

The significance of Newman's conversion

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The conversion of the Venerable John Henry Newman 150 years ago had a remarkable prophetic significance which is only becoming clear in our time.

Newman's reception into the Roman Catholic Church on 9 October 1845 was received at the time in three different ways. For many Tractarians, it was a devastating blow that seemed to spell the end of the attempt to assert or restore the Catholic character of the Church of England. To the average Protestant Englishman it seemed a confirmation that Tractarianism was nothing but a Romanizing movement as had all along been suspected, and that Newman was, if not in the pay of Rome, at least an unwitting pawn in the hands of the pope, ever anxious to subvert the Protestant independence of the English people. To Nicholas Wiseman, who was to be the first Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster in the restored hierarchy, it appeared to be the beginning of the return to the Catholic faith.

None of these different assessments turned out to be quite accurate, although each reaction contained elements of the truth. Newman's conversion did lead many of his Tractarian followers to Rome, just as it also (as Newman had feared) caused some to abandon their newly found Catholic principles, even in certain cases to give up any kind of orthodox Christianity. But, far from being the end of the movement, Tractarianism soon developed into a full-blown Anglo-Catholicism which, by providing the kind of Catholic devotions and practices that

Newman had already foreseen would be necessary if the younger Tractarians were not to go to Rome, enabled many Anglicans to remain in the Church of England. To this extent suspicious Protestants were quite right: the principles of Tractarianism did logically lead to the kind of religion that was seen as hardly distinguishable from "popery." But the Church of England was certainly strengthened, at least in its mission to the industrial slums, by its new Anglo-Catholic wing. Its presence also lent increased credibility to the old claim that Anglicanism was a "reformed" Catholicism. Paradoxically, anti-Romanism was to emerge as a mark of a certain kind of Anglo-Catholic. As for Roman Catholics themselves, the sanguine expectation which Wiseman had encouraged at Rome that Henry VIII's Church was about to collapse also proved illusory. Nevertheless, Newman's secession remained to haunt high Anglicans, so many of whom were to follow in his path, including some of their most important leaders, thus proving a constant drain on Anglo-Catholicism.

For his own part, Newman's personal experience of the suffering and trauma of leaving the Church of England for the Church of Rome made him highly uneasy about any kind of unrealistic triumphalism. Catholic insensitivity to Anglican difficulties and susceptibilities pained him as much as did the resentment of Anglo-Catholics against the alleged treachery of the converts. Increasingly, in the years after his conversion, Newman found himself to be the object of suspicion and hostility from all sides. The publication in 1859 of his celebrated article *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, which was de-lated to Rome by one of the English bishops, brought him into disfavor with the authorities there. Moreover, the growing Ultramontane movement within the Catholic Church included some of Newman's most prominent fellow converts, not least the future Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Manning, who was to play a leading role in the proceedings of Vatican I. Never a liberal like Döllinger or Acton, Newman became inevitably a rallying point for moderates opposed to the excesses of the extreme Ultramontanes, who were pressing for a much less circumscribed definition of papal infallibility than was eventually passed. In the authoritarian climate of the time, an official censure or even condemnation of Newman could not altogether be ruled out.

During the 1860s news of Newman's difficulties began to spread and there were many rumors, including reports in

the newspapers, that he was about to leave—or even had already left—the Catholic Church. Naturally, this aroused sympathy among Anglicans, and old colleagues and friends now began to get in touch again, often after many years of silence. But Newman's sharp denial that he had any intention of returning to a Church which he believed to be in schism was completely consistent with the *Lectures on Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Submitting to the Catholic Church*, which he had delivered in 1850 in the wake of the so-called Gorham case, in which a judicial organ of the state had ruled that baptismal regeneration was not an essential doctrine of the Church of England. These polemical lectures were intended to persuade Anglo-Catholics that Tractarianism logically led to Rome, and after the Gorham judgment many Tractarians, including Manning, came indeed to that conclusion. These lectures are among the earliest and are surely the most brilliant writings in a long tradition of controversy, following on the Oxford Movement, between Roman and Anglo-Catholics on the legitimacy of the Anglican "branch" theory of the Church and the necessity of communion with the Holy See. Still, the unsympathetic treatment that appeared to have been meted out to Newman by the authorities of his adopted Church not only drew a great deal of sympathy from High Anglicans but also persuaded many that in his heart of hearts Newman must regret his move to Rome, especially as so many battles appeared to have been won by the successors of the early Tractarians within the Church of England.

