

## INTRODUCTION

The idea for this reader arose out of the wish to introduce my undergraduate Victorian seminar to a fresh John Henry Newman to complement the Newman represented in standard selections from the literary anthologies, usually passages from the erudite *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, in which Newman recounts the steps toward his famous conversion, or from the satirical *Tamworth Reading Room*, in which Newman skewers liberal views of religion, or perhaps from a lecture in *Idea of a University*, where Newman redefines utilitarian education or gives his famous description of an educated man. More specifically, since a lecture on the “Oxford Movement” is part of my seminar, I wanted my students to hear, behind the dry description of this early nineteenth-century attempt at doctrinal reform of the Anglican Church, what Ian Ker, Newman’s fine biographer, calls “the most potent spiritual force behind the Oxford Movement”; that is, Newman’s brilliant sermons of the period, collected as *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. It is Newman the famous nineteenth-century preacher who gives a richer, more balanced picture of his genius, because in his sermons Newman is especially personal and concrete—“heart speaks to heart” (*Cor ad cor loquitur*), to use the motto chosen when he became a cardinal. Here we also find in the form of moral and spiritual guidance many ideas that Newman develops in later discursive writing. Newman’s thought was remarkably all of a piece, despite a conversion, decades of controversy, and long development through a varied course of writing. He had the most comprehensive and unified view of life—what he called “the Providential system of the world”—of any of the great Victorian writers, so his writing on spirituality gives ready insight into his later and more famous works.

In the course of making this selection, I have tried, too, to provide a guide—one of many possible, given the extraordinary number and variety of the sermons within the grand organic unity

of the *Parochial and Plain Sermons*—to one of the fundamental missions of Newman’s life and work as theologian, preacher, educator, controversialist, and priest: the restoration of holiness to the Christian life, that of both individuals and the Church. No picture of Newman’s work should leave this mission out, though the image of Newman as Victorian “sage” tends to obscure it, just as the historical treatment of nineteenth-century religious life tends to conceal the living tissue of faith in the lives of ordinary Victorians, who consumed sermons as avidly as they did the great entertainment of the age—novels. History foregrounds the great disturbance of traditional Christian faith occasioned by an array of new, concerted secular forces, among them the utilitarian material philosophy reshaping national institutions and a liberal, sceptical spirit of the age, challenging orthodoxies, particularly the doctrinal foundation of Christianity. The latter is displayed in Victorian “crises of faith” precipitated by “Higher Criticism,” the beginning of the long-running attempt by scholars to historicize Scripture and strip it of divine authority, and the Darwinian revolution, which, for many, called into question not only the authority of Scripture but the very definition of man as a special creation in the image and likeness of God. So powerful was the Enlightenment heritage of doubt in the nineteenth century, despite the counter-balancing forces of Romanticism, that Newman, later, as a Catholic, would come to believe that only Catholicism or scepticism could prevail in the contemporary world. If the Victorians looked to their “sages,” or public intellectuals—chief among them Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, and John Henry Newman—to guide them through the thicket of social debate to an understanding of their fractured Christian world, they looked to their preachers to guide them in the duties of daily Christian life. Newman was uniquely suited to the task of combining the roles of sage and shepherd. Threaded throughout his Anglican and Catholic writings composed over many decades—his sermons, treatises, lectures, autobiography, devotions, and letters—is a profound attempt to relate learning and inquiry, even into the great mysteries of Redemption, to the most humble duties of daily Christian life.

Newman’s life at Oxford over twenty-five years (1817–1842),

as undergraduate, fellow, and public tutor, but also as curate, vicar, and preacher was, accordingly, two lives running parallel: thinker and pastoral minister. Newman, the student of logic, tutor at Oriel College, church historian, and ecclesiastical reformer, came to be the motive force behind the Oxford Movement. Through a series of scholarly tracts, Newman, John Keble, E. B. Pusey, and others attempted to reform the Anglican Church, which these critics had come to see as no more than an appendage of the state, increasingly subject to liberal political designs, and thoroughly at home in the world. Later, as a Catholic, Newman described graphically his frustration with the Established Church:

If it be life to impart a tone to the court and houses of parliament . . . to be a principle of order . . . and an organ of benevolence . . . to make men decent, respectable, and sensible . . . to shed a gloss over avarice and ambition,—if indeed it is the life of religion to be the first jewel in the queen’s crown, and the highest step of her throne, then doubtless the National Church is replete, it overflows with life; but . . . Life of what kind? Is the Establishment’s life merely national life, or is it something more? Is it Catholic life as well? Is it supernatural life? <sup>1</sup>

