



Volume 12

Issue 1 *Sacred Heart University Review, Volume XII, Numbers 1 & 2, Fall 1991/ Spring 1992*

Article 5

1992

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Recommended Citation

O'Regan, Cyril. (1992). "Newman's Anti-Liberalism," *Sacred Heart University Review*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 5. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol12/iss1/5>

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Newman's Anti-Liberalism

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was presented as a talk to the Sacred Heart University Philosophy Club on April 25, 1991.

CYRIL O'REGAN

*Newman's Anti-Liberalism**

Prelude: Dressing Up and Dressing Down

We all know the story: the decidedly gullible, definitely vain, and perhaps borderline senile emperor requisitions from the master-tailors of the kingdom a new suit of clothes sufficient to his stature and calculated to amaze and inspire the populace on the day of the parade. The emperor's vanity is such that clothes bearing any connection with the erstwhile are rejected; the people's fear — especially that of the surrounding entourage — is such that the emperor *must* have his despotic desire satisfied. Gullibility and vanity, it appears, go hand in hand, for the emperor shows himself vulnerable to suggestion, the last weapon in the arsenal of the tyrannized. In any event, the emperor proceeds to get fitted with an ensemble that provokes the enthusiastic applause of all those consulted and for weeks before the parade submits docilely to tucks and adjustments, additions and subtractions of what might plausibly have been ruffs, and so on. On the day of the parade everything is ready: the garment is absolutely splendid, a work of art, and though the surrounding entourage have as much trouble describing it as theologians have describing God, this neither stops nor detracts from a praise that makes up in gush and emotion what it lacks in descriptive precision. Of course, everyone knows what happens, and everyone is equally well acquainted with the hero of the tale, i.e., the unspoiled child, emblem of candor and honesty. It is the child who breaks fear's spell, and the child breaks it once and for all without any negotiation. The child does not say: perhaps the emperor's clothes are not too regal after all; that maybe the tailor is the slightest bit suspect; or a little more bravely, that the emperor's clothes are a little too *decollete*. No, the child exclaims: "The emperor has no clothes." Each reader, each hearer, hears the

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hushed silence, the isolated titters generating pockets of barely suppressed giggles, in turn giving way to the seamless unity of

laughter.

Nothing in the story demands that one reads it as more than a parable of the encounter of vanity and candor in everyday life. Certainly, there is nothing in the story that forces a religious interpretation. By the same token nothing prevents it either. Given the general iconoclastic function of the child, and the fact that the child brings the populace over the brink of belief into non-belief in the tokens of royalty, it is tempting to think of the child as the Enlightenment *philosophe*, the one who reveals to his contemporaries that the gestures of the religious *ancien regime* are "thread-bare" in a quite literal sense. This emblem tells it as it is, and he does so making his particular community or society aware of its conspiracy in perpetuating an illusion. Or perhaps one ought to say: this child divides, repeats himself, for the forever young "child" has been around awhile. He pointed at the emperor in the eighteenth century, and there the first titters were heard, which in due course became a laughter that infected all of Europe.

Now, while undoubtedly the immediate and direct relevance of the above story (especially with its tentative religious translation) for our topic, i.e., Newman's anti-liberalism, is relatively transparent, yet, it must be admitted, the story in its original form does not orbit near enough to what I wish to say about Newman and the general context of his enterprise to be truly illuminating. But true to the native promiscuity and/or fertility of story, the original can be thought to propose or propagate another story as a supplement. This story suggests itself so naturally that one is tempted to the conceit that the author of the original penned it also, or that at least he had meant to write it, but unfortunately finitude intervened. So in the spirit of that other Dane who continually added story supplements, let me offer a hypothetical reconstruction of this supplemental text.

The story opens some years later. "Emperor" is now a word with a less than exact denotation. All that remains in memory is the frayed tale of the final reclusive years of a notable once routed by laughter. This laughter also derailed in an essential way what he had stood for, so the forms of influence and government had changed completely. The political organization is distinctly democratic, though when the need arises – and this is usually infrequent – the remnants of "royal blood" are trotted out, which is society's courteous way of putting out

the red carpet. This society still likes parades, though needless to say the ultimate aim of the parade has hardly changed at all: its general purpose still is self-glorification through basking in one's own reflected image. However, what has changed radically is the means by which one achieves this self-appropriation. The means are those of minimalism. The object is no longer to be dressed up in the allegory of power, or to be this allegory, but rather to march naked. In fact the dignitaries are in secret competition to demonstrate just how naked they live, which they hope will be revealed by uniform skin color. It so happened that this year the leader of the parade is the grown-up version of the iconoclastic child – call him big Hans – who felt he could get a fair share of the applause from the lightly-clad but not quite naked populace lining the street. The dignitaries file past the viewing stand, wave to the crowd, and so on. But somewhere a voice which sounded cracked, an old man's voice, is heard, perhaps only after long repetitions: “But everyone is wearing clothes and big Hans is more clothed than anyone else.” Someone tries to silence the old man, but the crowd has caught fire: “There are ruffs and puffs everywhere, velvet and silk, and gaudy hats: one could gorge on it.”

Undoubtedly, it is time to give the moral of the story supplement: if the spell of unprecedented clothes is dispelled by the child, the spell of no clothes is dispelled by the old man. Now, if we think of the first dispelling as the forever young Enlightenment laughter at the illusions of religion, its ceremonies, dogmas, beliefs, its unmasking of a social reality already moribund, we can think of the second dispelling as the revelation that the posture of Enlightenment nakedness is a conceit. Tolerant or intolerant of religion it is dressed up in all kinds of presumption, all the more dangerous because they are denied. The unmasking of the unmaskers begins with Romanticism in the early nineteenth century, and without, as well as within, Christianity it has become a favorite twentieth-century scholarly preoccupation. But our interest here is the nineteenth century, and I wish to bring forward the candidacy of someone other than Hegel as “old man,” for such the famous German philosopher was called by his schoolmates from a very early age. At this point story and topic meet. Another nineteenth century “old man” is John Henry Newman, who shows us, as perhaps the Enlightenment before him had also, that an inescapable part of telling it as it is is pointing out how it is not. With respect to religion,

specifically Christianity, Newman had little choice: the enlightened child has been believed, and frightened Christian adults have modified Christianity to the point of non-recognition, attenuated it to the point of non-being. Newman's view of the nature of religion and its function, as well as his view of the self, will involve denial of a view or views which either, implicitly or explicitly, manifest commitment to the Enlightenment or its heritage. That is, Newman will be involved in a critique of Enlightened or liberal religion whatever form that takes, and he realizes as well as anyone in the nineteenth century just how chameleon-like it is in appearance.

