

THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

NEWMAN'S CULTURAL MILIEU: HIS INTERACTION WITH ANGLICANISM AND CATHOLICISM

Gerard Magill introduced the workshop with a short explanation of Newman's "Ethics of Belief" as a way of relating the two subsequent papers. The conviction that led Newman from Anglicanism to Catholicism in 1845 undergirded his ethics of belief (as the justification of religious assent) that remained constant throughout his life. He can contribute to the advance of ecumenism today if we understand that in the controversies of his personal history and his ecclesiology he retained a constant approach to religious assent.

In the first paper Kenneth L. Parker (Saint Louis University) discussed "Newman's Estrangement from the Church of England: An Experimental Historiography of the Anglican Years."

The historical task of this paper is to provide a meaningful frame of reference for understanding the estrangement of Newman from the Church of England, especially in light of the change that permeated early nineteenth-century England and his search for a certain foundation for his faith and practice. To do so Thomas Kuhn's theory on the structure of scientific revolutions is helpful as a framework for understanding Newman's life and work up to his rejection of his *via media* theology in 1841. Kuhn focuses on three major issues that illumine matters of critical importance in Newman's personal and intellectual growth. First, how a community defines itself, and the importance of a shared paradigm in maintaining community cohesion. Second, what can happen in the lives of creative individuals when the paradigm no longer accommodates the problems they encounter. Third, what deviations the group will tolerate, and how it controls impermissible aberrations.¹

For Kuhn there are four parts to a community's shared paradigm: symbolic generalizations, metaphysical beliefs, values, and exemplars. If consensus on one or more of the parts of the paradigm is lost a community will experience crisis, and a paradigm shift may occur. The Restoration Church of England established the paradigm that guided the religious establishment of England into the nineteenth century. By examining the various components of this paradigm and

¹Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 209.

the breakdown that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we can gain a clearer understanding of Newman's *via media* theology as a failed attempt at paradigm shift.

Newman sought to create a new paradigm, grounded in the writings of the early Church fathers and the Caroline divines of the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, there was a perception that he had abandoned anti-Romanism to the extent that he openly criticized the Anglican Church of the Reformation with its symbolic generalization in the Thirty-nine Articles. If Newman's *via media* theology was to survive, the Articles had to be interpreted in a way that conformed to the catholic tradition as Newman understood it. The fruit of the reinterpretation was his *Tract 90* (1841).² In an age when "catholic" was synonymous with Roman Catholic, the widespread reaction to *Tract 90* confirmed the community's rejection of Newman's paradigm. He had taken a symbolic generalization which had united the Anglican Church and had given it a meaning that distorted the identity of the community. He had rejected the reformed interpretation of the Thirty-nine Articles in favor of explanations that savored of Romanism. By the end of 1841, Newman knew himself to be an outsider.

Newman's work in Oxford failed because the *via media* paradigm violated deeply cherished remnants of the Restoration paradigm. He attacked the old paradigm at its strongest points. He rejected the Protestant character of the Church of England, symbolized in the Thirty-nine Articles, and transgressed the value of anti-Romanism. The rejection of his paradigm by the ecclesiastical authorities forced Newman to reassess the foundations on which he based his Christian faith and practice. In the autumn of 1843 Newman retired to Littlemore. Two years later his conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism was made possible by constructing in this painful transition another paradigm, the development of Christian doctrine, a paradigm that has transformed Christian discourse in the twentieth century.

Edward Jeremy Miller (Gwynedd-Mercy College) presented the following argument in his paper, "Contexts for Understanding Newman's Ecclesiology."

Most of Newman's writings were vis-à-vis opponents, and consequently he termed himself a controversialist. In ecclesiology, and writing as a Catholic, his opponent was often enough his old Anglican self. Furthermore, whenever he wrote and on whatever topic, he preferred to work from the facts, from the nature of things as it were. These two features, Newman's customary genre of apologetics and his penchant for thinking out of the concrete situation, indicate a context within which his ecclesiology can be appraised.

²*Tracts for the Times*, vol. 6 (London: Rivington, 1841).

The *Lectures on the Prophetic Office* (1837)³ were Newman's first attempt, while still an Anglican, at an explicit ecclesiology. He presented a *via media* position, situating Anglo-Catholicism between the doctrinal aberrations of Rome and the doctrinal vacuity of Protestantism. With Protestants against Rome, the *via media* held that Scripture contains all of Revelation. With Rome and against Protestantism, it held that Scripture of itself and interpreted privately could not provide clear teachings on revelation and that another informant (i.e., tradition) was required.

The tradition stopped with antiquity (the patristic church) for Anglo-Catholicism; Rome's doctrines from later tradition were corruptions. Why was this so? In founding a Church and gifting it with a divine message, God preserves that Church in the truth. However, this gift was partially forfeited when the original unity of the Church was rent apart. Consequent to that rupture there are three branches of the Church: Greek, Roman, and English, but no branch has the assurance of the full gift of indefectibility after the Church's sin of disunion. Thus Catholicity is the mark of the Church which assures authentic apostolicity.

This ecclesiology melted when Newman examined things as they existed, when he took into full account the nature of things. The *via media* was seen to have existed in the ancient Church too, and it was an heretical middle position. Then Newman was reminded of Augustine's *securus judicat orbis terrarum*, and this became the key to everything. Finally, when in *Tract 90* Newman argued for a more tolerant view within the Thirty-nine Articles, the very bishops his ecclesiology supported cut away his own supports by their universal condemnation of the *Tract*.

In 1877 Newman reedited the *Prophetic Office*,⁴ adding corrective footnotes and a lengthy preface. In these additions he indicates how one can understand an ongoing gift of guidance to a teaching Church, such as on infallibility, and how a devotional element in the Church which needs to be anchored in reliable doctrine can be characterized by abuses without causing such features of the Church to be unauthentic. The preface to the 1877 reedition describes the Church sacramentally in terms of the three offices of Christ: prophet, priest, and king. In the Church these offices invariably clash—and this is good—and at certain times one of these features of the Church (e.g., the authoritative dimension) can get somewhat out of control. Any honest ecclesiology needs a “theology of abuses” and Newman's ecclesiology has one.

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³Republished in 1877 as *Via Media*, vol. 1. For a critical edition, see *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, ed. H. D. Weidner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

⁴See *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, ed. H. D. Weidner.