This takes us on to the second stage, as it were, in the "reception" of Newman's conversion: namely, the publication in 1864 of the *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, in which he recounted the story of his theological development, ending with the 1845 conversion. Actually, the book did not in fact finish there, but concluded with a long chapter called "Position of my Mind since 1845," in which Newman not only attempted a general defense of Catholicism but in doing so indicated his own disagreement with Ultramontane ecclesiology. Cautiously worded though it was, this critical note impressed those who thought that Catholics were necessarily monolithic in their theology. Here and elsewhere in the book Newman effectively emphasized his Englishness to readers who assumed that Roman Catholicism was of its very nature a foreign, un-English kind of religion. But, of course, the book was also a powerful evocation of his Anglican past, inevitably critical both explicitly and implicitly, but still unmistakably affectionate, even nostalgic, in tone. Noncon-

formist readers, too, were impressed by the complete sincerity of Newman's *apologia*. But while the book made it clear beyond any doubt that Newman had no intention of returning to the Church of England, nevertheless it could not help but provide evidence for those who persisted in wanting to think that the conversion was a tragic mistake, brought about by the author's well-known sensitivity on the one hand, and on the other hand by the insensitivity of the Anglican authorities who had shown so little sympathy for the early Tractarians, and especially by their harsh condemnation of Newman's attempt to interpret the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England in a Catholic sense in *Tract 90* (1841).

Whatever wishful thinking there may have been on the part of some Anglicans, it is certainly true that the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* sounded a distinctly irenic note, and the autobiography may reasonably be seen as a significant milestone in the history of ecumenism. Already as an Anglican, Newman had written two important theological works which at the time were intended as part of the Tractarian attempt to forge a *via media* between Rome and Geneva. But insofar as both *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church Viewed Relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism* (1837) and *Lectures on Justification* (1838) go back behind the medieval scholasticism in which both Reformed Protestantism and Tridentine Catholicism had their roots, and return to the Fathers as the primary fount and source of the tradition, they are important pioneering works anticipating the most fruitful ecumenical theology of the late twentieth century. Some would say that Newman's most brilliantly creative theological work lay in the area of justification, which after all had lain at the heart of the Reformation. As with that other vexed problem of the relation between Scripture and tradition, Newman's approach was to ascertain how far the controversy was merely terminological and verbal and obfuscated by misunderstandings, and how far the obscurities of modern thinking could be irradiated by patristic light.

The ecclesiology that Newman found himself obliged to develop piecemeal as a Catholic began with an example of *ressourcement* in *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, where he found in the history of the Arian heresy a theological foundation for what he regarded as the rightful place of the laity in the Church. Ecumenical considerations were more to the fore of his mind in the last chapter of the *Apologia*, as well as in his moderate and nuanced treatment of papal infallibility in *A Let-*

ter to the Duke of Norfolk (1875) and in his 1877 preface to the *Via Media* on the three "offices" of the Church. There was a pressing need for a balanced scriptural and patristic theology of the Church in the face of Ultramontane exaggerations and in the wake of the 1870 definition of papal infallibility, which manifestly required to be set in the wider context that Vatican I could hardly have provided, even if the Council had not been forced precipitately to suspend its proceedings. In the years that followed, Newman was wont to predict that there would be another Council to complete what was incomplete and therefore unbalanced at Vatican I. The history of the early Church had impressed on him that one Council was modified by another one, "as if the Church moved on to the perfect truth by various successive declarations, alternately in contrary directions, and thus perfecting, completing, supplying each other."¹

