

NEWMAN AND THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY—INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: John Henry Newman
Conveners: Brian W. Hughes, University of Saint Mary, Kansas
Danielle Nussberger, Marquette University
Moderator: John T. Ford, Catholic University of America
Presenters: Paul Monson, Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology (Fr. Tom Rausch, S.J., served as proxy)
Ono Ekeh, Sacred Heart University
Damon McGraw, The Academy of the Holy Cross, Maryland

This interest group focuses on how John Henry Newman’s thought perceptively describes, analyzes, and provides compelling explanations or interpretations of the complex set of issues that many associate with “modernity.” This interest group hopes to foster a critical engagement with Newman’s thought and a variety of theological and philosophical topics relevant to our particular cultural context: the meaning and exercise of reason both for and against Christian faith; the possibility of knowing God and the intellectual substance of religious belief; the challenges of atheism, secularism, religious indifferentism, the privatization of religion, biblicism, the understanding of human freedom, and the nature and exercise of religious authority.

Paul Monson’s paper brought together Newman’s ecclesiological thought with the proposal for a “hemispheric ecclesiology.” Drawing from Pope Francis’s transcontinental vision of “America” in his advocacy for migrants, Paul Monson’s paper demonstrated how Newman assists U.S. Catholics in understanding “American Catholicism” as a transnational, hemispheric reality. Contextualizing Newman’s 1877 *Preface* to his *Via Media* through his epistemology, the presentation maintained that Newman crafts a historical ecclesiology grounded in the realities and complexities of human experience. Unlike *Lumen Gentium*, Newman’s work accounts for conflict in the Church, revealing how tension births compromise and creativity. For instance, Newman’s appreciation for how the devotional life balances abstract theology intimates parallels with Pope Francis’s call for a “theology of the people” for the Church today. Monson plans to incorporate Newman’s ecclesiology as a “grammar” for his forthcoming book project that bridges the history, faith, and culture of North and South America through a hemispheric lens.

Damon McGraw’s paper, “Modernity as a Crisis in Newman’s Thought: A Primer,” provided an overview of how Newman understands “modernity.” Newman’s interpretation of “modernity” has an ideological and a practical dimension. He sees its most important idea as a “new image of liberty.” It imagines freedom to be the absence (1) of any restraint, (2) of any reliance upon authority, and (3) of any dependence upon a neighbor. Newman argues that the modern exercise of reason, as opposed to discerning what is good, true, and beautiful, is aimed at the establishment of what can be proven by evidence and the instrumental calculation of expedience. Ultimately Newman sees this as heralding a new theory and practice of society. The traditional role of religion as the bond of society is being replaced by the secular principle of utility. The practical import of this secularizing revolution, according to Newman, is that Western Christianity (and the English Church specifically) is entering a new era defined by the withdrawal of state support, the loss of temporal

honors and advantages, and the treatment of the Church as a “mere creation of the State.” Insofar as the maintenance of the Church has been secured by law, it has become weakened by “leaning on an arm of flesh.” While Roman Catholic superstition and Papal tyranny were regarded as the major threats to Christianity of the post-Reformation era in England, Newman argues that the new “false liberty of thought” has made schism, skepticism, and secularity the defining ills of high modernity.

Ono Ekeh’s paper, “Newman on the Role of Doubt,” explained the nuanced view of the role doubt plays in the discovery of truth and its implications for the life of faith. Doubt as a method or step in the discovery of truth is a distinctive feature of the modern mindset. Science, in its method of discovery and clarification of the world, uses doubt as a step towards achieving its goals. However, privileging the method of doubt undermines natural human cognition and makes truth a matter of investigation, thus undermining the claim that we are naturally ordered to truth. John Henry Newman provides a useful analysis of assent, inference, and doubt, such that doubt is recognized as a natural cognitive function that can be embraced under certain circumstances. For Newman, the goal of assent is truth, while the goal of inference is certainty. That which is true need not be logically certain, nor is the logically certain inference necessarily true.

Newman presents assent as our cognitive stance towards things that actually exist. These things cannot be doubted. Our natural life deals with things and thus our natural cognitive attitude is immune from doubt. On the other hand, notions, which are aspects and profiles of reality are the stuff of inferences. In the context of inferences, doubt is useful, if not necessary. Thus, since science and critical thinking deal with notions, doubt then is necessary to achieving certainty. This means that, in our cognitive lives, it is necessary to distinguish between the world of assents and the world of inferences. Doubt does not belong in the world of assent, however; it does belong in the world of inferences.

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