

A NOTE ON THE UNIVERSITY SERMONS

A thorough discussion of the content of Newman's University Sermons would exceed the proper length of an article in a review. It would involve a study of his thought as a whole, for they are essentially incomplete, and deal with problems that exercised him throughout his life. In particular, a careful comparison would have to be made between them and the *Grammar of Assent*. By incomplete, however, we must not be understood to mean that they are sketchy or immature or unimportant. We mean simply that they represent the first stage, the initial orientation, of a synthesis which being organic and alive, naturally in the course of time developed. Far from being unimportant they are an impressive statement of the relations between faith and reason and mark a turning point in the history of modern religious thought. Newman himself, re-reading them in Rome after his conversion, wrote in a letter to Dalgairns: 'I must say I think they are as a whole, the best things I have written, and I cannot believe that they are not Catholic, and will not be useful';¹ and writing to James Hope he characterises the volume as 'the best, not the most perfect, book I have done. I mean there is more to develop in it though it is imperfect.'² Clearly he felt that they treated of fundamental issues and were personally significant as expressions of his thought. It is to the latter point that we shall limit ourselves in this article, not estimating the value of his ideas as such, but viewing them as indications of the position of his mind at that time, and noting the direction it is taking. Newman's thought is singularly homogeneous: the great principles which governed him in his early days were corrected and developed by his conversion, but they were not superseded. This suggests that there was something radically alien from Anglicanism in his outlook from the start, that his conversion

¹ Quoted in Wilfrid Ward. *Life of Newman*. Vol. 1, p. 173.

² *Ibid.* p. 58.

was no mere accident due to hostile circumstances, that he was heading for the Catholic Church the moment he began to think. It will be of interest to discover what light the University Sermons can give in justification of such a view.

To understand their purpose they must be situated in their historical environment. They were preached during a period covering seventeen years, from 1826-1843; the first nine date from 1826-1832, and five of these are of the year 1832; the last six date from 1839-1842. Newman was born in 1801, so that the sermons represent his thought mainly from the later twenties to the early forties. During that period much had happened, and at the end of it a definite crisis had occurred. It is worth while recalling, in order to estimate his development, the trend of his mind when he set out upon them. We know that he experienced an evangelical 'conversion' at the age of sixteen and that this was not merely an emotional experience but gave him a definite intellectual appreciation of God and a profound and lasting realisation of the gratuitousness of grace. Thus early then, he grasped the essential fact of religion—the fact of everything being *given* to the creature by a transcendent God: he stood for this throughout his life; and maintained it against every form of liberalism. That is why he stands out so remarkably in the nineteenth century: a great intelligence which understood what religion meant in an age which did not. A little later he learnt the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation from Thomas Scott—'to whom (humanly speaking), I almost owe my soul.'³ He went up to Oxford in 1817, took his B.A. in 1820, and became a Fellow of Oriel in 1822. In 1824 he was ordained deacon and became a curate at St. Clement's. At this time he was much influenced by Dr. Whateley, who 'emphatically, opened my mind, and taught me to think and to use my reason.'⁴ Whately also taught him 'the existence of the Church, as a substantive body or corporation'

³ *Apologia* (Longmans), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 11.

and fixed in him 'those anti-Erastian views of Church polity which were one of the most prominent features of the Tractarian movement.'⁵ He was later to free himself from Whateley's influence, and, as we shall see, the University Sermons are directed against the 'Evidential School' of which he was a member. Another influence was Dr. Hawkins, the Vicar of St. Mary's, who drew him from certain evangelical tenets, especially that of the two categories of men, those justified by faith and those unjustified. Then he read Butler's *Analogy* and it marked an 'era' in his religious opinions. In particular he learnt from it two main ideas; first, the idea of a connection and a harmony between the supernatural and the natural—an idea which, surely, put him on the right road to the solution of the problem of the relation between reason and faith, and secondly the doctrine that Probability is the guide of life, and this led him on to the question of the logical cogency of Faith. Thus at the time when the University Sermons began his mind was assured first of the nature of religion itself; then of, at least, the great doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, then of some considerable notion of a visible and independent teaching Church. Further than this, he was awakened to the idea of a philosophy. Not that he ever showed signs of becoming a pure metaphysician. It was from religion that he approached the question: it was the question of the relation between the realms of Faith and the domain of natural reason that made him deal with it at all. In general we may say, therefore, that at this moment he is beginning a synthesis of the two disciplines, that of theology and philosophy. Even truer, perhaps, would be the statement that he was attempting the creation of a theology only, for philosophy was never considered except as the *ancilla*. And the creation of this theology was a new thing in the Church of England. It was to lead him out of it.

