

Newman on Why Men of Learning Often Do Not Believe

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On The Will to Know The Truth

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On The Will to Know The Truth

"We attain to heaven by using this world well, though it is to pass away; we perfect our nature, not by undoing it, but by adding to it what is more than nature, and directing it towards aims higher than its own."

- John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 1, Discourse V 1853.

"But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and being mortal, to think of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth led, surpass everything."

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 7.

Chapter 1

Several years ago, in 1990, to be exact, some friends gave me for Christmas the Ignatius Press edition of Newman's *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. This is a book of almost inexhaustible depth and richness. On taking up this book again, I notice that I had, some time ago, put a mark on the Twenty-Fourth Sermon of the First Series. It is called "On the Religion of the Day." It begins, "In every age of Christianity, since it was first preached, there has been what may be called *the religion of the world*, which so far imitates the one true religion, as to deceive the unstable and unwary." Naturally, wishing neither to be "unstable" nor "unwary," I want to be sure that I have some idea of the subtleties of this religion of the world, which subtleties evidently can deceive even the elect because they "imitate" the "true religion." We like to think that the worst evils will look horrid so that we shall easily recognize them, but it is not so. Most often they will be quite enticing and we should not doubt it.

Newman already implies here that no age of Christianity will ever be quite free of this confusion between the true religion and its erstwhile imitators. True religion and truth, no doubt, have difficult going whenever and wherever men dwell. Here, it is intimated that to be successful, the religion of the world must imitate some or other aspect of true religion or else it will never attract anyone. On the other hand, since the imitation is not the true religion, it will contain something that is dangerous, something that will deflect us from the truth while

looking rather much like it. We are again surprised that knowing the truth is so difficult. We wonder why.

We suspect at first that truth may be very complex and subtle so that the main problem is simply lack of intelligence or talent, something for specialists, not for us ordinary folks. But we notice, if we are at all sharp, that the cultured and academic unbelievers are many and articulate. It is not the experience of Christianity since its beginnings that the more intelligent one is, the more likely one is to be a believer. Yet, Christianity professes to be and is, more than any other, an intellectual religion, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" . . . Such words from the Prologue to St. John suggest that the world is suffused with intelligence, with word.

Chapter 2

Our age has a difficult time with the idea that we are rational beings made to know the truth. We are afraid of truth because it confronts us with our limits, with things that are true whether we like it or not. We like to think we are, in our intrinsic nature, rather raw desires made to "will" into existence what we want, whatever it is we want. Truth, however, implies that freedom is related to something other than itself. Our eyes grow narrowly cautious when we hear, especially from revelation, that it is the truth that will make us free. We think and are taught that it is the truth that will make us "unfree," that truth is a threat to democracy, to what we are, or at least to what we want to make ourselves *to be*. We have established a *culture of choice not of reason*. We *do not want* to bind ourselves even to truth. At the heart of reality, we hold that things could always be otherwise, not by virtue of their having been created by a divine will, but by virtue of their having no necessary connection with what we choose or limitation of what we want. Things, including our own nature, do not restrict us; we use them as we will. We teach these things in our universities, we live them *in our daily* lives. We will *not admit that anything wrong is the result of what is known or of what* is true. Wrong can only mean wrong for me. The "I" acknowledges no other criterion.

Thus, we are perplexed to learn that our happiness consists, according to, say, Aristotle, in knowing and in knowing the highest things. The moral virtues, even in being themselves, are intrinsically ordered to our knowing. We are to know things for their own sakes, simply because *it is worthwhile knowing them*. In fact, we long to know even if we get nothing out of it. If there is something we do not know, we seek to learn about it, find out about it. We want to know the world about us. We want, as Socrates said, to know even ourselves, as if there is something about us to know. We want to know about God and who and what He is, once we realize that we did not create or order either ourselves or the universe to be as they are.

