



'That Was Then, This Is Now': Some Comments on Newman's 1877 Preface to the *Via Media* and the Modern Church

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Newman's Preface to the 1877 reissue of one of his most influential Anglican writings, the *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church*, was his last great original theological work. Throughout the 1860s and 70s he was engaged in a systematic reissue of his Anglican writings, a self-conscious assertion of the integrity and consistency of his own intellectual and spiritual journey. What eventually became a uniform edition of all his writings was designed to establish the essential catholicity of ideas gestated during his Anglican years, many of which, unsurprisingly, were viewed with suspicion by hypercatholics like W. G. Ward.

This was a tricky venture in the church of Pio Nono, and it is typical of Newman that this highly original final exercise in ecclesiology should present itself as something ostensibly quite different, an apologetic defence of the Catholic Church of the 1870s against the accusations of the fierce young Anglican high-churchman he had been in the 1840s.

So Newman's preface starts from an objection often raised against the Catholic Church of his time, the 'discordance' between the claims to purity of Catholic theology on the one hand, and the apparent superstition of much Catholic devotional practice and the corruption of 'ecclesiastics in high positions', on the other. But his real target audience was those within the Church from the Pope downwards, whose actions and ideas he believed were distorting contemporary Catholicism, and damaging the Church's credibility in evangelising an unbelieving world. The preface is a self-conscious corrective to nineteenth-century ultramontane ecclesiology, written from within, though the originality of the corrective was to have a life and value far beyond the occasions and the problems which evoked it.

As is well known, Newman was dismayed by the definition of Papal Infallibility in 1870. Though he himself accepted the doctrine, he thought the definition a needless and inopportune burden on consciences – 'unsettling the weak in faith, throwing back inquirers, and

shocking the Protestant mind'.¹ Supporters of the definition, whom Newman called 'an aggressive and insolent faction',² had branded conscientious opposition to it as the sign of a factious and disloyal spirit of dissent. For Newman, this accusation was typical of a disastrous eclipse of theological debate, in which forces outside the Church and an intolerant spirit within colluded to suppress the free exercise of the theologian's proper office. It was by what he called 'the collision of catholic intellects with catholic intellects' that in times past 'the meaning and limits of dogmatic decrees were determined'.³ Debate and disagreement were essential to the Church's apprehension of the truths she preached, but were now routinely treated as signs of apostasy:

Truth is wrought out by many minds, working together freely. As far as I can make out, this has ever been the rule of the Church till now, when the first French revolution having destroyed the Schools of Europe, a sort of centralisation has been established at head-quarters – and the individual thinker... is brought into immediate collision with the most sacred authorities of the Divine polity.⁴

As he remarked to Frederick Rogers, his favourite Oxford pupil, the Catholic Church's mission to modern society was hamstrung by a morbid fear of theological novelty, so that theologians 'cannot move in matters of speculation... without giving enormous scandal to our people... I have long wished to write an Essay, but I never shall, I think, on the conflicting interests, and therefore difficulties of the Catholic Church, because she is at once, first a devotion, secondly a philosophy, thirdly a polity. Just now, as I suppose at many other times the devotional sentiment and the political *embarrass* the philosophical instinct'.⁵

The preface to the *Via Media*, is that long contemplated essay. It is far more than a preamble to a forty-year old Anglican treatise, but rather a careful attempt to re-assert the proper place of theology within the life of the church.

Newman's argument in the Preface replaced a monolithic understanding of the church, in which hierarchy or governance determine all aspects of religious life with a radically dynamic model, in which three very different but complementary energies, principles or 'offices' exist in permanent creative tension. Newman had deployed triadic models of ecclesial life in earlier writings, and here as earlier

¹ J. H. Newman, *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching Considered*, London 1876, Vol 2, p. 299.

² *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol xxv, pp. 18–9.

³ *Letters and Diaries* XXVII p. 59.