In the Sermons Newman treats of the relation between

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 12.

faith and reason from a special point of view.⁶ He is not disputing with those who attack faith on the grounds of it being unreasonable, but with those who, while admitting the value of what they call faith, in reality misunderstand it altogether. There were two contemporary schools in Anglican thought; the Evangelicals, for whom any relation between faith and carnal reason was tabu; and the school of which Whately was a member, inheriting the traditions of Locke and the eighteenth century. It was ultimately rationalist pure and simple: no faith without proof was the way it solved the problem. It was the logic of Protestantism: no doctrines were to be believed unless the individual could prove them to be in Scripture—that was the first step: the next followed on—of the doctrines thence deduced none should be believed unless rational proof was forthcoming. The consequence of such a teaching was to 'cut off from the possibility and privilege of faith all but the educated few.'⁷ The Evangelicals did not worry Newman; it is against the 'Evidential' school that his sermons are directed.

Such a view as theirs inevitably met with stern opposition in his mind. Full of that sense of God and of the *givenness* of grace which we have mentioned above, he saw that implied the negation of religion and substituted a complacent pride and self-sufficiency. His way of meeting it is interesting. The faith of the masses was declared to be unreasonable, and therefore not faith. Only the few could believe, because only the few could prove. He did not thereupon content himself with denouncing this truculent pseudo-faith in the name of the supernatural. He took the enemy on his own ground and showed that the real fact was that the faith of the masses was most certainly reasonable. In other words, he made a psychological investigation in the concrete of the way in which faith works.

⁶ *cf.* for what follows : *Newman's Oxford University Sermons*. Francis Bacchus. *The Month*, July 1922.

⁷ Newman. *Development of Doctrine* (Longmans), p. 328.

All very well, he implies, to assert that this or that is so, but let us see how it actually happens.

He begins by examining the reasoning process in the human mind, and at once discovers a distinction. 'All men reason . . . but all men do not reflect upon their own reasonings . . . all men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason.'⁸ This is his famous distinction between Implicit and Explicit reasoning. Reasoning or the exercise of Reason, he maintains, is 'a living spontaneous energy within us, not an art.'⁹ In this way we gain 'truth from formed truth, without the intervention of sense.'¹⁰ We cannot help reasoning: it is the process which distinguishes us from brutes. Logic, on the other hand, is an attempt 'to analyse the various processes which take place during it, to refer one to another, and to discover the main principles on which they are conducted . . .'¹¹

'Clearness in argument certainly is not indispensable to reasoning well. Accuracy in stating doctrines of principles is not essential to feeling and acting upon them. The experience of analysis is not necessary to the integrity of the process analysed. The process of reasoning is complete in itself, and independent. The analysis is but an account of it; it does not make the conclusion correct; it does not make the inference rational. It does not cause a given individual to reason better. It does but give him a sustained consciousness, for good or evil, that he is reasoning. How a man reasons is as much a mystery as how he remembers.'¹²

He further points out that the lack of explicit reasoning is by no means confined to the uneducated or the simple. The reasoning process is so complicated that it is of extreme difficulty to give an account of it. Men reason well but argue badly: 'their professed grounds are no suffi-

⁸ Sermon on *Implicit and Explicit Reason*. Oxford University Sermons (Longmans), pp. 258-259.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 257.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 258.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 257.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 259.

cient measures of their real ones."¹³ If therefore this distinction between Implicit and Explicit reasoning is a universal phenomenon, if it is common to the educated and the uneducated alike, then there is no justification in assuming that the belief of the masses in supernatural truths is irrational simply because they cannot give a rational account of it or at least one that is adequate. Fr. H. Tristram and Fr. Bacchus give a quotation from Newman's *Church of the Fathers* which well sums up this part of his argument.