Even when we do not use such terms as truth or will, this seeking to know

whatever is what we do. We give reasons for everything we do, including, often adamantly, the things that we do wrongly. We cannot not but be rational even when we are acting wrongly. We insist on justifying ourselves, that is, in giving reasons for our deeds and acts, even when we know they are wrong. We are a proud lot. Yet, we worry about what pride is, especially after we have read Augustine who warned us about it, who told us it was the origin of all vice. We do suspect that we seek to locate the cause of all things in ourselves, not in God. This was Augustine's definition of pride, in fact.

Even though we do not believe in the devil, so we say, we know his vice was pride. We are curious about this. What is it that made him a devil instead of Lucifer, the bearer of light, of intelligence? Why *is the most dangerous of fallen spirits also among the most intelligent?*

The Thirteenth Sermon in the Eighth Series of this famous Newman collection is entitled, "Truth Hidden When Not Sought After." It begins with a famous quotation from Second Timothy in which St. Paul disturbingly tells us of those who "turn their ears from the truth," of whose claims to truth shall in fact become mere "fables." Here Newman brings up something that must often cause many to wonder and be concerned about. We know there are intellectual saints. Neither Augustine nor Aquinas, nor Newman himself, nor the present Pope, have need of yielding anything on the line of intelligence to any philosopher or wit of any era. Yet, we also know that Augustine, justly or unjustly, is often said to be the father of most heresies. At one time or another in his life, he embraced about every conceivable intellectual disorder. Thomas Aquinas was not much recognized in his lifetime. Today he is little studied except in a few isolated places. The most intellectual of all popes has unending opposition from what are said to be intellectuals, of indeed intellectuals who call themselves Christians.

Newman, still commenting on St. Paul, points out that if there is religious truth, this implies that there will so be "religious error." He adds that this truth is one so that "a views but one are wrong." Forgetting this centrality of truth, many, even Christians, turn away from truth to embrace "many fables." What are these "many fables"? Clearly, they are alternate explanations of reality, of God, of our redemption and its suffering, of ways to explain us or save us that would not include the revelation that we have received. Newman adds, speaking of his own time, that "all this (embracing of fables or ideologies) is fulfilled before our eyes." Needless to say, the situation is not better some century and a half after Newman. "The multitude of men," Newman observes, "whether by their own fault or not, are wrong even in the greatest matters of religion." This is not an observation of despair about truth, but simply a statement of fact about the reality of the human condition. And it would not be a significant statement unless, in fact, error in religious affairs were indifferent to human living and had no impact on human reality, Newman is willing to "tolerate" religious error, but not at the cost of denying that it is error or at the cost of denying that it makes any difference to our lives what we hold and whether what we hold is true.

If we understand the truth of this statement of Newman, intended, as I said, to

be no more than a statement of objective fact, we will be alerted. "This is a most solemn thought, and a perplexing one," as Newman put it. "How could this be," we wonder, "that most people do not know religious truth?" But there is something that is even more perplexing; although, as Newman said in the light of St. Paul, it ought not to be. It is not just that ordinary people are confused and unknowing about religious truth, but that "men of learning and ability are so often wrong in religious matters also." Here Newman already brings up something that later came to be called the "betrayal of the intellectuals," not just in religious matters but in matters of polity and morality.

Aristotle had already pointed out that a slight error in the beginning of some science or philosophical position would, if not corrected, lead to a great error in the end. That is, this error would continue in the intellectual community. Its disorder would be expanded, developed, organized; its implications would be carried out in real life. Great systems of errors are often based on a very narrow fault or error, one that seems, to recall Aristotle, small in the beginning. From truth, truth follows, but from error anything can follow, as an old saying went. And of course, even truth can be rejected, though always in the name of another claimed truth.

What concerned Newman is not so much the errors themselves, but the fact that they occur most often in the academics, intellectuals, and, yes, in the clerics in so far as they too belong to the intellectual classes. This deviation of intellectuals concerned Newman because, like Aquinas, he was a great defender of truth and its dignity, philosophic or natural truth as well as the truth of revelation. Newman was not concerned, however, to set up some kind of organization or system to prevent this error from being spoken or propagated. Rather he was troubled by the souls of academics, intellectuals, and clerics themselves, in their deviation.

