

REASON AND FAITH IN JOHN HENRY NEWMAN'S SERMONS AND POETRY

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Abstract: Throughout his writings, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was especially occupied by the relationship between reason and faith. Issues of faith and reason were especially pressing in Newman's Victorian context. This article will consider how this particular relationship is treated in Newman's sermons and poetry and what his representation and treatment of reason and faith means for his thought and theology in general.

Widely considered one of the greatest English literary stylists and prose writers of the nineteenth century, much of John Henry Newman's (1801-1890) work and writings focus on the relationship between reason and faith.

The nineteenth century saw the relationship between science and Christianity become increasingly conflicted, as the geological and paleontological discoveries of the time shook the foundations of religious faith and resulted in growing religious controversy, something that would affect religious belief for the rest of the nineteenth century. Thus issues of faith and reason were especially pressing in Newman's time and Newman himself was in no way ignorant of or oblivious to these. As he experienced the developments that would result in a widespread loss of belief, move the humanities into the periphery, the progress of science and great societal shifts throughout Europe, he was extremely conscious of the fact that these shifts and changes stemmed from a deep intellectual crisis.¹

This article aims to explore the way Newman's view of the relationship between reason and faith is expressed in two different mediums: Newman's sermons and his poetry. In both his sermons and his poetry, Newman presents knowledge as something dynamic and living, and which can perhaps be linked to Biblical representations of wisdom and knowledge, which aid him in his discussion of the relationship between reason and faith.

REASON AND FAITH IN JOHN HENRY NEWMAN'S OXFORD UNIVERSITY SERMONS

Newman had first hand experience of these discussions of science and religion, being surrounded by academics, intellectuals and scientists at Oxford. In his 15 sermons preached before the University of Oxford congregation between 1829-1843, Newman especially entered into dialogue with the changing relationship between science and religion, reason and faith. In his university sermons, as well as many other works, Newman defends internal, personal faith under siege from scientific reasoning's newfound superior standing in society. James David Earnest and Gerard Tracey write that: "there is nothing drily theoretical about these sermons, because each one issues from keenly felt problems of faith and reason".²

The earlier sermons show how the relationship between faith and reason would be an enduring concern for Newman. The very first of these 15 sermons considers the troubled

¹ Jane Rupert *John Henry Newman on the Nature of the Mind*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, 2011.p. 33

² James David Earnest, Gerard Tracey: "Editor's Introduction" in John Henry Newman: *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, p. xiii

relationship found between learning and Christianity. Whereas, in the rest of the sermons, Newman defends the faith of the simple, he attempts to defend the faith of the learned in Sermon I. He discusses whether it is possible for educated, intellectual people, and especially scientists, to be Christians or whether the Christian faith impedes intellectual and scientific pursuits. As Earnest and Tracey point out, this sermon demonstrates that Newman was sensitive to the fact that “the modern ‘religion of science’ would necessitate a new Christian apologetics”³ very early on in his career.

In Sermon I, Newman quite accurately predicted that “as the principles of science are, in process of time, more fully developed, and become more independent of the religious system, there is much danger lest the philosophical school should be found to separate from the Christian Church, and at length disown the parent to whom it has been so greatly indebted”.⁴ Here Newman foresees how the growing conflict between Christianity and science would result in a loss of faith because Christians would not be properly prepared nor equipped to confront the questions posed by science in a way that would satisfy their own minds. These sermons can then perhaps be considered more prophetic than polemic. “Newman was predicting the direction from which future attacks on Christianity would come and trying to prepare a generation of young clerics for the battles they would one day have to fight”.⁵

Basil Mitchell points out that Newman’s thought and his sermons are of a strongly dialectical nature as his focus always depends on whom he is arguing with. Often, and especially in the 15 University Sermons, Newman’s opponent is Whately and other Oriel men who advocated a Lockean view of reason. However, at times: “[Newman] is facing the other way and confronting those who think of faith as a basic commitment which is independent of reason, either because we enjoy a kind of direct awareness of God or because we can rely unquestioningly on scripture or some other religious authority”.⁶

In Sermon 13, Newman makes his views of the relationship between reason and faith especially clear. Newman meditates on the faith of Peter and exemplifies frequent instances where faith and reason seem at odds in the actions and life of Peter: “If ever Faith forgot self, and was occupied with its Great Object, it was the faith of Peter. If in any one Faith appears in contrast with what we commonly understand by Reason, and with Evidence, it so appears in the instance of Peter. When he reasoned, it was at times when Faith was lacking”⁷. Newman muses that reason and faith are strongly contrasted in the life of Peter, and yet Peter tells us to carefully exercise our reason “an exercise both upon Faith [...] and upon the Object of [Faith]”. Sermon 13 takes its starting point from 1 Peter 3:15, which Newman quotes: “But sanctify the Lord God in our hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear”.