Newman's Anti-Liberalism Thesis

While I definitely wish to claim that Newman can be considered as having made a significant contribution in the nineteenth century towards the critique of Enlightened or liberal religion, I also wish to say something perhaps more bold, quite definitely something more controversial. I will go so far as to claim that anti-liberalism represents *the hermeneutic key* that unlocks his entire *oeuvre*, Anglican or Catholic, even if the form Newman's act of resistance takes in these dispensations may differ considerably. Certainly Newman's own gestures at summing up his contribution to religious thought do nothing to obstruct this interpretation. In the acceptance speech of the cardinalate in 1879 Newman avowed that the consistent theme of his life's work was anti-liberalism in matters of religion. Newman was not unaware that the content of, indeed the referent of, "liberal religion" had changed over the course of the century: for one thing liberalism in religion, specifically Christianity, is, he opines, now more atmospheric than a position actually argued for in the public forum. Neither Newman's general avowal nor the suggestion of metamorphosis in the shape or form liberalism took in religion can be regarded as eccentric. Earlier in the *Apologia*, for instance, Newman proposed a similar self-interpretation and offered a similar interpretation of the change in denotation of "liberalism": what once could be identified with the views explicitly espoused by a particular party had now become ethos; what once had been argument now had become presupposition, the presupposition in this case of what Newman thought best nominated as "a deep plausible skepticism." Despite, or perhaps

precisely because of, the change, Newman wished to insist on continuity. The change is a change of accidents rather than substance. Newman also wished to insist upon the dangers. The mutated form is potentially the more destructive because more insidious and intangible. In the *Apologia* Newman seems to have something of the experience of Hegel who sees the contemporary form of the Enlightenment less as an identifiable other than as an infected cognitive and affective environment (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*).

In due course we will undoubtedly have more to say about Newman's view of the pathology of the Enlightenment. What I wish to underscore at this juncture is the simple fact that Newman provides some warrant at least for the plausibility of the view that anti-liberalism represents the hermeneutic key for his work as a whole. But why be so circumspect? Why not say that Newman's express pronouncements *prove* that anti-liberalism is indeed the hermeneutic key? There are essentially two reasons, one general, the other quite specific to Newman. The general reason is that it is not always safe to take authors at their word: while authors by no means are always liars, they are often self-deceived. The specific reason is the power of Newman's rhetoric, especially in the *Apologia*, where he enjoins a certain reading of his intellectual and religious vocation as well as a certain reading of his self. If anything, Newman is almost too persuasive in that text. Thus, in order to gain some measure of independence for interpretation, it is necessary to regard as hypothetical for the moment Newman's reconstruction of his own mission. This is not, however, to suggest skepticism, for it is quite possible that Newman's own construal will be affirmed. The important point is that his construal be verified by textual assessment beyond Newman's own powerful voice.

Nevertheless, though we do not wish to be swayed by the *Apologia*, it is with this text that we must start, for it is there that Newman provides his most clearly drawn portrait of liberalism and its mutation. For Newman in its original form the features of liberalism stand out, though as the century moves on the quite definite features become effaced. Five features are either posited or suggested. Following Newman's own practice in the *Apologia* these features or elements may be referred to as "principles." Without signifying any order of priority these five principles will be listed and then briefly

elucidated: (1) the anti-dogmatic principle; (2) the principle of rational method; (3) the principle of private judgment; (4) the anti-sacramental principle; (5) the meliorist principle.

For Newman the anti-dogmatic principle expressed itself in the propositions that no truth is possible (a) in principle or (b) in fact in matters of religious inquiry. In his view such propositions directly controverted traditional Christian understanding of the epistemic status of doctrines. However hedged with qualifier and caveat, Christian doctrines, e.g., the doctrines of Christ and Trinity, were understood to grant real knowledge of the divine. In the *Apologia* Newman suggests a plurality of postures which these propositions symptom and/or support. For instance, the proposition that no truth is possible in principle supports both vituperative skepticism and the slackest conventionalism, just as the weaker proposition that no truth is possible in fact supports or symptoms both a view of generous religious tolerance and sheer indifference regarding religious differences.

Though liberal religion tended to be minimalist at best with regard to what can be known religiously, for it religious inquiry is authorizable to the degree to which it is governed by rational method. Such a method forecloses the option of religious certainty, confining itself to sifting the probable truth of religious opinion, where probable truth is determined by the weight of empirical and/or verifiable evidence in its favor. Evidence in turn determines subjective entitlements. That is, a person's level of conviction corresponds, or at least ought to correspond, to the level of probability provided by the evidence. Since evidence in religious matters is never overwhelming, this amounts to saying that no religious views are, or ought to be, held absolutely. They are, or ought to be, held merely tentatively. For Newman, liberal religion's epistemic humility represents a caricature of genuinely Christian epistemic humility. As Newman understands it, Christian epistemic humility is not determined by weakness of intellect or the lack of irresistible evidence: it is determined by the very nature of the objects of religion which if communicated in human media or channels nevertheless transcend these media or channels.