St. Paul had already warned us that such aberration among philosophers was possible, even likely. Newman knew that St. Augustine himself embraced practically every error imaginable at one time or another in order to justify his life. Newman also knew that Aquinas calmly identified, defined, and explained all the known errors of his time or any time, almost always better than those who promoted them. Christianity is concerned with changing hearts and minds away from error to truth, but after the manner in which hearts and minds ought to be changed, by better thought, by discipline, oftentimes by prayer and a conversion of heart.

Chapter 3

When natural intellectual guides embrace religious error, Newman tells us, "they become stumbling-blocks to the many." That is, they cause and give scandal. They confuse the simple and ordinary folks. Newman is frank, with a kind of refreshing bluntness we almost never hear today. "Let us honestly confess

what is certain," he tells us, "that not the ignorant, or weak-minded, or dull, or enthusiastic, or extravagant only turn their ears away from the Truth, and are turned into fables, but also men of powerful minds, keen perception, extended views, ample and various knowledge. Let us, I say, confess it, yet let us not believe in the Truth less on account of it. I say that in the number of adversaries of the Truth, there are many men of highly endowed and cultivated minds. Why should we deny this? It is unfair to do so, and not only unfair, but also unnecessary. What is called ability and talent does not make a man a Christian, nay, often, as may be shown without difficulty, it is the occasion of his rejecting Christianity, or this or that part of it" (p. 1661). One has only to spend a small amount of time on university campuses, including those that go by the name Catholic or Christian, to realize the abiding validity of Newman's observation.

Newman's point is not, however, that there is something intrinsically at variance between Christianity and intelligence. Quite the opposite, he thinks that their mutual compatibility is itself proof of their own authentic and related insights. The observed opposition, then, must arise from sources other than revelation or intelligence themselves. When Newman points out that "ability and talent do not make a man a Christian," he puts his finger on the problem. Christianity was sent to more than the philosophers, the number of whom will no doubt be very few in any era. The average parish, or university for that matter, is not populated by philosopher-kings. Christ was sent to save not philosophers but sinners, among whom no doubt there might be counted not a few philosophers.

Actually, Newman had in mind not merely the proud professors in Oxford or Cambridge, but also the local village philosopher who could well display the same attitude of mind that we find in the teamed skeptics. St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians, is worried about the "wise" of this world, and Christ spoke things hidden from the wise and prudent, but revealed to little ones. In other words, no Christian should be at all surprised to find the leading intellectuals of his time confusing him about the truth of revelation or of reason for that matter. We should not be surprised that "men of acute and powerful understandings" reject the Gospel because they think, rightly, that revelation is addressed "to our hearts, to our love of truth and goodness, our fear of sinning, and our desire to gain God's and favor." This is not the stuff of which the intellectual, as such, is made.

The intellectual is interested in something else -"quickness, sagacity, depth of thought, strength of mind, power of comprehension, perception of the beautiful, power of language." Such things are likewise good as far as they go. We may, however, have such intellectual gifts but lack grace or inner goodness. "Ability of mind is a *gift*, and faith is a *grace*" (p. 1662. Here we begin to see how Newman sees the problem, "We just look with amazement on the error of those who think that they can master the high mysteries of spiritual truth, and find their way to God, by what is commonly called reason, i.e., by the random and blind efforts of mere mental acuteness, and mere experience of the world." The reason that can cause such difficulty is a reason that closes itself off from what is beyond reason, yet which likewise contains its own reason, is addressed to reason. The

sign of intellectual pride is always that of an unwillingness to consider or to accept what is not merely worldly experience and mental acuteness. What are we to do about this experience of academic blindness to truth?

Newman does not despair, even though he holds no optimistic expectations of it ever being otherwise or of easily convincing proud men about truths they did not concoct for themselves. He is mainly concerned with explaining to believers what they will experience from intellectuals and in wanting them not to be particularly bothered about it. Newman's own remedy is quite surprising - respect the intellect for what it is, that faculty of truth that we are given from nature. The fact of its abuse is no cause for us to worry about what it is in itself.

