

SEMINAR ON HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

This year the seminar was allotted only one session. It was dedicated to the thought of Cardinal Newman and was coordinated with the first of this year's workshops which was designed as a way of marking the centenary of Newman's death. The presentation at the seminar was given by John Linnan, C.S.V., of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and was entitled "Real Assent and a Large Mental Field: Aspects of Contextualization in the Thought of John Henry Newman."

Recognizing that the notion of contextualization as we think of it at the present time was not a part of Newman's vocabulary, Linnan's argument maintained that there were insights and elements in Newman's epistemology that anticipate the issue which we know as contextualization. In developing this argument, Linnan first provided a clarification of basic concepts such as real and notional assent, apprehension, and real idea in as far as these have a distinctive meaning in the thought of Newman. Crucial for the argument is the concept of "real idea" and the claim that a "real idea" must develop in a history. As this relates to the question of Christianity, it involves Newman's conviction that Christianity is one of the great real ideas that have shaped human history in a decisive way, and as a real idea, Christianity must develop in a historical process.

Real ideas and real assent are profoundly personal in nature. On the other hand, there is a sympathy between diverse minds that can draw the many into a common assent. Thus, Newman sees a relation between that which is intensely individual and personal on the one hand and that which is communal on the other. One must speak of faith as personal, real assent just as surely as one must speak of a community of faith that is shaped around and gives shape to a real idea.

It is in trying to understand the relation between the individual and the communal dimensions of Newman's analysis that we become aware of the role of cultural context. Newman is aware of the particularities of situations which are constitutive of a person's culture. He calls them the "accidents" which provide the groundwork or condition for particular experiences. In part, at least, culture is made up of the notional and real assents held in common by a community. For Newman, culture is a "furniture of the mind" which plays a fundamental role in human development.

In attempting to understand the relation between idea, assent, and development we gain considerable insight into the way in which Newman's analysis anticipates the issue of truth in a context of cultural diversity and the question of inculturation. In Newman's view, the process of development, which is inevitable for a real, living idea, is a violent process that involves a constant interplay between culture and history. An idea enters into interaction with a culture. Such an idea will modify and be modified. It develops in as far as it can destroy or modify

or incorporate other modes of thinking. In time, it may become one of the governing principles of the culture. But it may also be corrupted or destroyed in the process. This is the context for the well-known quote: "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often."

The universality of Christianity includes the need to relate to a variety of cultures and moments in history. It must develop in order to be true to its own nature. Having described Christianity as one of the real ideas which are the product of real assent, Newman approaches the whole of Christianity in terms of context, process, and history. In short, he anticipates in considerable detail that shift in outlook which we call contextualization. For Newman, as for many today, the doctrine of incarnation is "the central aspect of Christianity" which makes necessary both a divine, stable element and a concrete, changeable element. How the divine becomes enfolded in a variety of cultural situations is a central issue in talk about contextualization.

The discussion which followed Linnan's presentation raised the following issues. First, in reading Newman it is necessary to distinguish two types of experience. There is the question of his first conversion experience at the age of fifteen. This was an intensely personal experience. Beyond this, there is that sort of experience which is more clearly induced by cultural situations. This distinction is helpful in sorting out the relation between the almost solipsistic sense of individual experience and the obvious relation of individual experience to public realities in the cultural context.

The fact that Newman's sense of pluralism is strongly linear and successive was seen as an important point. By way of contrast, many today are concerned not with successive stages of development but with simultaneous pluralism. This was seen as a significant difference between Newman's analysis and many contemporary analyses.

A final point in the discussion focused on the possible relation between Newman's views on ideas and development and those on the European continent, especially in Germany, during the nineteenth century. While Newman did not read German, he did have some indirect knowledge of the ideas circulating on the continent through friends who were familiar with the German philosophers. His explicit reference to Möhler, however, does not seem to indicate any detailed knowledge of the early Catholic Tübingen school. It was suggested that the Tübingen theologians and Newman may have been responding to the nineteenth-century sense of historicity in relative independence of each other.

At the end of the discussion, the seminar elected a new member for the steering committee. The members of the steering committee in attendance met to plan next year's seminar. The current plans call for a topic from the patristic/medieval period.

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