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## The Saint and the Virus

What can a Victorian cleric and Oxford don turned Roman Catholic, cardinal and eventually canonized saint tell us about this crisis? Well, something it would appear. In his Oxford days, John Henry Newman and his friends were fighting another pathogen. A spiritual contagion they called religious liberalism or rationalism, which they understood as the application of human reason to that to which it was not equal, that is, to the things of faith. Decades later when he received the cardinal's hat, Newman defined his life's battle as against this liberalism.

The religious liberalism in the Tractarian crosshairs owned as one of its dicta 'I cannot believe what I do not understand'. It is not difficult to see in this the threat to transcendence and mystery in religion, to the sacramental vision, to the miraculous, and, when it comes down to it, to the very nature of religious faith. What religious liberalism appeared to do was set the whole body of traditional Christianity on a Procrustean bed and chop off all that was uncongenial to the optimistic, confident, enlightened religious mind. Eternal punishment, never! Rituals, really? Solemn liturgy, must you? It seemed to commend a tamer deity, one which blessed doctrinal latitude and indifference, approved religious sincerity simply for its being sincere, and forswore that which would make for human eschatological discomfiture.

Though it really broke out in 1830s Oxford, this infection had been incubating for a while, worming its way into the sacral, intellectual and cultural life of early Victorian England. To Newman, Keble, Froude and their friends, there were signs of its principle lodging within the sacred precincts of Anglicanism. Judging by the ferocity of their language against its representative figures, they reacted to this as though to a tumour spot in an X-ray. In the minds of their targets, they must have cut quixotic figures tilting at what seemed the benign and immovable edifice of the Church of England. Thomas Arnold, the famous Master of Rugby and devout Anglican of another stripe, called Newman and his party 'idolaters'.

Though they shot hard words at Arnold, the Tractarians reserved their severest censure for 'super spreader' Anglican clerics and dons like Renn Dickson Hampden. In 1836 correspondence, Newman alluded to Hampden as a 'forerunner of Antichrist'. One year later, Edward Pusey wrote of Hampden's views as a 'leprous spot' in Anglicanism, an infection that people should flee from. To fight the contagion of the liberal pathogen it appeared one had to remove one's gloves.

Religious liberalism attacked the body of Christian faith such as to turn its truths into tastes and its faith into fancy, leaving a denatured husk that could be brushed behind private doors by the benign broom of a broad-minded, tolerant reason. 'If a man puts on a new religion every morning, what is that to you?' was the new spirit. What could be changed as a tie could no longer, Newman lamented, be that kind of tie it had been hitherto - 'the bond of society'. Reason would own the public sphere from now on. And banished would be that which down long centuries had planted and tended humane institutions like schools and hospitals, raised the moral tone of society, drawn charm on a village skyline, and cut the brilliance of Oxford's horizon.

The mental effect of the virus was the powerful internalization of that external divide between public reason and private beliefs. We must leave our beliefs at home and not 'do God' in public. We must become the new hypocrites of Chesterton's notice. 'The Rev. Brown, the Wesleyan minister, sturdily declares that he cares nothing for creeds, but only for education; meanwhile, in truth, the wildest Wesleyanism is tearing his soul'.

In his *Grammar*, Newman had identified John Locke as an early spreader of the virus. In this philosopher's view on what counted as knowledge 'proper' there was a dangerous leaven. Locke held it to be immoral to call knowledge that which lacked paper proof. Coupled with so much else that seemed

just and sensible in his famous *Essay*, his 'ethic of belief' colonized intellectual culture. Against it Newman set his face. He preached that 'all men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason'. We know much more than we prove: that we had parents, that we shall die, that Britain is an island, that great cities exist though we have not visited them, and a multitude of other things.

He likened his long endeavours against Locke to attempts 'to find the weak point in the defences of a fortified place'. His Eureka moment was to realize that *assent*, the personal appropriation of something as true - as 'the case' - was as indispensable in the scientific philosopher's life as in the layperson's. Paper certainty could only ever rest on personal certitude. Locke, Newman realised, had set up an entirely spurious division between personal and scientific knowledge. And thus Newman could relocate philosophy in its proper origin from the page to the person. To preserve a place for the person in philosophy was, his instincts rightly told him, to preserve a place for religious faith and moral conscience. The public lockdown of religious faith demanded by the cold creed of religious liberalism could end.