This should be kept in mind when Christians are alarmed, as they sometimes are, on hearing instances of infidelity or heresy among those who read, reflect, and inquire; whereas, however we may mourn over such instances, we have no reason to be surprised at them. It is quite enough for Christians to be able to show, as they well can, that belief in revealed religion is not inconsistent with the highest gifts and accomplishments of mind, that men even of the strongest and highest intellect have been Christians ... (p. 1663).

Newman's point is clearly that intellect as such is often a temptation to pride and that many an academic or intellectual is consumed by it. But intelligence as such is a worthy thing. The fact that some, like St. Augustine or Aquinas, are Christian and intelligent would suggest that the essential concern that we have, whether we be an ordinary person or an intellectual, is how we live, how we respond to the graces we receive. It is not our IQ's that will save us, even though we are made to know, to know the truth, and to delight in it.

Chapter 4

But it is true that what makes a difference is the way we live. Aristotle already said that our ability to see the truth often depends on our virtue. If we are disordered in our ends, in our choices, we will spend our lives not pursuing truth but rather in shrewdly using our minds to justify what we want to do. Yet, Newman warns us that faith is not easy, even though it is a grace and a gift. We can thus be somewhat disdainful of the academic skeptics while at the same time neglecting the real effort and work it takes for us to know what we ought to know. One of the great problems in particularly Catholicism is the very fact of its intellectual richness, a richness that is only rarely and minimally ever seen in an education that includes even doctoral and post-doctoral studies.

The society is filled, in all sorts of disciplines, with the baptized who display Ph.D.'s after their names. Yet their religious and philosophical background is almost at the level of a seven year old, if that. Often the highly-degreed reveal the simplest and crudest misunderstandings of basic truths of theology or history. If one's secular knowledge is in radical disproportion to the level of one's religious

knowledge, there is bound to be trouble. (This is a problem I have dealt with in my *Another Sort of Learning*.) What Newman says on this point is quite blunt.

Let us consider for an instant how eagerly men in general pursue objects of this world; now with what portion of this eagerness do they exert themselves to know the truth of God's word? Undeniably, then, as is the doctrine that God does not reveal Himself to those who do not seek him, it is certain that its truth is not really felt by us, or we should seek Him more earnestly than we do. Nothing is more common than to think that we shall gain religious knowledge as a thing of course, without express trouble on our part.

No one expects to learn anything else without effort and discipline, so it is Newman's point that religious knowledge is not something that arrives from nowhere, without any effort on our part.

"To gain religious truth is a long and systematic work. And others think that education will do everything for them" (p. II 64). But Newman here is not just concerned with the effort that it might take to know religious truth. He also tells us that this truth draws us, attracts us. We have to be prepared to feel its influence on our souls. We do not seek truth just because it is a necessary intellectual exercise. We seek it because we already feel the attraction to the source of truth. Newman can be witty in describing our common foibles and excuses about religious truth that we claim is difficult, uninteresting, or of little meaning to us.

Doubtless if men sought the truth with one-tenth part of the zeal with which they seek to acquire wealth or secular knowledge, their differences would diminish year by year.

Doubtless if they gave a half or a quarter of the time to prayer for Divine guidance which they give to amusement or recreation, or which they give to dispute and contention, they would ever be approximating to each other (and eliminate their religious disputes.)

What Newman says here is that religious knowledge requires as much attention as any other knowledge. In addition, it requires means that are intellectual and more than intellectual. We know that amusement, recreation, dispute, and contention take up time often better spent on knowing religious truth.

Lest we think that Newman is speaking of a time utterly unlike ours, let us listen to his description of the man's mind who gives his justification for not honestly thinking through the validity of religious truth. Such truth is difficult to come by because it makes demands on us. We suspect that it will demand of us things we are not presently prepared to undertake. It is difficult because we have conjured up ready-made intellectual excuses that protect us in our implicit refusal to consider truth.