According to Jamieson, Faussett, and Brown’s Bible Commentary, a “reason” could also mean a reasonable account. This particular verse

refutes Rome’s dogma, “I believe it, because the Church believes it”. Credulity is believing without evidence; faith is believing on evidence. There is no repose for reason itself but in faith. This verse does not impose an obligation to bring

³ Ibid., xxix

⁴ John Henry Newman: *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006 p. 23

⁵ Earnest & Tracey p. xxvii

⁶ Basil Mitchell: “Newman as a Philosopher”, in Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill (eds.) *Newman after a Hundred Years* Oxford University Press 1990, pp. 223-246, p. 240.

⁷ Newman 2006, p. 173.

forward learned proof and logical defense of revelation. But as believers deny themselves, crucify the world, and brave persecution, they must be buoyed up by some strong “hope”; men of the world, having no such hope themselves, are moved by curiosity to ask the secret of this hope: the believer must be ready to give an experimental account “how this hope arose in him, what it contains, and on what it rests”.⁸

Newman defines reason as the faculty of gaining knowledge without direct sense perception: Newman states that all men reason and that reasoning is nothing but gaining truth from former truth: Reasoning is a “living spontaneous energy within us, not an art”.⁹ It is important to distinguish between two processes - the “original process of reasoning” and “the process of investigating our reasonings”.¹⁰ The important point here is that “all men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason”.¹¹ Newman denotes these distinct processes reasoning or arguing; conscious or unconscious reasoning or Implicit Reason and Explicit Reason. To the latter, he explains, belong the words, science, method, development, analysis, criticism, proof, system, principles, rules. Importantly, Faith, which Newman considers a reasonable process, is not necessarily founded on these processes that form the explicit form of reasoning. In fact, Newman is in doubt of faith being compatible with these processes in any way.

Rupert points out that when it comes to the personal relationship to God “we reason through a converging mode of thought implicit in our Image of God that, on reflection, we can also make consciously explicit”.¹² Newman himself argues for this type of convergent reason and views it as being “foundational to the scientific or theoretical reasoning of theology whose abstractions are only partially capable of making it explicit”.¹³ Newman importantly warns us against a one-sided and non-convergent view of reason, which is under attack from the increasingly dominant view that the only true form of reason is that which is represented by science and is based on sense perception.

In fact, Newman’s understanding of knowledge seems deeply rooted in Biblical representations of knowledge and wisdom. He writes in his sermon on *Wisdom, as Contrasted with Faith and with Bigotry*: “It is not the mere addition to our knowledge which is the enlargement, but[...] the movement onwards, of that moral centre[...] a connected view[...] the knowledge, not only of things, but of their mutual relations. It is organized, and therefore living knowledge”.¹⁴

Comparing this to the Biblical *logos*, there are many similarities to be drawn. Here *logos*, or wisdom is similarly represented as a living, dynamic, creating and holistic force which “was with God and [...] was God”.¹⁵ Similarly the Old Testament wisdom literature portrays knowledge, or wisdom, in a personified form. It does seem, however, that Newman warns against an overemphasis of either reason or faith. In Sermon 13 he writes:

Nothing would be more theoretical and unreal that to suppose that true Faith cannot exist except when moulded upon a Creed, and based upon Evidence; yet

⁸ Robert Jamieson; Andrew Robert Fausset, and David Brown: *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Zondervan, 1961.

⁹ Newman 2006 p. 177.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 178.

¹² Rupert, p. 34

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Newman 2006, p. 195

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible*, John 1:1

nothing would indicate a more shallow philosophy than to say that it ought carefully to be disjoined from dogmatic and argumentative statements. To assert the latter is to discard the science of theology from the service of religion; to assert the former, is to maintain that every child, every peasant, must be a theologian. Faith cannot exist without grounds or without an object; but it does not follow that all who have faith should recognize, and be able to state what they believe, and why. Nor, on the other hand, because it is not identical with its grounds, and its objects, does it therefore cease to be true Faith, on its recognizing them.[...] True Faith, then, admits, but does not require, the exercise of what is commonly understood by Reason.¹⁶

As shall be made clearer in the analysis of Newman's poetry, faith brings with it the realisation that our reason is flawed and inadequate, due to mankind's fallen state.