A third element (or facet) of the portrait, and thus a third functioning principle, is that of private judgment. The reason that

liberal religion endorses is not a corporate or tradition prerogative. It is a purely private affair. Valid judgment in religious matters resides in the exercise of individual reason. Now, while the proposal of rational method puts Christianity at the disposal of an objectivistic probability-evidentialist calculus, advocacy of private judgment, the presumed complement of the proposal of rational method, tends to absolve the individual from having to offer warrants of a public kind for his/her position. The principle of private judgment, therefore, shows an inherent tendency to immunize itself against critique. Thus, while all religious opinion is contestable in principle, individually or privately held opinion is not contestable in fact. Beneath the blatant anti-liturgical bias of liberal religion, Newman espied the operation of a deeper but also more pervasive logic. This logic, for which he suggested the label of "anti-sacramental principle" signified not one but two exclusions: (a) exclusion of any real sense of the reality or even possibility of a higher dimension to existence, a dimension Newman referred to metaphorically as the "invisible"; (b) exclusion of any real and general sense of the effective life of the invisible in the visible. The latter exclusion was, of course, logically dependent upon the former, just as this latter exclusion will render incoherent ecclesial discourse on the sacraments as such.

While the existence of the fifth principle, what has been referred to as "the meliorist principle," is not directly posited by Newman as a structural feature of the operation of liberal religion, its imputed presence is arguably a reasonable extrapolation from a knot of palliative gestures or strategies conspicuously present in liberal religion that are unambiguously denounced by Newman: (a) Liberal religion totally waters down (if it does not erase altogether) anything that smacks of sternness and fierceness in the Christian depiction of God. It is thereby, opines Newman, led undialectically to emphasize divine mercy and love; (b) In so watering Christianity, liberal religion confuses the essence of Christianity with one of its functions, that is, the function of consolation. Further evidence of the presence of an operation of a principle of selection and exclusion is provided by liberal religion's view of the human situation; (c) As with its view of the divine, liberal religion waters down or erases the stern side of Christian depiction of the human situation. Little or no place is granted an account of evil disposition, innate human selfishness,

pride, self-deception. Needless to say, in the context of such phenomenological attenuation a doctrine of original sin, or any facsimile, ceases to function. It ceases to function because it ceases to make sense; (d) A particularly serious consequence of such existential levelling is that the need for self-denial and the practice of virtue, needs focal in traditional Christian spirituality, are ignored if they have not become thoroughly incomprehensible. Newman is insistent in the *Apologia* that only against the dramatic backdrop of sin are virtue and holiness thrown into relief.

Newman's critique is, of course, the obverse of his own constructive counter-proposal. To each of liberal religion's principles he proposes its contrary. To the anti-dogmatic principle he opposes the dogmatic principle; the principle of rational method finds its counter in what might be called the principle of amplified reason; commitment to the principle of traditionary judgment replaces that of private judgment; the validity of the sacramental principle is upheld contrary to the claims of the anti-sacramental principle; and finally the rejection of the appropriateness of the meliorist principle implies the counter-assertion of what might be called the principle of dialectical or dramatic religion.

Testing the Anti-Liberalism Hypothesis: The Pre-Conversion Period

It cannot be held against Newman that he liked Cicero. Nor can he be put in the theological doghouse because he wrote an early, rather juvenile, essay on the great Roman rhetor from whom Augustine could not withhold his admiration. But when Newman praises Cicero for the naturalness and simplicity of style calculated to convince an audience of whatever the rhetor wishes to pass as truth, and later in the *Apologia* gives a wonderful display of precisely such naturalness and simplicity, we are, perhaps, better off withdrawing to a polite distance to take stock. So instead of being led "by the nose," as it were, of Newman's own presentation of the evidence — which even if it were accurate would in any event be highly selective — let us take an independent look at some of Newman's texts with a view to ascertaining whether in fact they tend to support or belie his *Apologia* reading that anti-liberalism was constitutive of his intellectual self-definition.

The two texts that will provide our focus and make investigation manageable, that is, *Plain and Parochial Sermons* (1825-43) and the famous *Oxford University Sermons* (1825-43), are selected in part because their production spanned a fairly extensive period of Newman's life, and in part because the form of sermon encourages, in a way a theological treatise does not, the enunciation of basic attitude as well as commentary on the contemporary state of affairs, religious and otherwise. Examination of both of these texts, I believe, will tend to support Newman's own reading and determine that methodological doubt remains just that and does not metamorphose into doubt of a substantive kind. That is, both texts corroborate the existence and operation of the five principles that provide the basic structural elements of Newman's anti-liberalism position. It is to the "demonstration" of this that we now turn. Though I will have something to say about the presence and operation of each of these principles, I intend to be more ample regarding the first three.

With respect to the affirmation of the first principle, i.e., the dogmatic principle, there can be little doubt that even a cursory examination of *Plain and Parochial Sermons* reveals a Newman insistent on the dogmatic essence of Christian faith. Attitude, tone, disposition, and feeling may, Newman grants, all be important in Christianity and for Christianity, but, Newman asserts, such psychological states cannot substitute for transcendent data, that is, religious truths which are authoritative for the Christian community and ought to be believed. Though one here runs the risk of anachronism, Newman in that particular text could be said to resist the suasion of what has come to be called the "experiential expressivist" position. Though most so-called "experientialist expressivists" are extraordinarily sophisticated (e.g., Schleiermacher), in its crudest form experiential expressivism relocates religion and/or Christianity in the religious subject. In Newman's act of resistance the emphasis falls heavily on what might be called "primary doctrines," that is doctrines, which if they are constitutive of the Christian community, nevertheless, do not involve explicit reflection on the community status of the doctrines. While Newman is prepared to advance the doctrine of regeneration through infant baptism as a primary doctrine, it is quite evident that his two central doctrinal foci are the doctrines of Christ and the Trinity. And given Newman's historical studies, there

is every reason to presume that these two doctrines not only are central but absolutely basic.

Plain and Parochial Sermons occupies itself with the full array of aspects of the doctrine of Christ, i.e., incarnation, Christ's redemptive act, and so on (see, for example, 2,2,3,13; 3,10-12; 4,15,16; 6,5-7,9,10; 7,7-10). For much of what he says Newman relies heavily on Alexandrian Fathers like Athanasius who played such a decisive role in the formation of christological dogma and the creed. This dependence of Newman on the classical christological tradition encourages him – though in itself it does not dictate – to take his distance from the evangelical wing of Anglicanism which was willing only to speak of the works of Christ and eschewed altogether any reflection on or statement about his person. Newman insisted that talk of what Christ does for us both naturally involves and spontaneously elicits reflection on the person who is the subject of our salvation. This was his central point, a point incidentally quite distinct from the issue of the general disposition of reflection on the person of Christ, i.e., the issue of whether the christological disposition more nearly emphasizes the divine or human aspect of Christ, or takes the eternal Word or the passional history of Jesus as its fundamental starting point.