Newman's prediction was, of course, magnificently fulfilled by *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church that is effectively the centerpiece of Vatican II. This Council, however, has often been referred to as "Newman's Council" not only for its scriptural and patristic (as opposed to neo-scholastic) ecclesiology, but because Newman had clearly seen that there was a real need for renewal and reform within the Church as well as for an engagement with the modern secular world, such as the *Syllabus of Errors* had refused but which Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* was to undertake. Moreover, Pope John XXIII convoked the Council not only with the purpose of *aggiornamento* but also with the aim of restoring Christian unity, "the absence of which," as Newman had written, "is so great a triumph, and so great an advantage to the enemies of the Cross" (*LD*, 24:22).

Newman's hour did indeed seem to have come. And it is during the immediate conciliar period that we can see the unfolding of the second stage in the reception of Newman's conversion. Now, far from being a source of controversy or embarrassment, the event of 1845 seemed almost to glow in the light of Vatican II. After all, the Roman Catholic Church had itself apparently returned to the scriptural and patristic theology that Newman had brought with him from his Anglican background into the Church, only to find that that kind of theology

¹The *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* [=LD], ed. Charles Stephen Des-sain, et al., vols. I-VI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978-84), VII-XXII (London: Nelson, 1961-72), XXIII-XXXI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973-77); 25:310.

was suspect in the Ultramontane Church of Pio Nono. There was perhaps a feeling in some quarters that Newman as an Anglican had already been living as a kind of Vatican II Catholic. His submission to Rome could then be seen as either a harbinger of the reunion with Canterbury that seemed to many only a matter of time, or alternatively as a move that may have seemed necessary at the time but which was now quite clearly uncalled for.

It was almost as if Newman was the patron saint behind the "agreed statements" of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission that began its discussions soon after the end of the Council. At least in the early 1970s it was confidently believed in authoritative circles that unity between the two communions could be achieved within a generation. Newman himself would in fact have been much less sanguine. Indeed, it was precisely at the beginning of this decade that some very significant private letters of Newman on the subject of reunion were published for the first time. Perhaps if they had been more widely known, they might have dampened some of the unrealistic euphoria of the time.

For in the 1860s, when hopes for reunion had begun to grow and before they were dashed by the definition of papal infallibility, Newman's sympathy for these early ecumenical initiatives was considerably tempered by his extreme skepticism about any possibility of the corporate reunion of Rome and Canterbury. Without the bigotry of his more narrow-minded co-religionists, he was far from dismissing the importance of what was shared in common or from underestimating the psychological barriers which prevented people of good faith from becoming Catholics. On the other hand, unlike some enthusiastic Catholic ecumenists, he found it hard to descry the "true fire" of Catholicism "glimmering amid the ashes" of English religion, or to pretend that Anglicanism was anything "else than a tomb of what was once living, the casket of a treasure which has been lost" (LD, 20:71; 21:249). As for the dream of corporate reunion, it seemed to him it would be nothing short of "a miracle,—in the same sense in which it would be a miracle for the Thames to change its course." The analogy seemed to him apt as the Church of England was like

a river bed, formed in the course of ages, depending on external facts, such as political, civil, and social arrangements. Viewed in its structure it has never been more than partially Catholic. If its ritual has been mainly such, yet its Articles are the historical offspring of Luther and Calvin. And its ecclesiastical organisation has ever been, in its fundamental principle, Eras-

tian. To make that actual, visible, tangible body Catholic, would be simply to make a new creature—it would be to turn a panther into a hind. There are very great similarities between a panther and a hind. Still they are possessed of separate natures, and a change from one to the other would be a destruction and reproduction, not a process. It could be done without a miracle in a succession of ages, but in any assignable period, no. (LD, 22:170-71)

The question was: was there a likelihood of such a transformation taking place over a period of time? Again, Newman was very skeptical. Even if Anglo-Catholicism continued to spread in the Church of England, the fact was, as he had pointed out years before, that Anglicanism and Catholicism were two quite different religions proceeding on "different ideas," so that whatever they might appear to have in common, "yet the way in which those doctrines are held, and the whole internal structure in the two religions is different" (LD, 12:234).

