and Coleridge

I shall conclude my review with some reflections on John Coulson's paper, 'Newman on the Church'. It illustrates in its own way that comprehensiveness and balance wherein, as I see it, the greatness of Newman's genius and intellectual discipline is most manifest. Just as he united in his comprehensive ecumenical mind the various traditions of Christian thought; just as his 'philosophical mind' (*Idea of a University*) embraced in one radically empiricist view the various aspects of human experience, unwilling to sacrifice one of them to an easy one-sided solution; so his view of the Church was a comprehensive one: 'We must first understand our response to the Church *as a whole* before we can effectively define how we should understand its component parts' (p. 24). The prophetical, priestly and kingly offices of the Church are equally necessary to the Church. They cannot be separated. They can only be understood when we view the Church concretely as the living body of Christ, describing it ' in terms of offices or functions, presupposing an antecedent unity, and aiming at an harmonious resolution of institutional, liturgical and theological claims in which no one element must preponderate at the expense of the others' (p. 136). The antecedent unity is the vision of the Church as constituted by the real presence of Christ.

I am, incidentally, happy to express my deep sympathy with Coulson's defence of the theological function in the Church against the tendency towards the totalitarian predominance of its institutional function, leading to 'that tyranny of the spirit which is so disquieting a feature of recent Roman Catholicism' (p. 142). In saying this, he faithfully echoes Newman himself on a point that was the object of his deepest concern within the Catholic communion.

Of particular interest, however, is the way Coulson brings Newman together with Coleridge and von Hügel. On the whole he certainly is right. In spite of extreme differences in their character and in the style of their thought, those three men represent the same tradition. Their common characteristic is that comprehensiveness of mind which is the distinctive mark of intellectual genius.

That the thought of von Hügel continues that of Newman is clear to everyone who has a personal knowledge of their works. Of course, the differences are as striking as the similarities. It is not by comparing details but by grasping their basic intuition as a whole and by seeing the nature and the working of their first principles that the unity of their inspiration and the convergence of their conclusions become apparent. In some respects von Hügel was even more comprehensive

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

than Newman. He possessed a far better knowledge of contemporary thought. He was as European as Newman was English. Moreover, his personal synthesis was more complete in that he was more positive and optimistic in his valuation of all earthly and natural values. But Newman's subtle clearness and judo-like controversial ability was sadly lacking.

As to Coleridge, he is for himself a problem. Prof. Cameron says that he was 'stupefied' because he was touched by idealist metaphysics (96). I candidly confess that to me such an appreciation seems to betray a lack of that intellectual ecumenism which is as necessary in philosophy as in theology. Coleridge himself could correct such a statement with the words of his *Bibliographia Literaria* where, quoting Leibnitz, he says: 'The truth is diffused more widely than is commonly believed. . . . The deeper we penetrate into the ground of things, the more truth we discover in the doctrines of the greater number of philosophical sects' (p. 133 in the ed. of Everyman's Library).

Coulson most happily compares Newman's view on the unity of the Church in the multiplicity of her dialectically related functions, with the tradition of Coleridge that 'emphasizes the distinction between distinguishable parts, and the antecedent unity in which those parts actually coexist' (p. 126). Now, this is a leading intuition in German idealism. It has a long tradition, as it goes back to J. Boehme. It is indeed the basic supposition of dialectical thought and logic. Coleridge applied it in a most brilliant way to the understanding of poetry, calling 'imagination' the power of antecedent perception of the whole, continually present in the further elaboration of a poem. The same power he called 'reason' in the realm of philosophy, working out in a strikingly similar way the formative influence of its abiding and active influence on the further unfolding of philosophical insight. An analogical role he attributed to conscience and faith in the domains of moral and religious thought. Moreover, imagination, reason and conscience are themselves various functions of the same basic power that in its antecedent unity is man himself, considered as a personal wholeness. However cryptic the utterings of Coleridge may at times have been, as they sprang forth from the splendid isolation of his introverted genius, the principles and the general pattern of his thought are as clear and firm as they are profound. If contemporary linguistic philosophers wish to study the nature and the logical structure of poetic and metaphysical language, there is perhaps no better way for them than to go back to Coleridge.