What has all this to do with our day and its battle with a dangerous physical pathogen? As it turned out, Newman's long rearguard against religious liberalism led him to uncover parallels between coming to faith and coming to *know*. In doing so he stumbled on insights about assent, knowledge, evidence, proof, certainty and so on which are highly germane in a world searching for certainty in the midst of contrasting expert opinion on how best to fight the pandemic.

#### *Why experts differ*

Face masks or not? Social distancing of six feet or two metres or four cubits? Why not double these given how far the virus can travel on coughed air? In his *Grammar of Assent*, Newman took up the question of why experts made such different prescriptions on common evidence. He contrasted the views of five leading historians of his day on the subject of the early constitution of Rome. Needless to say they were at odds with one another. Their differences, thought Newman, arose from the fact that a judgment thought expert is nonetheless ineliminably personal. Inferences are one thing, but the gaining of sound first principles on which to build inferences and come to judgment is quite another. In complex matters, Newman observed, how little that judgment is 'helped on by logic' and how intimately dependent on that expert's personal 'intellectual complexion'.

Newman's example of expert opinion on the early Roman constitution was a matter of history, it might be countered, but this crisis is a matter of science. And yet here too inescapably personal investments in seeing the challenge this way or that will bleed into modelling assumptions, forecasts and prescriptions. As regards sciences one ought to develop a 'philosophical habit of mind', as Newman suggested in *The Idea of a University*. By this he meant a personal wisdom which justly values each science as pursuing truth under a different aspect whilst having a sense of its limits. 'Follow the science' and 'listen to the experts' should never mean a blind outsourcing of our judgment to a scientific elite. We ought to be as much instructed by the consensus of experts as cautioned by their lack of consensus.

#### *The hubris of scientists*

Travelling in Sicily in the early 1830s, Newman fell dangerously sick and was bled in his fever. He recovered and returned to England (composing *Lead, Kindly Light* on the way back). Learning he had been bled, his doctors in England dismissed the efforts of the Sicilian medics. Why? Because, they said, he hadn't been bled *enough*. Had the sick Newman his own doctors in attendance, their fuller 'expert' bleeding of him might have pushed him closer to death. Most scientists would recognize that the state of their science also names a state of ignorance. It is not honest unknowns rather false knowns that are the

danger. In early Victorian times, the efficacy of bleeding veins to balance 'humours'; in our time, perhaps too uncritical a reliance on modelling?

Newman was fortunate in that his life straddled two ages: the age of an holistic Oxford curriculum - mainly composed of mathematics and the classics - and one where nascent disciplines like political economy, botany, and geology were offering the possibility of a specialist academic career. With the rise of specialisms, there also arose the danger that one could be cut so deeply into the groove of one's specialism as no longer to be able to see beyond it, presuming that theoretical approaches fit for, say, biology would be fit for anything. One of Newman's purposes in his *Idea of a University*, was to trim the pretensions of empirical science to have an uber-competency that need not look beyond itself. Newman's tack in *Idea* was to accommodate the expansion of the intellect in the form of ever new disciplines whilst cautioning against the undue promotion of one discipline to the occlusion of others and the distortion of that holism in which the pursuit of truth consists. To develop a 'philosophical habit of mind' is to realise that the white coat covering the scientist covers all to which fallen humans are prone, overconfident presumption being amongst this.

### *The urge for exactitude*

One of the more amusing episodes related to in Newman's correspondence was from his time in Dublin endeavouring to establish a Catholic university there. In preparation for this, he had carefully arranged his papers according as he had done with them or not. Whilst out, a housekeeper had gone through his lodgings with ordering zeal. His papers had been completely mixed up, laid out 'most neatly according to their *size*'. He could no longer find his 'pencils, pens, pen knife, tooth brush, boots, 'twas a new world'. The housekeeper, once gently informed, was 'amused at her own mischief' with 'no deep sense of its enormity'.