⁴ *Letters and Diaries* XX p. 426.

⁵ *Letters and Diaries* XXVII p. 70.

he relates these threefold energies to the threefold offices which unite in Christ: the prophetic, standing here variously for revelation, teaching, theology, rational thought; the priestly, representing the spiritual, devotional, or what Friedrich von Hügel would later call the *mystical* element of religion; and the kingly or royal office, representing rule, governance, structure, institution. In Nicholas Lash's formulation, Christianity is 'at one and the same time life in the spirit, language, and organisation'.⁶

These three powers or offices are all vital constituents of the concrete historical reality of the Body of Christ. But their different objects and scope inevitably pull them all in different directions.

Truth is the guiding principle of theology and theological inquiries; devotion and edification, of worship; and of government, expedience. The instrument of theology is reasoning; of worship, our emotional nature; of rule, command and coercion. Further, in man as he is, reasoning tends to rationalism, devotion to superstition and enthusiasm; and power to ambition and tyranny.⁷

So the balance between the three is always precarious, and in practice never adequately attained:

Who, even with divine aid, shall successfully administer offices so independent of each other, so divergent and so conflicting? What line of conduct, except on the long, the very long run, is at once edifying, expedient, and true?⁸

In the church of Newman's day, loyalty to authority was considered the core value, and, in the age of Lourdes and La Salette, ardent Catholic piety was rated above intellectual sophistication. Unsurprisingly therefore, Newman correctively elevates the prophetic or theological dimension of the church *above* the other two, arguing that it is theology which acts as a corrective and restraint on the other two offices.

And so:

I say then, Theology is the fundamental and regulating principle of the whole Church system. It is commensurate with Revelation, and Revelation is the initial and essential idea of Christianity. It is the subject-matter, the formal cause, the expression, of the Prophetic Office, and as being such, has created both the Regal Office and the Sacerdotal. And it has in a certain sense a power of jurisdiction over those offices, as being its own creations, theologians being ever in

⁶ Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach*, London 1979, p. 103.

⁷ J H Newman, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church Illustrated in Lectures, Letters and Tracts written between 1830 and 1841 with a Preface and Notes*, London 1877 vol 1 p. xli.

⁸ *Via Media* p. xlii.

request and in employment in keeping within bounds both the political and popular elements in the Church's constitution.

And yet theology too must sometimes submit to the necessities of the lived reality of historic Christianity,

theology cannot always have its own way; it is too hard, too intellectual, too exact, to be always equitable, or to be always compassionate; and it sometimes has a conflict or overthrow, or has to consent to a truce or a compromise, in consequence of the rival force of religious sentiment or ecclesiastical interests, and that sometimes in great matters, sometimes in unimportant.⁹

The bulk of the preface is taken up with concrete historical examples of the ways in which this unceasing interplay between the three offices has worked out, such as Pope Stephen's ruling that Donatist baptisms were valid, a piece of pastoral expediency in which a pope overruled the best theological opinion of the day, but which turned out to be a wise and necessary concession to the demands of unity and charity.

Newman's argument is not always clear: what, precisely, is the relationship in his analysis between revelation and theology? The Preface is constrained and at times impoverished by Newman's sometimes uncritical deployment of nineteenth-century theological categories, for example in his apparent reduction of the sacral dimension of Christianity to religious emotion or even popular superstition. It is woefully inadequate considered as a commentary on the scriptural or patristic deployment of the triple offices of prophet, priest or king, whether in relation to the work of Christ or to the life of the church.