Coulson's comparison between Newman and Coleridge delighted me. It is as important as Cameron's bringing together of Newman and Pascal. To bring out the convergence of the most widely different representatives of comprehensive genius is a momentous enterprise, as it helps us to overcome the confusions, divisions and misunderstandings that bar the way to mutual understanding, to human ecumenism, to spiritual and intellectual progress. There are some

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

questions, however, I want to ask. Is the difference between Newman and Coleridge on certain major issues really as great as Coulson would make us believe? Is Coleridge's identification of idea and reality so distant from Newman's distinction between them? Did Coleridge himself really mean that the idea itself was the real, *das Ding an sich*? Did he not rather conceive of the idea as a human participation of, or a communion with, reality itself, having accordingly a personal and subjective side, as essential to it as its objective side? On the other hand, is Newman's 'idea' or the antecedent inarticulate fulness, of which discourse brings out the various aspects in the process of development, only an 'image' of the real 'that acts upon us in the manner of sense-perception' (p. 129)? Did not Newman transcend the latter model? Does not his emphasis on our immediate knowledge of reality itself suggest that the idea was only the subjective side of our participation in a reality that is present to us because, in however defective a way, we exist in it and are taken up into it? Could we not say then that Coleridge and Newman only stressed different aspects of the same vision, the former being dependent on the language of idealist metaphysics, the other on the language of descriptive empiricism? Anyhow, just as the light of faith, according to Thomas Aquinas, is only the subjective side of God's immediate presence in us and to us (on that point Newman would agree), so the idea, too, can only be the subjective side of the immediate presence of reality in us and to us, or, if you prefer, of our immediate participation in the whole of reality we are living in.

My second question is not unrelated to the first. Is there so great a gap between Newman's doctrine of conscience and that of Coleridge? It is true, of course, that in concrete existence, bound to a sinful world, the life of conscience cannot be separated from the life of faith and the community of the Church, as Coulson rightly stresses. But Newman emphatically held that we have a conscience by nature and that conscience and faith are altogether distinct, the former being a subjective authority, the latter being dependent on an objective authority. Therefore conscience has its own domain of truth, independently of revelation, and it may become the object of a philosophical reflection, independent of theology. Coulson would so far agree. But my difficulty lies in the application of Newman's dictum: 'The philosopher aspires towards a divine *principle*; the Christian towards a divine agent' (p. 128). Does it mean that for philosophers, like Kant or Coleridge, God was no more than a principle and that he was not an Agent? Now, he seems to have been both at the same time. For Kant, at least in his *Opus postumum*, the presence of God as lawgiver is immediately perceived by the moral person in his experience of the categorical imperative, and this leads to an interpretation of the world's course in terms of providential action. Could it be true that Coleridge who was a believing Christian, remained behind Kant? This seems improbable to me. In order to

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

prove it, a careful examination of his works would be necessary. Let me point only to Coleridge's dependence upon Schelling.

Now, Schelling is particularly interesting on this point. In the later Schelling we find a remarkable parallel to the case of empiricism as stated by Cameron. You have to go all the way with empiricism in order to overcome it. It robs you of your familiar world in order to restore it to you. In a similar way Schelling came to the conclusion that we have to follow idealist reason to the end in order to find out that it can give us no more than an idea and that the thing we were asking for from the start was not an idea but a living God. Going all the way with reason, we discover that it cannot give us what reason tries to establish. The disappointment in which philosophy ends points to the fact that all the time along its path we were already on the look-out for something it is unable to unveil. Therefore the history of mythology is the history of man's powerless asking for a living God, expressing itself in creations of anticipating imagination, while Christianity is the history of God's answering our need by his revelation, and the history of our gradual understanding of its truth and consequences. This does not prove anything concerning Coleridge's final view, but it may perhaps suggest that the problem asks for careful consideration.

I suspect that on the point of conscience the difference between Newman and Coleridge is in the end not so significant as some clear-cut formulations suggest. And does it not point, once more, to the desirability of a philosophical ecumenism, founded in the belief, confirmed by experiential wisdom, that, just as all great saints shared the same vision of Christ's indwelling, but expressed it according to their historical situation and their natural idiosyncrasy, so all true philosophers try to penetrate and to describe the same mystery of human existence in its dimensional fulness, although the historical traditions which they share leads them to give different and partial accounts of the elusive whole. One-sidedness, as Friedrich Schlegel puts it, is the original sin of human thought and, on that level, salvation, or 'wholeness' is only possible if we try to understand one another in a detached way, humbly accepting to be corrected and completed by all the scattered rays of that universal 'striving for wisdom' which is the original meaning of the word philosophy. This was clearly stated by Coleridge himself in his *Philosophical Lectures*, and Newman worked it out in a masterly way in his *Idea of a University*. Both understood the claims of that intellectual comprehensiveness which they so eminently displayed in their own works.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb01196.x Published online by Cambridge University Press