However, in spite of the apparent success of Tractarianism, Newman was by no means sure that its spread was as inevitable as some supposed. After all, the Oxford Movement had been a reaction itself against the dry rationalism of the eighteenth century, and who was to say that there might not be a reaction against Anglo-Catholicism from the growing liberal wing in the Church of England? Then, too, there was the still powerful Evangelical party to contend with—not to mention "the Erastian party, which embraces all three, and against which there is no re-action at present, which ever *has* been, which is the *foundation* of Anglicanism." The Church of England had been established in the first place as a state church with the king at its head, and it was this "established" character of the Church which Newman thought was the glue that held its very disparate elements together. Whatever the composition of the clergy, of the laity only "a fraction" was Anglo-Catholic, "a great portion evangelical, a greater liberal, and a still greater . . . without any faith at all" (LD, 22:171).

Deploring as he did the narrow bigotry of the Ultramontanes, Newman never doubted that there would be a reaction within Catholicism, just as he prophesied another Council to place the definition of papal infallibility in a larger ecclesiological context. The hope for a better ecumenical future could be said to lie very simply in the Church of England becoming more "Catholic" and the Roman Catholic Church more "Christian." But as the years went by and as he watched events in the Church of England unfold, he came more and more to fear that

Anglicanism might become so "radically liberalized . . . as to become a simple enemy of the Truth" (LD, 21:299).

The decision of the Church of England and other provinces of the Anglican Communion to change the historic order of the ordained ministry by admitting women to the episcopate and priesthood would surely have seemed to Newman to sound the death-knell of the Oxford Movement and the Anglo-Catholic "branch" theory. The fundamental position of Catholic Anglicanism has always been that, regardless of what may or may not have happened at the English Reformation, the Church of England retained the essential elements of primitive Catholicity. Whatever additions or accretions that the Church of Rome was responsible for, Anglicanism had held fast to the apostolic deposit as defined by general Councils of the undivided Church. Only another such Council, according to the classic Anglo-Catholic view, could authorize any developments or modifications in the traditional faith and order shared by Canterbury, Constantinople, and Rome.

The collapse and disintegration of Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England as a result of the 1992 decision to ordain women may well be seen by historians as the climax of its gradual decline since the peak of the movement in the 1930s. Just as the problem of doctrinal development was the final factor that led Newman out of the Church of England, so it was the dilemma of how to hold fast to Catholic principles and tradition but without fossilizing which has been at the heart of the difficulties of Anglo-Catholicism in modern times, not least since the 1960s when the emergence of a strong new liberal school of theology in the Church of England coincided with seismic changes in Roman Catholicism.

We have already come, then, to what I suggest is the third stage in the reception of Newman's conversion. And that is the realization of its larger historical significance. This is only partly a matter of what Newman regarded as the inevitable and logical outcome of the principles of Tractarianism. Certainly, he never changed from the view which he had expressed so forcefully in *Lectures on Anglican Difficulties* that Anglo-Catholicism was inherently illogical and inconsistent. In 1882, now a cardinal, he wrote that what Anglo-Catholic ritualists lacked, for all their dedication and even heroism under persecution, was "an intellectual foundation—which, sufficient for practical purposes, the Evangelicals seem to me to have" (LD, 30:120). The lack of any real authority for the Anglo-Catholic position, which seemed to

fly so manifestly in the face of the historical facts of the English Reformation, also seemed to Newman to carry within itself the seeds of theological liberalism. A religion without either the biblical authority of Evangelicalism or the teaching authority of the Catholic Church could only be "a form of liberalism," however liturgical and sacramental it might be (LD, 12:260).