The other core doctrine – and arguably it also enjoys a similar status in *A Grammar of Assent* – is the doctrine of the Trinity. It seems to be Newman's general view that the doctrine is, from a sociological point of view, in an even more enfeebled state than the doctrine of Christ, for the latter shows evidence of some degree of survival, albeit in truncated form. Lack of doctrinal integrity does not cut off, for instance, personal appeals to Christ's work of salvation in one's life. Unfortunately no such similar existential factors come to the rescue of the doctrine of the Trinity. So, if Christ is misunderstood in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that he succeeds in being relevant for particular psychological states – usually of a positive kind – the Trinity can only be misunderstood in the modern field of presumption, because it fails dismally to be subjectively relevant. Both the attenuation of christological discourse and the veritable silence regarding the Trinity reflects, from Newman's point of view, the dislocation of religious focus away from the religious object as such and its relocation on or within the religious subject. Taking his

cue from the Latin and Greek Fathers, Newman insists on the properly objective nature of Christianity. Christianity is a discourse about the real and not about the self. Indeed the state of health of Christian discourse is in part, at least, a function of just how objective it is prepared to be. Perhaps the real barometer of the general state of theological health is the role and function, if any, played by the doctrine of the Trinity. Not being easily resolvable into psychological categories, the presence of the doctrine of the Trinity in a particular Christian dispensation suggests a realized grasp of the properly "eccentric" nature of Christianity.

Newman's insistence on the trans-subjective nature of the doctrine of the Trinity lies at the core, therefore, of his defense of the specifically cognitive character of this particular doctrine and by implication doctrines in general. However, it is quite clear that he does not construe this cognitive character in any straightforward propositionalist fashion. In *Plain and Parochial Sermons* Newman seems struck by the systemic oddness of trinitarian language (see 2,22; 6,24,25). For the doctrine of the Trinity has worship as its abiding context, and this context invests trinitarian language with its own peculiar character. In drawing attention to this feature of trinitarian language, Newman seems to be doing essentially two things. On the one hand he is simply paying attention to the operative function of this language in Christian religious life outside the context of theological textbook and learned discussion. And on the other, he is, perhaps, recalling a Patristic insistence. In any event, it can be said that for Newman the doxological context of the proclamation of the Trinity as well as its actual doxological (or meta-doxological) character makes the doctrine religious rather than specifically theological. Thus understood, the doctrine no longer obstructs or cuts off primary relation to God, but becomes a means to engagement with a vital religious reality.

The second anti-liberal principle, that is the principle of amplified reason hospitable to religious mystery, also finds support in our two texts. If *Oxford University Sermons* is more perspicuous about what Newman is rejecting, *Plain and Parochial Sermons* is more perspicuous about what Newman is affirming. In two classic Oxford sermons, "The Usurpation of Reason" (1831) and "Faith and Reason" (1839), Newman challenges the legitimacy of evidentialism in matters

of religious inquiry. In both these sermons Newman suggests a mode of apprehension which can be regarded as *other* than but not necessarily *contrary* to reason, in the former calling this mode of apprehension "conscience" or "moral sense," in the latter calling it "faith" as he proceeds, after the high theological tradition, to interpret "faith" as a gift of a supernatural kind.

If *Plain and Parochial Sermons* offers the positive complement to *Oxford University Sermons'* critique of liberal religion's rationalistic bias, it also shows signs of a burgeoning rethinking of the nature and scope of reason in matters of religion, a rethinking which comes to full fruition in *A Grammar of Assent*. In truly important sermons Newman proposes a more traditional epistemic humility – in fact a patristic version – to what, he feels, is a disingenuous rationalist pretender. For Newman in this period before his conversion, as after it, there was nothing inconsistent in holding at one and the same time the conviction that religious belief gives knowledge of its object and that the mysterious nature of this object which resists full disclosure (see *Plain and Parochial Sermons* 1,16; 2,2,18; 6,23,24). Newman's classic essay, "The Christian Mysteries," is an attempt to fend off the sophism of an apparently hospitable rationalism, namely the view that with revelation mystery as such is abolished with the consequence that truth becomes transparent to a mind willing to proceed rationally. For Newman the hospitality of rationalism is spurious, and he sees in Christian willingness to accept this peace offering both a fatal tedium and a wondrous naivete regarding the logic of acceptance. Under the cloak of the embrace lies the dagger that gives the fatal wound. For to think of revelation in this way is already to conceive of revelation as if it presented information or data rather than persons or acts, as it is also to reduce religion to its use-value in accelerating the accumulation of rational wealth which, of course, would have accumulated in any event, though necessarily more slowly and laboriously.

Against this species of hospitable rationalism, represented by Locke and his epigones, Newman insisted on behalf of the Christian tradition that mystery is not abolished by revelation. While revelation does indeed propose divine truth, it does not put this proposal at the disposal of human beings. One intuits and accepts the truth, but never exercises rational control over it. With the great Alexandrian

dogmaticians, and perhaps after them, Newman maintains that mystery is endemic to Christianity. Given its inalienable as well as perduring quality, mystery calls for a particular epistemic disposition which, if not irrational, is, nonetheless, considerably more ample than that suggested by liberal religion. It is hardly an accident that the sermon preceding that on the Christian mysteries is "Religious Faith Rational" (*Plain and Parochial Sermons* 1,15).

