

John Henry Newman – Saint? Scholar? Or Infidel? 21 Feb 1801 – 11 Aug 1890

Pope Benedict is scheduled to visit these shores in September this year. His many duties will include the beatification of the late Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801 – 1890). Already Cardinal Newman is on track to become the first British person since the 16th century to be canonised – the last people canonised in Britain were the “Forty Martyrs of England and Wales”, who were executed for treason during the Reformation. They were declared saints by Pope John Paul II in 1970.

But who was John Henry Newman? What was his influence in his lifetime and what is his influence on Christendom today?

EARLY LIFE

John Henry Newman (JHN) was born in London in 1801 to middle class, church-going parents. His father, John Newman, a banker, was a nominal Christian and a member of the Church of England. His mother, Jemima Foudrinier, had a Huguenot background, and she encouraged JHN to read his Bible. She had 6 children in total, John Henry, Charles, Harriet, Francis, Jemima and Mary. JHN was educated from the age of 7 at a private boarding school in Ealing. He was a bookish boy, who did little sports and games, but enjoyed playing the violin, and this was to become his lifelong hobby. In school he wrote poetry in English and Latin and won several book prizes including John Milton’s Works and Cowper’s translation of Homer. His upbringing gave JHN an interest in Christian literature and during his school years he read many Christian works including Milner’s Church History, Isaac Newton’s Commentaries, William Law’s Serious Call, and works by William Romaine, and Daniel Wilson (Bishop of Calcutta and one of the founders of the Lord’s Day Observance Society).

In 1816, aged 15 JHN professed Christian conversion. Speaking of this later he said *“I was brought up from a child to take great delight in reading the Bible; but I had no formed religious convictions till I was fifteen. Of course I had a perfect knowledge of my*

Catechism.... I was very superstitious, and for some time previous to my conversion used constantly to cross myself on going into the dark."

"When I was fifteen, (in the autumn of 1816,) a great change of thought took place in me. I fell under the influences of a definite Creed, and received into my intellect impressions of dogma, which, through God's mercy, have never been effaced or obscured." (p. 3, Newman)

JHN's testimony seems more like an intellectual assent to the Church of England's doctrine than an experiential moving by the Holy Spirit to close in with Jesus Christ. One writer commented *"...conversion, properly speaking, implies a previous life of positive sin, real or supposed. Luther's conversion, for example, called forth the cry of the heart, O peccata mea (O my sin!). There was none of that sort in Newman's case"* (p. 15, White)

In June 1817, aged 16, JHN moved to Oxford to continue his education at Trinity College. He studied Maths and Classics and was known to read between 6-10 hour each day, alongside playing his beloved violin. Students in Oxford then were no different from students today. Fellow Oxford students including BW Newton (Fellow of Exeter, who moved amongst the Plymouth Brethren) and JC Philpot (Fellow of Worcester College, an ordained clergyman who later seceded and became a Strict Baptist) expressed their shock at the debauchery and drinking of their fellow students (p. 5, Fromow).

JHN was hardworking and smart and on 18 May 1818 he was elected a Scholar of Trinity College. However, he did not performed well in his final exams, obtaining a second class lower in Classics and a pass grade in Maths. Nevertheless, JHN stayed on as scholar in residence, as he wanted to be a private tutor. It was around this time that his father suggested he commenced a career as a lawyer. JHN had other desires and on 11 Jan 1822, he decided to enter the ministry and take Holy Orders.

It is interesting to note that to begin with, JHN was a self-confessed Calvinist – having been influenced by Rev. Walter Mayers, of Pembroke College, Oxford, who passed Calvinistic literature onto him. Conveniently, JHN points out in his spiritual autobiography, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, that at one point he held to the doctrine of final perseverance. He claims that he “...received it at once, and believed that the inward conversion of which I was conscious, (and of which I still am more certain than that I have hands and feet,) would last into the next life, and that I was elected to eternal glory... for while I considered myself predestined to salvation, my mind did not dwell upon others, as fancying them simply passed over, not predestined to eternal death. I only thought of the mercy to myself.” (p. 3, Newman)

Even the highest of all Calvinists must have a problem with these statements. Calvinism and the doctrine of election ought not make a Christian proud or self-centred. Elsewhere in his *Apologia*, JHN states his views on Calvinism – “*Calvinists make a sharp separation between the elect and the world; there is much in this that is parallel or cognate to the Catholic doctrine; but they go on to say, as I understand them, very differently from Catholicism,— that the converted and the unconverted can be discriminated by man, that the justified are conscious of their state of justification, and that the regenerate cannot fall away. Catholics on the other hand shade and soften the awful antagonism between good and evil, which is one of their dogmas, by holding that there are different degrees of justification, that there is a great difference in point of gravity between sin and sin, that there is the possibility and the danger of falling away, and that there is no certain knowledge given to any one that he is simply in a state of grace, and much less that he is to persevere to the end :—of the Calvinistic tenets the only one which took root in my mind was the fact of heaven and hell, divine favour and divine wrath, of the justified and the unjustified. The notion that the regenerate and the justified were one and the same, and that the regenerate, as such, had the gift of perseverance, remained with me not many years, as I have said already.*” (p. 4, Newman)

Here we see that JHN had a misconception of historic Calvinism. Jesus Christ Himself makes a “*sharp separation between the elect and the world*”. He said. “*but because ye are*

not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you...