REASON AND FAITH JOHN HENRY NEWMAN'S POETRY

Newman had a special gift for figurative language which exhibited rhetorical and imaginative flair, which he not only demonstrated in his prose, but also his poetry. Gerard Magill writes that "[i]n the wake of Romanticism [Newman] used the imagination in his theological method to portray the intellectual depth of religious belief".¹⁷ Similar to his sermons and theological writing, Newman's poetry treats questions of faith and reason.

It is possible to liken Newman's attitude to and view of poetry to his concept of implicit reason: Gregory Goodwin writes that Newman makes reference to "'an unscientific reasoning" found in "rude as well as... gifted minds"' and compares "this form of reasoning to poetry's "spontaneous outpouring of thought"¹⁸. However, Newman did not believe there was reason to divide poetical and theological ways of thinking as these could be considered such different approaches that could not possibly be confused, and "Newman [...] would never have thought that poetry however high it aimed could partake of the same supernatural guarantee - unless of course it was religious poetry"¹⁹.

Much of Newman's poetry has a distinctively religious character. In a sense, the sermon and the poem are quite similar forms of writing, as both can find expression through the spoken word. In the poem, *A Thanksgiving*, Newman expresses his gratefulness to God:

For blessings given, ere dawning sense
 Could seek or scan Thy grace[...]
 Blessings, when reason's awful power
 Gave thought a bolder range"

The poem ends with the stanza:
 Deny me wealth; far, far remove
 the lure of power or name; Hope thrives in straits in weakness love,
 And faith in this world's shame.

¹⁶ Newman 2006, p. xciii.

¹⁷ Gerard Magill: "Moral Imagination in Theological Method and Church Tradition: John Henry Newman, *Theological Studies* 53, pp. 451-475, 1992, p. 451.

¹⁸ Gregory H. Goodwin: "Keble and Newman: Tractarian Aesthetics and the Romantic Tradition, *Victorian Studies* Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 475-494, 1987 p. 481.

¹⁹ Goodwin p. 481.

Here criticism is leveled at the over-emphasis of reason and Newman especially highlights the hope found in faith. Furthermore, the first two lines emphasise that God's blessings were given to mankind before man had "sense" to seek out God's grace.

It is important to note that Newman's criticism is not of reason in itself, but rather its inflated role and its positioning above other "habits of mind". The power of reason alludes to the fact that man places faith in his own abilities and intellect, however, true hope is found in the acknowledgement of our weakness and shame, and the proper attitude is humility.

We see this further elaborated and also see the distinction outlined between implicit and explicit reason, as defined in Sermon 13, in the poem *The Elements*. In *The Elements* Newman's criticism of physical and natural scientific reasoning's superior standing can in particular be traced. The important thing is not whether man's reason and faith are compatible, but rather than man recognise his fallen state:

Thus God has will'd
That man, when fully skill'd
Still gropes in twilight dim;
Encompass'd all his hours
By fearfulest powers
Inflexible to him.
That so he may discern
His feebleness,
And e'en for earth's success
To Him in wisdom turn
Who holds for us the keys of either home,
Earth and the world to come.

Thus God's wisdom surpasses all human attempts at knowledge, and our endeavours, whether they be scientific, philosophic or theological, should rather be in aid of us understanding our own shortcoming and recognising that all we have is from God, and given to us through grace, not through our understanding, our ability to reason or the strength or weakness of our faith.

In Newman's discussion of scientists' and philosophers' view of Christianity, he focuses on this particular aspect: "Such men often regard Christianity as a slavish system, which is prejudicial to the freedom of thought, the aspirations of genius, and the speculations of enterprise; an unnatural system, which sets out with supposing that the human mind is out of order"²⁰. However, for Newman these claims are the product of intellectual pride. For him Christianity does not strangle or hamper research or restrict progress: "we have no reason to suppose that [God] forbids lawful knowledge of any kind..."²¹ Rather the fall of man is a dogmatic fact and the entire Christian belief system is contingent on this particular doctrine, as it was for this reason Christ died on the cross. In many of Newman works, we are continually reminded of the Fall and the consequences of the Fall. As Earnest and Tracey point out: "Newman concedes that humility, which he regards as indispensable to successful scientific research, can be achieved merely by experiencing error and failure"²². However, according to Newman, without the Christian perspective, this humility will never reach a similar level of

²⁰ Newman 2006, p. 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²² Earnest & Tracey, p. xxxvi

profoundness: “The philosopher confesses himself to be imperfect; the Christian confesses himself to be sinful and corrupt”²³.