This brings us to the third of Newman's anti-liberal principles, that is, the principle of the value of traditional judgment. In both the texts under consideration one finds considerable evidence of critique of the principle of private judgment and the constructive counter-proposal of the wisdom and the ineluctability of tradition. This time, however, the two texts seem to reverse roles with *Plain and Parochial Sermons* providing Newman's more critical, and *Oxford University Sermons* Newman's more constructive position. In a pre-1830, but far from plain, text called "The Self-Wise Inquirer" (*Plain and Parochial Sermons*, 1,17) Newman offers a classic expression of the denunciation of private judgment. In exegeting 1 Corinthians 3:18-19 ("worldly wisdom"), Newman feels called upon to observe: "The warning of the apostle against our trusting in our wisdom, may lead us through God's blessing, to some profitable reflection today." One is not sure just how profitable. For if Newman's reflection did bring some benefit to a confused and moribund religious situation, the benefit must have been quite temporary, for Newman continues to repeat such warnings throughout his Anglican period. That the problem is a chronic one is evidenced by the fact that Newman feels compelled as late as 1870 to condemn the arrogance of private judgment and its less than adequate epistemology. Of course, it is not until this time that Newman himself has a fully wrought epistemological counter-proposal. Nevertheless, *A Grammar of Assent* (1870) is but the terminus of a line of thought that is receiving burgeoning expression as early as the late 1820s.

On the constructive side one witnesses in *Oxford University Sermons* perhaps Newman's first attempt at what would now in the post-Gadamerian situation be called the rehabilitation of prejudice or prejudice as tradition. With regard to religious matters (see, for example, *Oxford University Sermons*, 10, 11) — Newman will generalize later in *A Grammar* — we do not start from scratch. We

inhabit or rather or inhabited by a web of presupposition we do not in fact submit to testing. Of course, Newman has some sense that mere appeal to the facts does not decide the issue, even if he was convinced that the proud empiricist is often not particularly empirical in his mode of thought. For the proponents of liberal religion might well agree with this description, and then call for change of our unreflective bad habits. Though Newman is hardly as clear and cogent as he will be later when he writes his great text in religious epistemology, he does lodge objections against the liberal prescription that knowledge be built slowly and meticulously from the ground up.

Convinced that the liberal insistence on empirical self-evidence is a chimera, Newman accuses liberal religion of disingenuousness and rhetorical over-kill. Specifically, he suggests that: (a) Liberal religion is imposing unrealistic requirements for faith, requirements, indeed, that it does not make in other walks of life and other areas of knowledge; (b) Liberal religion is mistaken in supposing that every unexamined presupposition – that is, every prejudice in the widest sense of the term – is a prejudice in the pejoratively narrow sense of the term. Not all prejudices in the broad sense reflect themselves, for instance, in bigotry and fanaticism. The honorable motif of countering such aberrations has led, Newman believes, liberal religion to restrict the real scope of reason, indeed contract it into a particular function, which Newman will later call “inference” (*Grammar*).

But if the value of tradition and/or prejudice can be supported on non-foundational (largely pragmatic) grounds, Newman thinks that what this might ultimately involve is nothing less than a reconsideration of the nature of reason, such that reason no longer functions as a contrast term to “prejudice” or “tradition.” But, the liberal might have replied – certainly his twentieth-century Habermasian offspring would reply – does not the validation of “prejudice” and “tradition” leave Christians fatally exposed to the possibility of ideology or deformation, even granted that some aspects of the tradition remain wholesome? Is Christianity rationally and ethically sustainable in the absence of an ideology-critique apparatus? While Newman here cannot be claimed to deal satisfactorily with what is a genuine problem, he does suggest that appeal to an external organ of critique is unnecessary, that Christianity possesses internal critical resources – perhaps themselves traditional – for preventing

obscurantism and the emergence and maintenance of ideological deformation.

This brings us to the last two principles, and for brevity's sake our textual focus contracts to *Plain and Parochial Sermons*. Certainly that text offers plenty of evidence in support of Newman's fourth anti-liberal principle, that is, the sacramental principle. And this support is by no means generic. In fact *Plain and Parochial Sermons* endorses both assumptive elements that together constitute the sacramental principle, i.e., (1) the belief, to use Wittgenstein's language, that the visible is not all that is the case; and (2) the conviction or experience of the active presence of the invisible in the visible. If in a sermon called "Invisible World" (*Plain and Parochial Sermons* 4,13) the former aspect gets most explicitly affirmed, the latter aspect is arguably most explicitly affirmed in a sermon called "Church Visible and Invisible" (*Plain and Parochial Sermons* 4,16). This dual affirmation grounds Newman's decidedly positive attitude toward liturgy in general (see, for example, *Plain and Parochial Sermons* 2,7) and the eucharist in particular. Newman was convinced that the sacramental life of the Church only made sense against the backdrop of deeper and broader presupposition and mindset. It was obvious to him, for instance, that the marginalization of the sacraments or "ceremonies" of the Church, as he often referred to them, recommended by liberal religion, was facilitated, if not determined by the prior assumption of a this-worldly, non-miraculous view of the order of things. Therefore, to repeal marginalization required as a desideratum repeal of the principle which underwrites it.

Again, with regard to the fifth and final principle, it can confidently be asserted that it finds validation in *Plain and Parochial Sermons*. If any particular word hypnotically recurs in that text, it is that of "holiness." That "holiness" does not function simply as a pious word but as a religious-theological category becomes clear when Newman denies, as Rudolph Otto does much later, the synonymy of "holiness" and "goodness" in religious discourse. Accusing liberal religion of identifying the divine with the good, Newman, largely focusing on Old and New Testament theophany, suggests the reductiveness of this view. What liberal religion systematically fails to grasp is the essential bivalence of holiness. For Newman, holiness is not coincident with divine mercy, it also includes divine justice.

Again, before Otto, Newman suggests that a retrieval of the proper, that is, biblically informed, view of holiness would represent a much needed correction of the liberal view, which he perceives as being humanistically sentimental. Since wrath is as legitimate a characteristic of God as mercy, fear is as much an appropriate response to the divine as affection and gratitude.

Newman is equally prepared to announce the stern side of what is religiously and Christianly demanded of human beings. Now what is demanded is not simply sweet reasonableness, a sanguine temper, a benevolent and even altruistic disposition toward one's fellow human beings. One may suggest that the attitude proposed by Newman is best summed up in the adage: holiness not peace. The recommended human holiness trades off the dialectical-dramatic character of the "holy" in divine epiphany. Among other things, it points to the dark background of sin. From Newman's point of view, any anthropology which excludes the negative loses all rights to be regarded as faithful Christian depiction. As the recommendation suggests sin as background, it points to the tension within the self and the necessity of a struggle that is a continuous and not a once-and-for-all-affair. The category of "religious hero," thus, makes sense in Newman in a way it does not in liberal religion. Yet Christianity does not specify beforehand the form of heroism. In principle there exists an infinite vocabulary of such forms, and there is no reason to suppose that heroism need be attended by conspicuous signs, that heroism cannot function incognito.