Through the Tracts, which were disbursed widely, the Tractarians wished to reconnect the Anglican Church to its catholic roots in the Primitive Church and to shore up Anglican doctrine weakened by sectarian controversy, neglect, and the influence of “private judgement”—even at the great risk of arguing for “Romish” views on contested ground such as “justification by faith alone” and sacramentalism. Importantly, they also labored to return the Established Church to a higher standard of sanctity, personal holiness, and reverence before the divine mystery. In their efforts they offended, by turns, the High Church Establishment, the Broad Church “latitudinarian” liberals, and the Evangelicals,

<sup>1</sup> *The Difficulties of Anglicans*, in *The Works of Cardinal Newman*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910), p. 47.

among others. Finally, the Tractarians came under strong censure from the university and the bishops when Newman published his famous Tract 90 in 1841, arguing essentially that the Anglican credo, the Thirty-nine Articles, was really aimed at the abuses of Rome and did not substantially alter its doctrines, which were the universal doctrines Anglicanism shared with Roman Catholicism. After an attempt to establish a historical foundation for an Anglo-Catholic Church, Newman came to see that this “Via Media” was a paper church that had never actually existed. From this point, Newman moved slowly but inexorably toward Rome. He took with him many Oxford converts, especially among younger men who had come under his influence. In this, by many accounts, his personal sanctity, great empathy, and uncompromising call to holiness in the sermons played as great a part as the Tractarian attack on the Established Church, even greater.

His severance from Oxford and retreat to the nearby village of Littlemore, reception into the Catholic Church in 1845, the national scandal it occasioned, his life as a Catholic priest and head of the English Oratorian Movement are recorded in the *Apologia* and treated in detail by his biographers, but it is in Newman’s Anglican years and in his other life at Oxford that he establishes the view of the Christian life that underpins his life and works. Newman came from a Bible-reading Church of England family. His father was a London banker. Newman was converted, or “born again,” at fifteen under the influence of an Evangelical teacher. He wavered almost unconsciously when exposed to philosophic scepticism as an undergraduate at Oxford; but then, after setbacks in his academic ambitions and a serious illness while travelling in Sicily, he settled into the personal habits of holiness—he had already decided on celibacy at age fifteen—that he would retain for the rest of his life. And now he began to pursue his unique intellectual mission of reintroducing the religion of the apostles, martyrs, and saints to the age of “progress,” the “cash nexus,” and “respectability.”

The direction that Newman took as a young man in his duties at Oxford is in keeping with the message of the sermons that for the Christian one’s religion and work are inseparable. When assigned curate at St. Clement’s Church in Oxford, having been

ordained deacon in 1824, he came to see in often difficult pastoral duties among working people the limitation of Protestant “saving faith,” when faith was so clearly joined to “works.” Faith realized in action, not merely words and feelings, became a cardinal truth to him. Likewise, Newman wanted the Christian life to be more integrated with undergraduate life, but was rebuffed when he proposed to reform the tutorial system at Oriel by creating much greater contact, and thus the possibility of healthy personal influence, between tutors and undergraduates. But it was chiefly in the preparation of his Sunday sermons that Newman worked out his spirituality. Part of his duty as Fellow was to serve as vicar of St Mary the Virgin, the university parish church, preaching at the 4:00 service on Sundays and Holy Days. Here, while studying the Church Fathers and conducting, through the Tracts, often arcane theological debates in an atmosphere of political and religious controversy, Newman was able through his preaching to exert extraordinary influence on the daily lives of his parishioners and a widening circle of visitors. Yet he succeeded not by aiming at social “relevance” in the manner of the Evangelical preachers of the day, but by using lively and abundant scriptural quotation, showing the real relation of Christians living in a dangerous and perplexing world to the mystery of revelation and bringing the great catholic doctrines to bear on the ordinary problems of Christians in the world: strong faith, obedience, and discipline, prayer and self-denial, avoiding the snares of a disbelieving and pharisaical world. His very first sermon sets the tone: “Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness.”