The present confused and perplexed state of things, which is really a proof of God's anger at our negligence, these men say is really a proof that religious truth cannot be obtained; that there is no such thing as religious truth, that

there is no right or wrong in religion; that, provided we think ourselves right, one set of opinions is as good as another; that we shall come right in the end if we do but mean well, or rather if we do not mean ill (p. 1665).

These positions, of course, while written a century and a half ago, constitute an almost perfect contemporary intellectual description of what most of our contemporaries hold.

Newman's remedy for this condition is, we are astonished to learn, obedience, the most annoying of the commands that the Lord gives to the intellectual of any age. Newman warns us, however, about judging others, even the proud. "Unless we have faithfully obeyed our conscience and improved our talents, we are no fit judges of them at all" (p. 1666). We also know that the variety of philosophies and religions are offered with confidence by those intellectuals who hold them.

Chapter 5

How are we to avoid producing our own fables instead of obeying the true religion? Newman's advice is rather in the form of a command or admonition:

Seek truth in the way of obedience, try to act up to your conscience, and let your opinions be the result, not of mere chance reasoning or fancy, but of an improved heart. This way, I say, carries with it an evidence to ourselves of its being the right way, if any way be right; and that there is a right and a wrong way conscience tells us. God surely will listen to none but those who strive to obey Him. Those who thus proceed, watching, praying, taking all means given them of gaining the truth, studying the Scriptures, and doing their duty, in short, those who seek religious truth by principle and habit, as the main business of their lives, humbly, not arrogantly, peaceably not contentiously, shall not "be turned into fables" (p. 1667).

If truth must first be sought after, as Newman tells us is the case, our seeking of it must recognize that truth first calls us. We do not create it. We find it, after having looked for it because we know that we do not possess it by ourselves.

This advice to obey, honestly follow conscience, and pray, we know, is not spoken to us by someone who does not know what intelligence and its temptations might be. Newman reminds us that there are those who are believers and who are also intellectuals. We need not be surprised that many intellectuals do not believe, or believe in false gods. This is neither new or unexpected. Yet, it is a betrayal of that good that intelligence can provide for others who do wonder about things and seek illumination about truth from those who claim to know.

But more is available to us about truth than we often are willing to admit if we have not formulated properly the questions for which our minds seek answers. We are all already redeemed, even those who reject redemption. The way is open, what is lacking is not grace, which is sufficient. Understanding our actual condition is the first step in our quest to know why truth is hidden when not

sought after. "We are not under the law of nature, but under grace; we are not bid to do a thing above our strength, because, though, our hearts are naturally weak, we are not left to ourselves. According to the command, so is the gift. God's grace is sufficient for us" (p. 1668).

The primary sin of the intellectual is not the rejection of reason. The rejection of reason is normally the consequence of the rejection of grace, for once this is rejected then we must create fables to explain why reason and revelation, grace and nature do not in fact fit together. They do not fit together because we make them so, but because they are so, apart from our making, but not apart from our seeking and not apart from the grace that is sufficient. We are not asked to do a thing above our strength and our hearts are weak. We are not left to ourselves. The will to know the truth includes the gift that is sufficient for us. The rejection of reason is the drama of our time. It is first a rejection of grace and the patient work that it takes to know religious truth, but above all the will to know it and the humility to accept it.

Aristotle advised us not to follow those who would restrict us to purely human and mortal affairs, however worthy of pursuit they are, as Aristotle himself taught us. We attain heaven, Newman tells us, "by using the world well." Yet, we know that it too "passes away." We perfect our nature not by rejecting it, or making it over into our own image, but by adding to it especially under the guidance of revelation, that teaches us much about ourselves, much that completes the questions we have about ourselves. Men of learning often do not believe because they do not will to know the truth that makes us free. The academic problem is, more than anything else, a spiritual problem - the struggle of pride, grace, and reason. *Homo non proprie humanus sed superhumanus est.* This famous scholastic phrase that we are created for a divine purpose is what Aristotle implied and what Newman taught. The men of learning who do not believe will not to know this truth, the one essential truth that reminds us all that we do not make but are given what we are.