

John Henry Newman

Newman was one of the most controversial Victorians. After an elite education, he graduated from Trinity College, Oxford, and became a fellow of Oriel, a sister Oxford college. There he and three other young fellows, John Keble, Edward Pusey, and Richard Henry Froude, became engaged in studies of religion and church history that led to their eventual espousal of Anglo-Catholic doctrines. They published their views in a series of "Tracts for the Times" that defined what soon became known as the Oxford Movement. In "Tract 90," published in 1841, Newman argued for the compatibility between the "Articles of Religion," the core beliefs of the Church of England, and Catholic theology – a radical position that led to an official ban of the Tractarians and Newman's resignation from the Oxford church where he had been the vicar since 1828. In 1845 he became a Catholic. In 1846 he went to Rome and was ordained as a priest. Returning to England in 1847, he began preaching in Birmingham. And in 1854 became the rector of the new Catholic University of Dublin, although he later became disappointed with the university and the Irish Catholic clergy and returned to England.

His *Apologia pro Vita Sua* first appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1864. Charles Kingsley, an Anglican priest and author of many popular novels and stories, had written a pamphlet attacking Newman titled *What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean*, accusing him of inconsistency and lack of respect for truth. The *Apologia*, which should not be thought of as an apology, was Newman's answer. His purpose was not to express regret or say he was sorry. Quite the opposite, it was "a defence of myself." (p. 189) As such, it has become a classic intellectual and spiritual autobiography, admired for the author's sympathetic self-presentation and rhetorical strategy by readers who may or may not agree with Newman's religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, the modern reader may get impatient with Newman's many references to church history and teachings, his Latin quotations, and the doctrinal issues that no longer seem as important as they did to Newman and his friends and opponents. What is "Evastianism" (the union of church and state)? Who were the Monophysites (defined by the dictionary as Syrian and Coptic Christians who believed that "in the person of Jesus there was but a single divine nature") and why were they important? What was the doctrine of the *Via Media*? What was meant by "Liberalism" in Newman's time?

Questions like these, however, should not prevent us from appreciating Newman's skill in defending himself. He was not just a learned man. He was a very thorough man who could quote at length from his earlier writings. He had great respect for his friends and was warm and generous in his praise of them. He had written lovely hymns as well as sermons and tracts. "Lead Kindly Light," which he wrote in 1833, while traveling in Italy and France, is still sung in many churches. And he is very modest in speaking of himself and the difficulties of recounting his experience. As he asks in the beginning of Chapter III, "For who can know himself, and the multitude of subtle influences which act upon him?" (p. 81)

Questions for Further Study:

1. Examine carefully how Newman describes one of his teachers and associates (e.g. Pusey, Keble, or Froude). How does his praise of them reflect on him?
2. He describes the years up to 1841 as "the happiest time of my life." (p. 69) Why were they? How important are the Biblical echoes, like "seven years of plenty," in his saying this? Also note his skillful use of images and analogies, like the one of house and furniture?
3. Do you sense a change of tone in the concluding pages of the *Apologia*, when Newman examines why the English distrust Catholics and quotes from the "Catechism of the Council of Trent"? Is the change effective?