There are many accounts by those who heard Newman’s sermons, which were carefully drafted and read in a low voice—the preacher rarely looking up—with occasional pauses for emphasis. His mixed audience of the parishioners of St. Mary’s was mostly local tradesmen and their families, and undergraduates, though Newman gathered an audience of outsiders, many distinguished, as his reputation grew. Matthew Arnold gives the most famous description of Newman’s presence:

Who could resist the charm of that spiritual apparition, gliding through the dim afternoon light through the

aisles of St. Mary's, rising into the pulpit, and then in the most entrancing of voices, breaking the silence with words and thoughts which were religious music—subtle, sweet, mournful?<sup>2</sup>

Not so well known but even more impressive is a comment by the historian James Anthony Froude. As an undergraduate, he heard Newman preach his sermon “The Incarnate Son, a Sufferer and a Sacrifice.” Years later, he described the effect Newman had on his listeners:

Newman described closely some of the incidents of our Lord's Passion; he then paused. For a few minutes there was breathless silence. Then in a cold clear voice, of which the faintest vibration was audible in the farthest corner of St. Mary's, he said, “Now I bid you recollect that He to whom these things were done was Almighty God.” It was as if an electric stroke had gone through the church, as if every person present understood for the first time the meaning of what he had all his life been saying. I suppose it was an epoch in the mental history of more than one of my contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

On the page, these plain sermons represent a brilliant use of the English conversational style. They are never conventional, forced, or ornamental, but stylistically transparent. They are concrete, focused, and alive to the needs of a specific audience, answering to Newman's own description of the art of sermon writing in a later essay, “University Preaching”:

Definiteness is the life of preaching. A definite hearer, not the whole world. A definite topic, not the whole evangelical tradition; and in like manner, a definite speaker. Nothing that is anonymous will preach; nothing that is

<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Daniel Super, vol. 10 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886), p. 88.

dead and gone; nothing even which is of yesterday, however religious in itself and useful. Thought and word are one in the Eternal Logos, and must not be separate in those who are his shadow on earth. They must issue fresh and fresh, as from the preacher's mouth, so from his breast, if they are to be "spirit and life" to the hearts of his hearers.<sup>4</sup>

Newman's sister Jemima has the final word. Though speaking of the collected *Oxford University Sermons*, she could as easily be describing the *Parochial and Plain Sermons*: "It makes deep things so very simple."<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, excerpting these sermons sacrifices perhaps their most pronounced feature, scriptural lessons so rich in detail, so alive, surprising, and subtle that it is impossible not to hear these Biblical texts anew. Generally, a reading involving a passage or parable, feast or mystery, Biblical incident or character is used to probe deeply into a virtue of or danger to the Christian life—earnestness or equanimity, conscience, or the temptation of worldly advantages—illuminating its many facets by a uniquely Newmansque circling of the subject. Newman likes to develop his theme through a whole range of ideas, testing it again and again in relation to differing standards and perceptions—the light of Scripture, the mandate of conscience, the authority of doctrine, and then in contrast, perhaps the power of custom and evidence of common sense, the fashions of the world, and the prism of often-deceiving "private judgement"—cutting away the grounds of rationalization, self-delusion, and denial. Newman has the singular ability to present the great complexity of life and the paradoxes of Christian warfare in the world while keeping us ever aware of the one Truth behind it all. Error is always renewing itself, but truth is always the same. The Christian who lives by faith not sight and is steadfast in the disciplines of holiness will be led to a deeper understanding of the Truth. Obedience and active faith in a world of "excitements" and temptations is the means to developing "spiritual discernment," a life-long conversion in

<sup>4</sup> *Idea of a University*, in *The Works of Cardinal Newman*, vol. ??, p. 426.

<sup>5</sup> *Letters and Correspondence of John Henry Newman*, ed. Anne Mozley, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1970), p. 367.

contrast to the single emotional conversion of the evangels that Newman had long suspected. Newman's spirituality, especially in the sermons, reflects the two sayings of Thomas Scott of Aston Sandford, whom Newman read in his youth, which are mentioned in the *Apologia* as deeply influential: "Holiness rather than peace" and "Growth, the only evidence of life."<sup>6</sup>

These lessons are not mere exhibitions or arguments but, to use Newman's language, "realizations" of the subject in which the reader, engaged wholly, finds himself obliged to examine his life. "Real Assent," as Newman argued in his *Oxford University Sermons* and later in the *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, requires not abstract argument but vivid particular images. Religious truth, which we are bound by conscience to seek, eludes scientific demonstration. It is an accumulation of probabilities "sufficient for certitude." Repeated exposure to the multivalent truth of revelation through Newman's evocative sermons is a concrete embodiment, a realization, of his grammar of assent.