Testing the Anti-Liberalism Hypothesis: The Catholic Period

When Newman remarked in 1879 that anti-liberalism had been from the beginning his essentially private and public demeanor he was plainly including the Catholic, i.e., post-1845, period of his life. This was not to say, however, that anti-liberalism and its confession was not complicated by a number of factors. (1) There was first – and here I recall a point made at the start of this essay – the fact that liberalism in religion as well as outside had undergone mutation. Vaporized, as it were, it had become the social and cultural air Christians and non-Christians alike breathed. Invisible and taken for granted, it had become all the more religiously dangerous and toxic. The assumptive

world of liberalism was no longer really criticized, because through dissemination it had essentially ceased to be criticizable. In the latter half of the century liberalism is not so much an object of thought or debate as that by which people in general, and most definitely the educated in particular, think. (2) There is the question of the effect, if any, the new context of Catholicism had on Newman's theological and philosophical agenda. In his Anglican period the central attraction of Catholicism had always been its solid sense of identity and resistance against liberalism.

These two positive notes were, of course, intimately, if complexly, related. If on the one hand its solid sense of identity put the Catholic Church in a better position than some, perhaps many, of the other Christian churches to engage in a successful act of resistance, on the other the act of resistance made a significant contribution to Catholic identity. Once Newman had worked through his aversion to Catholic popular practices, and on a specifically theological level come to terms with his objections to Catholic ecclesiology and ecclesial structure, the attraction of Catholicism proved irresistible. In his new-found situation, one that actually provided intellectual and institutional support for an anti-liberal stand, it would hardly be surprising if Newman, at least on occasions, found the need to supplement the assertion of anti-liberal principles with qualifiers intended to prevent too doctrinaire, too supra-rationalistic or fideistic a view of religion, too sacramental or transcendental a view of the world, too stern a view of God and the human condition. And this I think is the case. Anti-liberal principles are insisted on in the Catholic period, but on the evidence of some of Newman's later texts, including *Apologia*, *Consultation of the Faithful*, *The Idea of a University*, the text which trajects Newman into Catholicism, i.e., *Essay on Development*, and, of course, also and especially *A Grammar*, anti-liberal principles are asserted in such a way as to resist deformation. Given the length already of the present piece, it will not be possible, and perhaps on account of the intrinsic importance of the material covered, not advisable, to give even the illusion of adequate treatment. I will content myself, therefore, with the merest profile of Newman's Catholic commitment to his anti-liberal principles and their supplementation, and restrict my focus in essentially two ways: on the one hand I will concern myself only with the first three anti-liberal

principles, and on the other only one or two texts of Newman's Catholic period will come in for explicit discussion.

Without great fear of contradiction, it can be claimed that many of the texts of Newman's Catholic period validate the value, even the necessity of dogma. Nothing else is the task of the *Essay on Development*, and the dogma of the Trinity comes in for significant discussion in *A Grammar*, arguably because while it is a central doctrine for faith, it is also the doctrine that is experientially most remote from the average Christian believer. Now, while it is undoubtedly true that in both texts Newman insists that dogma definitely involves knowledge of God and the divine dispensation, the essential modesty of Newman's proposal ought to be noted. In eschewing liberal religion's spurious epistemic humility, he does not go the opposite extreme and suggest after the fashion of Scholasticism of a decadent sort the existence or possibility of a fully adequate knowledge of the divine. On intrinsic Christian, and not simply on apologetic grounds, i.e., grounds essentially calculated to make the Christian or Catholic position less vulnerable to liberal-rationalist critique, Newman suggests that human knowledge of the divine can never be fully adequate or truly comprehensive. The reality or "fact" referred to in scripture, and in doctrine which represents a discursive articulation of what is implied in the dense and richly suggestive matrix of scripture, exceeds both.

But as Newman makes clear when discussing the doctrine of the Trinity in *A Grammar*, a less than fully adequate grasp of the reality denoted by the doctrine – in the technical language of *A Grammar*, a failure of "real apprehension" – neither means that Christians in general, Catholics in particular, have no knowledge of the divine, nor that they fail to have an *adequate enough knowledge*. For Newman "good enough" has to be regarded as sufficient in the absence of the possibility of a completely positive knowledge of the divine. Granted anything like a reasonable understanding of what is involved in the notion of God, full epistemic elucidation becomes a logical and not merely an empirical impossibility. This really brings us, however, to Newman's spirited defense of the second anti-liberal principle, i.e., the affirmation of mystery and the positing of a more ample conspectus on reason.

A Grammar fills in the outline of a religious epistemology first

sketched in the *Oxford University Sermons*. Newman's target is the same as it had been half a century earlier, but now Newman has the full conceptual resources to challenge liberal epistemology and take on Locke among others, who insisted on a perspicuous, narrow functioning of reason, where reason is the passive co-respondent to evidence. Newman in that text in particular shows himself convinced that Locke and his followers slight reason in so limiting the range and nature of its functioning, and counters by suggesting that reason ranges securely beyond the empirical in all kinds of matters where the legitimacy of such ranging is never questioned. Newman's point in *A Grammar*, of course, is not, as perhaps it might be with a thoroughgoing foundationalist, that the epistemological critique has not been pushed far enough, but rather that the critique should never have got going in the first case. It is not the common-sense exception that is mistaken, it is the attempt at epistemological foundation that is the exception and mistaken. Epistemologists like Locke fail to be guided by the evidence of precisely that common-sense that in any event is allowed to creep in the back-door.