But none of that was Newman's real concern. In an age in which rigid pyramidal ecclesiologies prevailed, his intention was to argue for an irreducibly dynamic and perichoretic understanding of the life of the church, and to vindicate the legitimate role and freedom of theology as a permanent element in that perichoresis. On his account, the life of the church could never be one of a sealed and self-sufficient balance, raising it above confusion, contradiction and error. It was a dialectical process, rich and life-giving, but consequently messy, in which the tensions between the conflicting claims of truth, expediency and ardour would not be resolved this side of the eschaton. As he wrote:

Whatever is great refuses to be reduced to human rule, and to be made consistent in its many aspects with itself. Who shall reconcile with each other the various attributes of the Infinite God?... This living world to which we belong, how self-contradictory it is, when we attempt to measure and master its meaning and scope.... We need not feel

⁹ *Via Media* p. xlviiii–xliv.

surprise then, if Holy Church too, the supernatural creation of God, is an instance of the same law . . . crossed and discredited now and again by apparent anomalies which need, and which claim, at our hands an exercise of faith.¹⁰

I completed this brief outline of the argument of Newman's Preface at noon on Wednesday 1 September 2010. As it happened, that same day at noon, Italian time, Pope Benedict chose as the theme of his Angelus Address to pilgrims at Castelgondolfo the life and work of Blessed Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was one of the most remarkable women of the twelfth-century, an aristocratic Benedictine abbess whose much publicised visions earned her in her own lifetime the title Sybil of the Rhine, who published a series of theological and moral works based on her visions, engaged in four preaching tours through Germany, was a gifted composer, and corresponded on equal terms with popes, emperors and religious leaders like Bernard of Clairvaux. If ever a single figure embodied all of the threefold energies explored in Newman's essay, it was Hildegard. But on any reading of her career, it is the charismatic or prophetic dimension which is uppermost, indeed, the word *charisma* might have been invented to describe her talents.

It seems remarkable therefore, that what Pope Benedict chose to dwell on in his address on Hildegard was what he called 'an exemplary ministry of authority', stressing her role as an efficient and sensitive abbess governing communities of holy women, and her own willing subordination to male ecclesiastical authority.

So, declared the Pope,

As is always the case in the lives of true mystics, Hildegard wished to place herself under the authority of the wise, in order to discern the origin of her visions, which she was afraid could be the fruit of illusions and not from God The sign of an authentic experience of the Holy Spirit, the source of all charisms is that the individual possessing supernatural gifts never boasts of them, never shows them off and, above all, demonstrates complete obedience to ecclesiastical authority. All gifts distributed by the Holy Spirit are, in fact, intended for the edification of the Church and it is the Church, through her pastors, who recognises their authenticity.

To put it mildly, this is a selective reading of Hildegard's career. She learned her theology from a woman teacher, established the autonomy of her community of nuns in direct and sustained defiance of the Abbot of the monastery where she had been professed as a nun. Securing the approval of bishops and popes was less a sign of docility than a quest for autonomy and protection from the unjust opposition of her immediate ecclesiastical superior. The clerical

¹⁰ *Via Media* p. xciv.

advisers who helped her compose her books were at least as much her disciples as her censors or instructors, she used her preaching tours to denounce clerical abuses, she spent the last years of her life in acrimonious conflict with the local clergy over her decision to grant Christian burial in her convent to an excommunicated man, and in her correspondence with Popes she felt free to give them the benefit of her outspoken advice. In short, Pope Benedict's emphasis on Hildegard's humble docility to ecclesiastical authority may tell us a good deal more about modern papal priorities than it does about those of the historical Hildegard.

I doubt if Newman was even aware of the existence of Hildegard of Bingen. Had he been so, it is doubtful whether he would have warmed to her visions. However, it seems equally certain that he would not have interpreted her career as the meritorious subordination of the priestly and prophetic offices, exemplified in Hildegard's visionary and theological activities, to the regal office, exemplified in the jurisdiction of the clergy, from her confessors to the Bishops of Bamberg up to Pope Eugenius III. I have emphasised that the 1877 Preface originated in Newman's unhappiness about the distorting effect on the church of his day of an overriding emphasis on central ecclesiastical authority. The Pope's Angelus address suggests that on such matters, the corrective emphases of Newman's Preface are still essential reading.

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