What so bothered Newman about Anglo-Catholicism was his old objection as an Anglican to the use of "private judgment." Anglo-Catholics had to decide themselves, from their reading of the Fathers and their own particular way of interpreting the formularies and liturgy of the Church of England, what constituted Catholicism. Even the theological approach of the impeccably orthodox E.B. Pusey, who had succeeded Newman as the leader of the Tractarians, seemed to Newman to lead to "giving up doctrine altogether" (LD, 15:63). Why? Because Pusey did not claim "to appeal to any authority but his own interpretation of the Fathers" (LD, 12:157). Ultimately his authority was himself. When *Lux Mundi*, a collection of liberal Anglo-Catholic essays, appeared in 1889 a year before Newman's death, he agreed that it was the "finale" of the Oxford Movement, and was supposed to have remarked: "It is the end of Tractarianism. They are giving up everything" (LD, 31:294). Many would say that the curtain finally fell when the Church of England, along with other parts of the Anglican Communion, defied Rome and Constantinople by unilaterally ordaining women to the priesthood. Regardless of the theological possibility or otherwise of such a change in the sacrament of orders, it was extremely hard to reconcile such an independent action with the "branch" theory of Anglo-Catholicism.

But if Newman's conversion anticipated the final realization of many Anglicans of the impossibility of trying to be Catholics outside the communion of the Roman Catholic Church or at least in communion with a Reformed Church—there was also a wider way in which it symbolized the modern crisis of Protestantism. Certainly, Newman would not have been in the least surprised by the increasing liberalization of Protestantism in the twentieth century. Early on as an Anglican, he had predicted the "great attack upon the Bible" which gathered force during the nineteenth century.² He saw that the use of biblical

²For this unpublished letter, see Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 193.

criticism, together with scientific discoveries which called into question the literal truth of the Scriptures, would undermine the whole intellectual basis of Protestantism. As a result of substituting the Bible for the Church at the Reformation, Protestants would be left without any final authority in matters of faith. Whereas the literal truth of the Bible was not "one of life and death" to a Catholic, "we are witnessing the beginning of the end of Protestantism, the breaking of that bubble of 'Bible-Christianity' which has been its life" (*LD*, 20:465). But even apart from the increasing difficulty of interpreting the Bible, it could not take the place of the Church—"a book does not speak; it is shut till it is opened":³

Experience proves surely that the Bible does not answer a purpose for which it was never intended. It may be accidentally the means of the conversion of individuals; but a book, after all, cannot make a stand against the wild living intellect of man, and in this day it begins to testify, as regards its own structure and contents, to the power of that universal solvent, which is so successfully acting upon religious establishments.⁴

As we have seen, Newman did not deny that the Bible, read selectively and from a fundamentalist point of view, could indeed provide a certain theological basis for Evangelical Protestantism. But, as he noted, so narrow and unsatisfactory was this base that Evangelicalism was always highly vulnerable to liberalism. This was so not least because of the overriding Evangelical concern with their central doctrine of justification by faith, which resulted in a neglect of dogma in general. Moreover, this preoccupation with one's own justification through one's own personal faith led morally, Newman thought, to rationalism—the "Rationalist makes himself his own centre, not his Maker." The replacement of objectivity in religion by subjectivity was the direct result of Evangelicalism's directing "attention to the heart itself, not to anything external to us, whether creeds, actions, or ritual." Such a "specious form of trusting man rather than God" was "in its nature Rationalistic." And so the theology of Schleiermacher, the father of liberal Protestantism, could be seen as the natural "result of an attempt of the intellect to de-

³*Sermon Notes of John Henry Cardinal Newman, 1849-1878*, ed. Fathers of the Birmingham Oratory (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913), 53.

⁴*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 219.

lineate, philosophise, and justify that religion . . . of the heart and feelings, which has long prevailed."⁵

Although he did not predict the continuing vitality of Evangelical Christianity in our own day, let alone the rise of Pentecostalism, Newman could easily have foreseen the spiritual vacuum that the decline of main-stream Protestantism would create. His own conviction was that only Roman Catholicism had the intellectual resources to confront the secularization of contemporary society which he prophesied with somber prescience. But he was only too well aware that Catholicism itself was in urgent need of reform and renewal—if only because "the Church must be prepared for converts."⁶ And this brings me to the last, more positive point I should like to make about what I have called the third stage in the reception of Newman's conversion.