But *A Grammar* offers more than a defense of common-sense, though indeed it does so in a manner invested with something of the spirit of Aristotle and the letter of Bishop Butler. It also attempts to change the dominant Lockean and post-Lockean picture of the mind as passive. On Newman's view, given this picture of the mind, it should come as no surprise that once Locke and his empiricist followers have determined that reason has as its ideal aim irrefutable evidence, it follows that being reasonable consists in the strength of the mind's conviction being strictly correlatable with the degree of less than irrefutable evidence almost inevitably the case in anything other than trivial matters and perhaps even there also. What is fundamentally wrong with this picture of the mind is that it seriously underestimates the reality of the essential activity of the mind. The higher part of the mind, and not simply the lower part of the mind, whether the passion or imagination of empiricism, is crucially involved in coming to decisions about reality. The mind is not simply a computer of probabilities, but in advance and excess of evidence can commit to something as true that has less than irrefutable evidential warrant. For Newman the "can" is not linked, as in liberal epistemology, with an "ought not." For such leaps beyond the

evidence are not intrinsically irrational, examples of sheer caprice, as liberal epistemology would have it. Newman wishes to deny that the activity displayed by the mind in its excess over evidence is purely voluntaristic, and certainly not capricious.

The argument that the mind often, indeed usually, assents in the absence of irrefutable evidence is for Newman a truth not only of experience, but of the larger philosophical tradition which was convinced of the rationality of such a manoeuvre even if the upshot was that this mode of rationality did not conform to the canons of demonstrative knowledge. Rather than generalizing Tertullian's *credo quia absurdum*, Newman considers himself to be engaged in bringing back into religious epistemology the less narrowly conceived view of reason first propounded by Aristotle and amended and adjusted in the context of Butler's conflict with Lockean epistemology in the eighteenth century. *A Grammar* accepts the less restrictive Aristotelian view, and seems to find particularly congenial the view Aristotle announces in the *Nichomachean Ethics* to the effect that it is unreasonable to expect objective certitude in the specifically human sphere, given the degree of complication.

Yet non-correspondence to the strictest demands of demonstrative knowledge does not vitiate a particular sphere of inquiry or interest. Something less than objective certainty is permissible if the particular sphere under investigation is not amenable to such certainty, where, in Newman's language, "strict inference" is out of the question, and only "informal inference" is realistically possible. Indeed, the claim for demonstrative knowledge, and indeed even seeking after it, in areas of investigation that do not support such pride, is judged to be wrongheaded if not mischievous. There are, of course, special difficulties why such seeking is particularly hubristic in matters of religion. In concert with what he had said in his Anglican period, in *A Grammar* and *Essay on Development* Newman suggests that the reason why knowledge cannot be absolute in religious matters lies in the very nature of the religious object itself which as infinite is objectively and not simply subjectively mysterious. The ultimate religious *intendum*, that is, "God," exceeds any and all cognitive attempt. No raid, or succession of raids, on the absolute could logically succeed.

A Grammar also provides Newman's classic defense of the

principle of tradition-forming judgment. Newman argues that if judgments or assents are not without grounds, because they do not satisfy the canons of a restrictive, reductionist rationality, they are also not without backgrounds which definitely ought not to be summarily dismissed as irrelevant as is the wont of liberal epistemology. Real judgments are made by human beings in the context of background assumptions which are themselves not grounded and which for the most part are not even investigated. For Newman an open non-reductive realist epistemology ought to take background as well as foreground into consideration. In *A Grammar* Newman completes the rehabilitation of prejudice or tradition that received a preliminary airing in the *Oxford University Sermons*. Before Gadamer, Newman argued for the validity of tradition over against the failed Enlightenment and liberal attempt to securely found knowledge by linking it to empirical evidence.

Of course, the grounds for revision are not the same in every respect, nor can it be claimed with any definitiveness that rehabilitation of the value and validity of tradition involves for Newman any essential rethinking of the nature of truth, as is definitely the case with Gadamer's espousal of the Heideggerian model of truth as disclosure. Nevertheless, in *A Grammar*, as earlier in the *Oxford University Sermons*, while Newman shows himself aware of the potential for what is now referred to in philosophical literature as "ideological deformation," he also shares some of the vulnerability of a Gadamer to a Habermasian and Habermasian-like critique. Traditional judgment may not *always* be wrong as liberalism tends to suggest; it may not even *often* be wrong. But it stretches plausibility to claim against those who would criticize it that it is always right. Newman is, as is Gadamer, sensible enough not to make any such claim, and yet, as with Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, there is perhaps insufficient attention to the possibility of prejudice in the pejorative sense of the term and insufficient information provided as to how judgment on religious matters protects itself against deformation, and the nature and scope of the sources available for such protection. One can, however, safely conjecture that were Newman to explicitly raise and answer these questions it is highly likely that he would argue for critical resources of an internal rather than external kind.

By way of closing this brief and altogether inadequate account of

the continuity of anti-liberal principles in the Catholic Newman I should say a few words about the qualifiers Newman felt ought necessarily to be added in the Catholic situation. Given the *de facto* anti-liberal constitution of Catholicism in both its theology as well as its ecclesial practice, Newman felt called upon to take account of, and set some protection against, Christianity deforming itself by defining itself in a reactively, perhaps even reactionary, anti-liberal fashion. From a host of possible examples of such supplements let me just mention two.

First, if against the corrosive of liberalism Newman insisted on the dogmatic principle, this was not intended to encourage lazy acceptance of *credenda* only incompletely understood and to positively discourage religious inquiry. If Newman wished to prune somewhat the burgeoning culture of experience, he by no means wished to exclude it. Newman is quite clear that not all elements of the divine mystery are experientiable. As *A Grammar* and *Essay on Development* both point out, such definitely is the case with regard to the nature of God as Trinity, which is a reflective extrapolation from its compact revelation in scripture. Not only would it not have occurred to the human mind to have defined God thus, even after such revelation or the articulation of such revelation, the mind cannot experientially apprehend the mystery of the triune God. But this does not appear to be the situation with regard to every aspect of the great religious fact or mystery. In *A Grammar* Newman is quite clear that certain features of this most complex of Christian mysteries can be grasped cognitively, just as in the *Essay on Development* Newman does not rule out the possibility that it is something like religious experience, albeit communally mediated experience, which is decisive in the last instance in determining the superiority of the orthodox view of Christ.