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” John 15:9; 17:16

How important it is for us Protestants to understand in our heads and hearts the main doctrines of the Christian Faith.

At this time, JHN was still teaching at Oxford University and on the 12 Apr 1822, he was elected Fellow of Oriel College. At the dinner to honour the elected fellows, he found himself sitting next to John Keble, a hymn-writer, poet and later to become with JHN and Edward Bouverie Pusey (another Oriel College Fellow), a leader of the Oxford Movement. This movement which started among high churchmen in Oxford University, established Anglo-Catholicism within the Anglican Communion and resulted in the defection to Rome of several high profile Anglicans.

In 1824 JHN became curate of St Clement's Church Oxford with a parish of 1500 people and began visiting and fund-raising for a new building. It was during this period that the cracks in his theological foundations started to show. Once when JHN was also called upon to preach for his old mentor, Walter Mayers, he chose as the text for his sermon "*Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening.*" Ps 104:23 [incidentally this was the same text he used for his final sermon in the Anglican Communion, 19 yrs later]. After writing out his sermon, he showed it to Edward Hawkins, a Fellow of Oriel and Vicar of St. Mary, University Church. Hawkins, being a high Anglican, felt that Newman's sermon was too evangelical and that JHN rejected baptismal regeneration. He did not approve of the way Newman made the distinction between all people as being either saints OR sinners. Hawkins convinced Newman that all who are baptised ought to be viewed as "*in Christ*" or "*sanctified in Him*". It is noteworthy that most modern deviations from the doctrine of Justification by faith alone (Federal Vision/New Perspectives on Paul, etc) use the same argument. Hawkins then gave JHN Archbishop John Bird Sumner's "*Apostolical Preaching Considered*" which was effective in "*routing out evangelical doctrines from Mr. Newman's Creed.*" (p. 31, Martin)

It must be said that the seeds of JHN's defection to Rome were already visible at this time. In 1824, his brother Francis had found an ornate engraving of the Virgin Mary in the rented house in which JHN was living. Francis wanted the landlord to remove it, only to be told that the engraving had been purchased by JHN (p. 33, Martin). A possible influence on JHN can be traced back to Charles Lloyd (1784 – 1829), Regius Professor of Divinity and Bishop of Oxford. JC Philpot (who knew these men) stated that Charles Lloyd, apart from conducting public lectures, also gave private tuition to Newman, Pusey and others. During these private classes "*Dr Lloyd read and discussed the history of the Council of Trent and that of the English Prayer Book, in such a way as to imbue his pupils with a respect for RC and RC doctrine, which to them was an entirely new notion.*" (p. 33, 93, Philpot)

By the time JHN was ordained as a priest in 1825, he had rejected Calvinism and embraced high church principles. Even EB Pusey accused JHN of becoming too high church (a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black!). It was around this time that new Oriel Fellows were elected who became JHN good friends and comrades in the Oxford Movement. These were Richard Hurrell Froude and Robert Isaac Wilberforce (the second son of William Wilberforce). In 1828 JHN was called to be vicar of St. Mary Oxford, in place of the outgoing Edward Hawkins, who was to be Provost of Oriel College. St. Mary Oxford was the University Church and JHN ministered predominantly to the academics of the university. He was popularly known as the "University Preacher" and he began to use his pulpit to promote the doctrines which would later form the basis of the Oxford Movement.

As a gift to celebrate his new appointment, Newman was given a gift of 36 volumes of the Early Church Fathers by students & colleagues at Oriel. This was later used as the basis for his book *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1834). One reviewer (Archdeacon Lyall) wrote that "*Mr Newman's views seem to me more favourable to the Romanist writers, than I should like to put forward in the Theological Library.*" [Ironically, Rowan Williams also published the book "*Arius: heresy and tradition*" before he became Archbishop of Canterbury – one wonders if he will follow the footsteps of JHN and defect to Rome?]

JHN was not free from controversy as a vicar. At one time he was secretary of the Oxford branch of the Church Missionary Society (CMS, founded 1799 by evangelical Anglicans) and wrote and circulated a pamphlet entitled "*Suggestions in behalf of the CMS*", to encourage High Churchmen to join what was then a Low Church (evangelical) society. This led to him being removed from his position by BW Newton. But this was just the tip of the iceberg, and more controversy was to follow which culminated in JHN's defection to the Church of Rome (p. 45, Martin).