Readers who have in mind the urbane author of the *Apologia* or the brilliant expositor of the relationship of faith and reason or the formulator of the mission of education in a secularizing world are surprised by the uncompromising severity of the sermons. For Newman, "beauty and severity" are the inseparable attributes of religion. Some scholars attribute this to Newman's youthful exposure to Calvinism, but Newman found ample justification in his society to use these sermons to attack what he sees as the apostasy of the age, which the lax, worldly "religion of the day" has no resources to counter. Too often, the latter has identified itself with this world as if religion were no different from decent behavior, philanthropic attitudes, and improvement in sanitation. Moreover, Newman was perfectly aware that traditional religious practice, with its creeds and disciplines, was a weariness to most men and for others violated "private judgement," democratic individualism, or the "cheerfulness" of those already saved by their experience of faith. He had no illusion that his view of holiness as the standard for all Christians, not simply clergy, was a novel ideal to many and at sharp variance with the attitudes of an enlightened

<sup>6</sup> *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Martin Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 19.



and progressive age. Those whose principles conflicted with his own were, he wrote in 1850, “on the best terms with queen and statesmen, and practical men, and country gentlemen, and respectable tradesmen, fathers and mothers, schoolmasters, churchwardens, vestries, public societies, newspapers, and their readers in the lower classes.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus Newman holds before his age and ours the picture of the faith of the Apostolic Age, the presence of the Invisible Church and the power of the Indwelling Spirit. He warns the educated that faith can be destroyed by the corrosive power of the untempered critical reason; that Christianity is a system, the suppression of any part of which invites disobedience and falsehood; that conscience is God in man and must be followed at any cost; that the world is the same idol that it has always been, despite “progress.” The true Christian must, with much effort, develop consistent habits of obedience, reverence, and self-denial if he is to overcome the deeply ingrained habit of sin and reach a higher level of spiritual discernment afforded by grace. He must live a life “hidden in Christ,” watching and waiting, as enjoined by Revelation.

Newman created a highly developed and consistent discourse on the Christian life in his Anglican sermons, one which threads throughout his numerous works, but since almost all of his writing is for occasions—in answer to “divine calls”—he did not write a systematic spiritual theology per se, although Vincent Blehl and Ian Ker have examined the parts lucidly and demonstrated their living unity.<sup>8</sup>

My purpose in these selections has not been to systematize Newman—although Newman’s whole view of the moral and spiritual life of man combined with his insistence on balance and consistency in both religious discourse and Christian living should be a caution to any anthologist—but to give an introductory sampling, particularly of the formidable bulk of the hundred and ninety-one densely written *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, that might serve as a

<sup>7</sup> *Difficulties of Anglicans*, in *The Works of Cardinal Newman*, vol. 1, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> See Vincent Blehl, *The White Stone* (Petersham, Mass.: St. Bede’s Publications, 1993); and Ian Ker, *Newman on Being a Christian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), particularly chap. 7, “Christian Life.” See also Ker’s introduction to *John Henry Newman: Selected Sermons* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

guide or daily reader. For the sake of variety and breadth, the selections from these sermons delivered by Newman at St. Mary's between 1828 and 1843 are leavened by passages on the Christian life from other works, both Anglican and Catholic, including *Sermons bearing on Subjects of the Day*, *Oxford University Sermons*, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, *Lectures on Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, *The Idea of a University*, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, *Discussions and Arguments*, etc. However, it is those fifteen years of *Parochial and Plain Sermons* that form the monument of Newman's spirituality and set the tone for his many later investigations of the Christian life.

The divisions I have marked out—Faith, The True Christian Life, Temptation, The World, Doubt, and Mysteries—are, as the reader will see, a simple arrangement of Newman's view of Christian development, one with highly permeable membranes, for Newman is always in his sermons constructing a picture of the whole Christian life, nor can he speak long about faith without introducing temptation, the world, and doubt. The Christian mysteries—Newman's study of the Church Fathers profoundly affected his theology—are ever-present in his thought, so we are continually made aware that the individual soul is wedded to the Church Invisible. I also hope to capture both the elegant prose and the profound lessons of the other Newman, whose great contribution to our understanding of the spiritual life is the ballast to his more public career as Victorian thinker and controversialist. Having taken note of Newman's remarkable contribution to the nineteenth-century debate over faith and reason, Pope John Paul II ends a recent papal letter on the second centenary of Newman's birth with the hope that “the time will soon come when the Church can officially and publicly proclaim the exemplary holiness of Cardinal John Henry Newman, one of the most distinguished and versatile champions of English spirituality.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Papal Letter on Cardinal John Henry Newman on Occasion of Second Centenary of His Birth,” Feb. 27, 2001.