Newman in his Catholic texts seems to be engaged in amending the claims of experience rather than excluding its claims altogether. From a theological perspective Newman seems to be suggesting in fact that growth in the Christian life is growth in religious experience, not as an indiscriminate cognitive or trans-cognitive quantum, but rather as the personal appropriation by the subject of the truths of the tradition. In this sense not only did Newman not exclude experience, he positively encouraged it. As adulthood is the telos of the Christian

life, experiential, and not simply notional, apprehension is the heuristic which guides Christian witness. If because of the very nature of the divine, crucial aspects of the divine admit only of notional apprehension, this provides no warrant for sloth in avoiding bringing to experience that which does admit such bringing. As Newman keeps the door open for experience, he also keeps the door open for religious inquiry, and he does so in two different ways. On the one hand he suggests the continual necessity of attempts to explain theologically the great Christian mysteries, while insisting that these mysteries be approached with due reverence and that the human mind neither overestimate its competence nor set the canons of meaningfulness according to its own presumptive lights. On the other hand, as is clear from texts such as the *Essay on Development* and *Consultation of the Faithful*, Newman understands the process of doctrinal formulation, as well as elucidation, to be open, and he understands that this process will, and ought to, continue as long as there exists in the Church the miraculous coincidence of fidelity and creativity.

This brings me to my second and final supplement to Newman's championing of anti-liberal principles. While Newman in his Catholic period continued to validate traditionary judgment in both its implicit as well as explicit forms in matters of religion, he in nowise maintained that they could not be challenged by individual conscience. Conscience is an extremely important concept in *A Grammar* and is regarded as inalienable. Furthermore, in the *Apologia* Newman uses all his considerable rhetorical skill in rebutting Kingsley's view of the traditionary bias of Catholicism, which for him demanded a *sacrificium intellectus* of its members, and fatally discouraged even the semblance of intellectual honesty. For Newman, if the Catholic Church is the bastion of the rights of traditionary over private judgment, this sets limits to, but does not extirpate, conscience from the province of Catholicism. While Newman enjoys that in the event of conflict between the communally held view and a competing private view it is the former that should be given the benefit of the doubt, and that the individual should submit himself or herself to the closest introspective scrutiny, in the last instance individual conscience can legitimately challenge the communally held view, and successfully challenge it.

Newman is aware of a number of such successful challenges throughout history which assisted the Church in resisting deformation and remaining faithful to its substance and mission. He sees no reason why such will not be the case in the future. But the mantle of prophet ought not to be confused with superficial private opinion which does not submit itself to self-scrutiny and which asserts it is right not on the basis of special credentials but on the basis that it holds a particular view with conviction. Newman could never concede that the claim of conviction ought to displace the claim of truth.

Conclusion

No illusion is entertained in this paper that either the reality of the presence of a consistent set of anti-liberal principles or their perdurance over the course of Newman's literary production have been "proven" or "demonstrated." Awareness of this is indicated by the fact that the word "demonstrated" was used in this paper only in an inverted comma sense. For demonstration in the strict sense, a much more extensive textual terrain would need to have been covered, and the texts consulted plumbed more deeply than is possible within the confines of an essay. Still I hope I have proposed at least a *prima facie* case for supporting Newman's own reading of the depth-grammar of his philosophical-theological position, a case not weakened very much by omission from discussion of the fourth and fifth anti-liberal principles, for at least in the case of one of those principles, i.e., number five, all that would be required is a quick presentation of Newman's great discussion of Natural and Revealed Religion that closes *A Grammar*. If it is this consistency and tenacity which makes of Newman for modernity an emblematic "old man" who refuses Enlightenment blandishments and unmasks its pretended and/or delusory nakedness, it is the coherence of his anti-liberal counter-proposal which makes him a valuable conversation partner with twentieth-century philosophy and theology. But the illumination is not uni-directional. Newman is informed as well as informing, some of his insights gaining weight by being put in richer systematic contexts, some of his suggestions pointing the way out of philosophical and theological dead-ends.

Indeed, one might risk the opinion that it is in this conversation

rather than in Newman haliolatry or historical studies that the true value of Newman lies. For to evoke the Italian commentator and critic of Hegel, Benedetto Croce, what is living and what is dead in Newman is ultimately decided by this conversation. The present interpretive scene shows some signs of beginning to get this conversation off the ground. This is especially the case with regard to Newman's religious epistemology, where Newman's anti-Lockean position has been explored via the epistemological outlook of the later Wittgenstein as well as Michael Polyani (e.g., by J. Ferreire) and read in the light of the experiential dominant in modernity's construal of religious sensibility (e.g., by Nicholas Lasch). Yet even here, in plausibly the most developed area of the desired conversation, much remains to be done. Discussion of Newman and twentieth-century rapprochement in the area of religious epistemology could be broadened to include the hermeneutic theory of Gadamer and the critical theory of Habermas, and might even conceivably become ecumenic enough to include the post-Nietzschean stream in contemporary philosophy, both continental and analytic. Moreover, too often read as gravitating to one or other side of the propositionalist-fideistic either-or, Newman's view of religious mystery calls out not only for a definitive statement regarding its patristic provenance, but for comparison with exemplary twentieth-century Catholic accounts provided by Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Here the mutual questioning concerning the christological and trinitarian mysteries has a particular call on critical attention.

Conversation has not even begun in other areas which are crying out for critical treatment, areas like religious anthropology and phenomenology. It is only in and through such discussion that one remains faithful to Newman. For not only is it true that the child of the Enlightenment is continually replicated, there is also and always a considerable amount of metamorphosis, for the Enlightenment child of whom we spoke in the preface is a master of disguise, even if all the disguises have somehow or other something to do with nakedness. Repetition of Newman is not enough, or if so only in the amended Kierkegaardian sense of repetition forwards rather than backwards, that is, repetition that appropriates a past to the extent to which it is open to the future and its contingencies and allows flexibility of

response in dealing with new emergencies and crises. Genuinely repeating Newman may thus involve even a margin of literal infidelity, so that one is liberated into Newman's critical ethos which availed of every and any intellectual tool at its disposal to expose the deficiencies of a phenomenon that is forever undergoing mutation.