OXFORD TO ROME

It is helpful to remember some of the historical context of JHN's defection to Rome. The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 which gave greater rights to Catholics in Britain was followed by the Reform Act of 1832 which gave the State greater power over the Established Church. This led the historian Thomas Arnold to write in 1832 "*The Church as it now stands, no human power can save*" (p. 509, Trevelyan). The authority, power and influence of the Church was undermined by the Government. This led to the protests by the clergy (especially the high churchmen) and Roman Catholics.

One such protest was in the form of a sermon preached by John Keble entitled "The National Apostasy". He preached before court officials at Oxford on 14 July 1833. This date is generally taken as the start of the Oxford Movement. In that sermon, Keble sought to exhort 1) state officials to honour their positions in society; 2) the nation to return to God; 3) people to defend the Established Church. It can also be said that it signalled the start of JHN's journey to Rome, although as shown earlier, the seeds were already there. JHN was excited about Keble's sermon and had it printed and distributed. Alongside this, JHN and the Oxford Movement friends set up a number of societies "*for the defence of the liturgy and the enforcement of the doctrine of Apostolical Succession*". Finally, with friends from Oxford, they began to write tracts to influence clergy to be loyal to ancient (high church) traditions, which were named "*Tracts for the Times*". The first tract appeared in 9 Sep 1833. These

tracts brought Anglo-Catholicism into the public eye and were influential in 1) resuscitating the study of the Early Church; and 2) the veneration of sacraments and other rituals. This gave the clergy something to stand on (sadly not the Scriptures but 'ancient' traditions), in a time when Parliament threatened to rule over the Established Church.

The tracts were a success until the publication of the infamous Tract 90 entitled "*Remarks on Certain Passages in the Thirty-Nine Articles*", (1841) written by JHN. One writer wrote that Newman was defeated by his own weapons when that tract appeared. JHN wrote the tract in response to Cardinal Nicolas Wiseman who compared the Anglican Communion to the Donatists (a 4th century separatist group, condemned by Augustine and others). However, JHN in his zeal to protect the Established Church, sought to reinterpret the Church of England's 39 Articles and show how close they were to the original church traditions (those of Rome, not the New Testament). He believed that the English Church lay at an equal distance between Rome and Geneva and wanted a "via media" (middle way). Clergy reading that tract denounced JHN as a traitor, a "*Guy Fawkes of Oxford*" and under the pressure, JHN ceased writing and publishing the tracts. He went into hiding at Littlemore (nicknamed Littlemore Monastery), and said later "*From the end of 1841, I was on my death-bed, as regards my membership with the Anglican Church, though at the time I became aware of it only by degrees.*" (p. 96, Newman). Dissatisfied with and disillusioned by the Established Church, Newman left his vicarage in 1843, signalling the end had come. In 1845 he published his "*Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*", arguing that Christianity, as a religion, is dynamic - she grows and evolves. Hence, he argued, the Early Church became the Roman Catholic Church, with the Papacy overseeing the development. Once more, through this publication, JHN shows his progression towards the Church of Rome. Not all Roman Catholics accepted Newman's idea, but it did appeal to the Darwinists (then and today). Whether Newman would jump ship or remain loyal to the Established Church became a burning issue with even W E Gladstone, worried at the possibility of such a defection and how it would effect the Established Church (p. 73 Martin).

Finally in October 1845, JHN defected to the Church of Rome and was by Father Dominic Barberi.

LATER LIFE

JHN's later life as a Catholic was fruitful. Rome welcomed JHN into their communion with open arms for it gave them a foothold in the religious life of England. Within 2 years, JHN was ordained as a priest in Rome and proceeded to found the Birmingham and London (with F W Faber) Oratories in 1849. He also became the Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland (1854-58). During this time, in order to counter the accusations by Charles Kingsley that JHN had been a closet Roman Catholic while an Anglican, Newman wrote and published his now famous "*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*" (1864) – his spiritual autobiography (originally titled "*History of my religious opinions*"). For all he did to promote Roman Catholicism in England, JHN was created cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in 1879. He was both feted and criticised – the first British man to become a Cardinal! He died 11 Aug 1890 in Birmingham.

HIS INFLUENCE

Through his writings and leadership during the Oxford Movement, JHN helped establish Anglo Catholicism, and bring about the Roman Catholic Revival in England. This culminated in the restoration of a Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales (1850). He is a hero and saint to both Anglo-Catholics and Roman Catholics. Beyond this, as remarked by Clifford Longley (then writer to The Times Newspaper), Newman helped to write the ecumenical agenda of the Second Vatican Council from the grave. It was his idea of the development of doctrine that was used by Vatican II to bring back the "separate brethren" (i.e. Protestants), an attempt to unify Protestants and Catholics. Prior to Vatican II, Protestants fell under the anathemas of Rome.

Today, Roman Catholicism is again making inroads into this nation. She is winning the disillusioned Anglicans (like JHN in Victorian times), who are disappointed with the

Established Church and her leadership. They have found the Roman Pontiff and his representatives in this country to be the outspoken leaders on issues, such as sex education, abortion, women ordination, euthanasia and the debate over the Equality Laws.

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