

Journey's End

'In these latter days things are tending to atheism in one shape or another.' That Newman believed was the fundamental issue confronting the Church – the project of human life lived without God or gods. It was the subject he pondered on throughout his life, scribbling jottings, making notes, which were to issue in a beautiful but complex book 'The Grammar of Assent'.

Some aspects of the contemporary world seem to have passed Newman by. He does not seem to have been much moved by social issues. In 1845 his opponent that hearty clergyman who had challenged his integrity, Charles Kingsley was the one who stood with other Anglicans to support the great Chartist gathering on Kennington Common demanding the right to vote. But Newman was an opponent of the Reform Bill and when in Ireland seemed unmoved by the oppressive English rule. Yet he strove to understand other aspects of the world around him including what we would call, the growth of secularism. This had nothing to do, he believed, with the advances in the scientific understanding of the Universe. In fact 'the discoveries of modern astronomy' Newman declared made 'the Creator more wonderful.' Also, this time with Charles Kingsley, he was unfazed by Darwin's 'Origin of Species.' 'It does not seem to me to follow that Creation is denied because the Creator, millions of years ago, gave laws to matter.' Finding answers to questions about how things came to be left untouched the religious question why things came to be.

Newman did not believe that it was advance in knowledge or clever arguments which had weakened the sense of God's reality, it was rather the birth of a new world view which seductively set confident human beings at the centre. This view had not won the argument but had captured the imagination. About this Newman is very realistic. This is how all big ideas and new visions make their way. They appeal to our imaginations before they appeal to our minds. So we do not vote for a political party because we have studied every word of its manifesto but because we find that this particular vision captures us. Of course later the critical mind will be applied to that manifesto because we know that not all soaring visions are either practical or true. Nazi rallies provided a vision, which captured the imaginations of vast crowds, but this was a wicked untruthful vision.

Religious belief, Newman held, was to do with the response of the whole person – heart and mind. And when we consider the activity of the mind, we must avoid limiting the scope of its work. Yes, it has the important task of sifting and analysing evidence but it can also move like a rock climber 'who by quick eye, prompt hand, and firm foot, ascends how – he knows not himself.' The intellect may make great leaps of faith taking us to places whose lasting security has yet to be tested by evidence. Life is too rich and complex to tolerate any narrowing of our human search for the truth. We need scientists but we also need artists, poets and musicians to take us where critical reason cannot go – yes, on into the mystery of God.

Newman confronted the growth of atheism not by moaning about modern thought or denying its real achievements but by challenging what he saw as a growing narrowing of the mind, which could take us only into a claustrophobic godlessness. Life so rich and complex was a mystery to be explored and studied in many ways and from many angles. So, as he resisted the narrowing of secularism, he resisted too a narrow clericalism in the Church, which fearfully tried to close down discussion and argument. In the battle for the reality of God, thinkers must not have to 'fight under the lash' with freedom of intellect 'beaten out of' them. For Holy Spirit can only lead us into all truth if our minds are set free.

It is this unremitting search for God that is central theme of Newman's life and work. It is there in his great sermons, there in those endless letters to fellow seekers, there as the focus of his life. His was not just a journey from one church to another, from Canterbury to Rome, but ever on into the mystery of God 'o'er moor and fen 'until that night was gone. Yes, there would be a coming out of the shadows at last into the light, and with that morn 'the angel faces' would smile. In this life Newman had known suffering through failure, misunderstanding and rejection. He had known that 'the flame of everlasting Love doth burn ere it transform' and yet in death it was those smiling angels who met him to dip him 'softly, gently in most loving arms.' The end of the journey was in the love of God. So we dare to say: 'John Henry, pray for us in our journeying'.

Father Peter Cornwell

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