As I tried to show in my *Newman and the Fullness of Christianity*,⁷ Newman's conversion may be seen as the culmination of a religious development which included what I loosely called all the main varieties of Christianity. This fact has ecumenical significance, too, if Christian reunion is to be a convergence of what is positive and valid in the different Christian traditions within the fullness of Catholic unity. But it has also, as I have already indicated earlier, significance for the renewal of Catholicism within a post-Christian secularized society. A brief indication of some of the themes I developed in my book must conclude this article.

The undogmatic, unsacramental, but solid Bible Protestantism that Newman was brought up in within the Church of England was, he would say, the real religion of England, as it was of other Protestant countries where it crossed denominational distinctions. Hardly able to survive the secularism and unbelief of the twentieth century, it has very largely been replaced either by Evangelical or secularizing liberal Protestantism. In spite of its obvious deficiencies, it has the great merit of imparting a knowledge of the Bible, especially the Gospels, ignorance of which Newman thought was responsible for so

⁵*Essays Critical and Historical* I, 33, 95-96. References are to the Longmans uniform edition except where stated otherwise.

⁶*John Henry Newman: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Henry Tristram (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 258.

⁷Ian Ker, *Newman and the Fullness of Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

much lapsation among Catholics—for “to know Christ is to know Scripture.”⁸

Newman’s other great conversion in 1816 when he was 15 to a Calvinistic form of Evangelicalism brought with it not only more definite Christian beliefs but also a sense of the importance of personal conversion to Christ which never left him. It was an experience that was foreign then and now to many Catholics, who have frequently been more sacramentalized than evangelized, and who would hardly see themselves as called to evangelize by virtue of their Baptism.

Election to a fellowship at Oriel College, Oxford in 1822 brought Newman into contact with the leading Anglican liberal thinkers of the time. By 1827 he found himself “drifting in the direction of the Liberalism of the day.”⁹ The experience was by no means altogether negative, particularly the influence of the logician Richard Whately (1787-1863) who, Newman said, taught him how to think for himself. Now, although Newman was always to set his face against any kind of liberalism in the sense of rationalism, nonetheless as a Catholic he never underestimated the importance of intellectual inquiry, stating, in defiance of Ultramontane positivism, “Theology is the fundamental and regulating principle of the whole Church system.”¹⁰

An early love of the Fathers, gained from reading extracts from them in an Evangelical church history in 1816, had, Newman maintained, saved him from ever becoming seriously liberal in doctrine. And in 1828 he began systematically to read the Fathers, starting with the early Apostolic Fathers. It was the deep study of the Greek, particularly the Alexandrian, Fathers that formed the basis of Newman’s theology, which was fundamentally Eastern rather than Western in its orientation. Newman’s surprising disclaimer as a Catholic that he was a theologian is understandable when one realizes that he had not been trained in the kind of Scholastic theology dominant at the time. From our vantage point, he is the greatest Catholic theologian of the nineteenth century, but he was not to come into his own until the *ressourcement* of the twentieth century.

These then were the formative influences which Newman brought into the Catholic Church in 1845. The fact that

⁸*Sermon Notes*, 230.

⁹*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, 26.

¹⁰*The Via Media of the Anglican Church I* (London and New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1901), xlvii.

unlike some converts he did not seek in any way to repudiate his past indicates the ecumenical dimension to his conversion. But it also has significance for the renewal of Catholicism that must accompany the work of re-evangelizing the post-Christian world, to which Pope Paul VI first called to the post-conciliar Church in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1974). And when we consider the rise and growth of the new lay communities and movements in the Church, with their strongly scriptural basis and their emphasis on personal conversion, or look at the recently published *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, with its careful attention to the spirituality and theology of the East, we may well feel that the conversion of the Venerable John Henry Newman 150 years ago had a remarkable prophetic significance which is only becoming clear in our own time. □

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