It is understandable that the public asks government for clear guidelines in this crisis. We want order and precision, fearing that nothing stands between clarity and chaos. But is this always well-grounded? Following his mentor Aristotle, Newman offered another standard between pristine clarity and chaos: that is, *appropriate* clarity. In his *Grammar*, he recurred to Aristotle's example about stonemasons using a ruler made of lead (rather than of wood or iron) so as to fit to uneven surfaces and bring the stones more neatly together.

The subject matter of offering guidelines for conduct and movement in public spaces in a pandemic does not admit of the clarity of mathematics or physics. No prescription, no matter how detailed, can 'mind the gap' between rule and instance in a complex practical matter like this. Aiming for appropriate clarity, guidelines must co-opt common sense for practical adjustments in particular instances. They must rely on that supremely flexible rule - 'more delicate, versatile, and elastic' than any written rule - one's own judgment. By individual prudent judgment general guidelines can be brought most aptly to bear in concrete situations. To demand an inappropriate clarity is to court the very chaos such clarity was meant to avoid.

### *Evidence, evidence!*

Newman felt it a tendency of Victorian intellectualism to evict the person from the account in favour of an automatic epistemological impress of 'evidence' on a mind passive before it. This could be in matters sacred or profane. The *Christian Evidences* derived from Paley were popular in his youth, but Newman gave them only a restricted imprimatur. Though he esteemed them in ways, he felt they sometimes used arguments that were supposed to work on and gain a mind irrespective of its moral preparation. He said of this approach that 'there is nothing inward, nothing personal. It is a sort of proof which a man does

not make for himself; but which is made for him'. Newman maintained that true assent was a personal act which could be given or withheld.

He was instinctively dismayed at a view of education seen as external body of knowledge intrinsically remedial on the minds of the ignorant. Some of Newman's finest and most forceful writing comes from an 1841 quarrel with the likes of Lord Brougham and Sir Robert Peel. On the occasion of opening a reading room in his Tamworth constituency, Peel had preached a gospel of redemption by reading. Science and literature would sort out the immorality of the lower classes. An education in these would be the 'parent of virtue' and the 'nurse of religion'. Newman questioned this. In their well-intended, reformist zeal, Peel and Brougham sought impersonal solutions for problems whose cause and cure lodged in the person.

Whether as regards 'evidence' or 'knowledge', Newman's disquiet was with a view of mind as mechanism. In the 1830s, Newman was already alarmed at 'the fashion of the day to consider the human mind as a machine and to think that education will do any thing for it'. Twenty years later amid a Victorian information age, he warned of the same presumption. The proliferation of printed information sponsored a 'process feel' to education in which 'there is to be nothing individual ... what the steam engine does with matter, the printing press is to do with mind'.

The problem with believing 'evidence' automatically convinces or that 'knowledge' automatically improves a mind was that it left no active space for 'I' in 'I believe' or in 'I know'. 'Evidence' or 'knowledge' should work on the mind irrespective of that mind's preparation. I am, as it were, passively inducted into conviction by 'evidence' and into learnedness by 'knowledge'. The mind was a tabula rasa inevitably inscribed by the evidence or knowledge put onto it.

'All the evidence shows' is that today this phrase is far too easily the opening line of bluster and rhetoric. What 'the evidence shows' for Newman is that 'evidence' is rarely so compelling as to command unanimity. Just as for acknowledged experts so for the rest of us, 'evidence' is a function of the receptivity of a mind with its particular intellectual and moral complexion. 'A good and a bad man will think very different things probable,' said Newman.

Evidence matters. Newman was not a Victorian truther. His protest was against the mind as machine. That which would shut out the 'I' of 'I learn' or the 'I' of 'I believe' also bars the 'I' of 'I think'. Newman wants each of us to *think*. He will not allow anyone to put on another what belongs to their own dignity and responsibility to do. The only successful vaccine against a baleful family of spiritual contagions sprung from Locke is to develop a philosophical habit of mind as far as we may. A habit which weighs, apportions, adjusts, and balances. A habit which does not privilege clarity over truth. One that pierces through the long-gathered haze of assumptions about what evidence and experts can do to a wiser view of both.

Dr P J McHugh, 2020, for *The Pastoral Review*