In the end, one might therefore argue that reason and faith, although important faculties endowed to humans by God, are both inferior to the grace of God. Newman himself explains:

The merit of faith is due to the fact that it is an act of free will done with the aid of grace, and not the mere admission of conclusions whose logical necessity prevents the intellect from dissenting. Faith is the gift of God and not a mere act of our own, which are free to exert when we will. It is quite distinct from an exercise of reason, though it follows upon it[...]. The absolute and perfect certitude of divine faith does not rest on reasoning or human motives, but solely on the fact that God, the Eternal Truth, who cannot deceive nor be deceived has spoken²⁴.

Faith rests on the authority and the grace of God and not on arguments, which are only the steps towards faith and gaining deeper knowledge of God.

Goodwin also makes this point clear: “Literature is not a science, Newman tells us. Rather, literature is an account of human history not as religion would have it, but as humanity is without religion’s illuminating aid. Newman allows that literature may be tinctured by a religious spirit and gives as his example Hebrew literature as in the Old Testament”²⁵. However, in Newman’s view, the Bible is more than literature as it “certainly is simply theological, and has a character imprinted on it which is above nature”. Ordinary and worldly literature can then be considered an expression of the loss of innocence and fall of man, as man is “sure to sin and his literature will be an expression of his sin, and this whether it be heathen or Christian”²⁶. Newman demonstrates the double-sidedness of man’s artistic creations as reflecting man as a dual creature both fallen and created in God’s image. Thus literature “will have the beauty and the fierceness, the sweetness and the rankness of the natural man”²⁷.

Just as science and reason cannot replace religion, literature is no substitute either. Science and literature can both be viewed as forms of human knowledge. As Goodwin notes Newman argued that

knowledge, [...] whether discovered and expressed by literature or science is no substitute for religion. Science proceeds by deductions and literature by conclusions and inferences, but neither has the power to display directly the concrete realities of supernatural religion. All human forms of knowledge are founded upon doubt, a fact that Newman believed was observable in the very nature of language, where every affirmation suggests its own negation: “To say that a thing *must* be is to admit that it *may not* be”. Religious knowledge does not admit of doubt because its foundations are not merely in language, but in the testimony of “facts and events, by history” It is not “a deduction from what we

²³ Newman 2006, p. 22.

²⁴ Newman “Theses de Fide”, in “Cardinal Newman’s Theses de Fide and His Proposed Introduction to the French Translation of the University Sermons”, H. Tristram (ed.), *Gregorianum* 18, pp. 226-241, 1937, p. 226-227.

²⁵ Goodwin p. 488.

²⁶ John Henry Newman *The Idea of a University*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, p. 173.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

know”; it has “ever been synonymous with revelation”. To attempt to build a religion upon inference - on science, literature or art - is to invite skepticism²⁸.

When approaching the issue of faith and reason, it often seems to be presented as an issue of an irreconcilable dichotomy. However, as we see in Newman’s work, faith and reason are not necessarily opposites, nor necessarily in conflict with one another.

The above quote underlines an interesting perspective on the relationship between reason and faith. Whereas human knowledge is based on doubt, faith can be seen as the opposite of doubt. To some extent this relates to Newman’s remark that reason can be considered a “critical” rather than “creative” faculty²⁹. Faith on the other hand is more than believing based on evidence or conclusions reached through formal logic reasoning.

The relationship between faith and reason is thus, in Newman’s view, not a one to one relationship. Although these two categories are often opposed to each other as level, in Newman’s terminology, habits of mind, a simple comparison is not possible. It is not a question of one of them being better or more important than the other. They reflect different things about humankind and man’s relationship to God. There is thus no inherent divide between faith and reason. Both reflect us as creatures made in God’s own image, however, only faith, and the revelation we gain through faith, truly instills in us an understanding of our fallen nature, the fallibility of our own reason, and the sovereignty of God’s wisdom.

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²⁸ Goodwin p. 492.

²⁹ Newman, 2006, p. 131.

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