' He [St. Antony] considered, contrariwise to present notions, that the consciousness of being rational was no necessary condition of being rational. I mean, it is the present opinion that no one can be acting according to reason, unless he reflects upon himself and recognises his own rationality. A peasant who cannot tell why he believes, is supposed to have no reason for believing.'¹⁴

Having shown that there is no impossibility in simple faith having rational grounds, he has now to determine whether in actual fact believers have any materials on which to exercise their reason. He claims that they have—in the truths of natural religion taught them by their conscience. By the truths of natural religion evoked by conscience Newman is thinking principally of such truths as our responsibility to God, the sense of sin and judgment, etc., *i.e.* moral truths. But he defines natural religion as 'the system of relations existing between us and a supreme Power, claiming our habitual obedience';¹⁵ and it seems clear that we may include among these 'truths' the existence of God as proved by the *Quinque Viae* and the various deductions from it. Now these results of the natural reason and conscience, though of extreme importance, have grave defects. They are essentially incomplete: they tell

¹³ Sermon on *The Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason*, p. 212.

¹⁴ Art. Newman. *Dict. Theol. Cath.* T.xi, p. 355.

¹⁵ Sermon. *The Influence of Natural and Revealed Religion respectively*. p. 19.

us something but not enough. We cannot always be certain of them and then we can deceive ourselves. It is here that Newman introduces his principle of Antecedent Probability. The combined evidence and incompleteness of natural religion afford an *a priori* presumption of a revelation. The very fact that we can know so much indicates that there is much more to be known, and the estimate of the character of the supreme Power which we can already form, suggests that He will reveal what we need. It is an antecedent probability of a revelation. Thus the argument has run its course. The believer may not be conscious of his reasons, but he has them. His 'conscience' has equipped him with a number of truths about God—truths which point to a fuller knowledge. He is reasonable therefore when he accepts a revelation: it is only what he rationally could expect. Of course the presumption that there must be a revelation does not prove that there is one. That is a matter of historic fact, of the Bible and the Church and the authority of Christ.

It is the fashion in some circles at present, to be patronising about Newman. He had a genius for psychology, it is said, but he was no theologian—and there are one or two bitter remarks made by Newman in later life to back this up. There is no doubt, indeed, that he had an amazing gift for psychological analyses—there is ample proof in these sermons alone. But he was much more than a psychologist—and again the sermons prove it. It is surely a remarkable fact that a man setting out to deal with a local controversy should in the process arrive at an almost complete statement of the Catholic teaching on the relations between faith and reason. Yet that—certain difficulties of terminology apart—is what Newman achieved. He saw that acceptance of the possibility of the supernatural, far from being unreasonable, is an exigency of reason, that its existence can even be negatively known by reason, and further that faith, 'the vehicle of these [supernatural] truths is not merely antithetic to reason, but is in truth a perfection of reason, for it opens the way of the human

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mind to a vast field of knowledge inconceivable and hitherto absolutely unattainable.¹⁶ In his remarks on the defects of conscience and the information of natural theology we may notice a strange parallel to St. Thomas' reasons why a revelation is necessary for the guidance of man even with regard to the truths he can naturally know. The creation of this prolegomena to theology is of great importance in Newman's history. It was his own creation, and his work was not carried on. That is not surprising. Two things were necessary for its continuance—a definite faith and a sound philosophy. The synthesis was in an alien home. The work must also have been a determining influence on Newman himself: it concentrated his mind on faith and the content of faith—and the distinction between Implicit and Explicit reasoning helped him to expand the fatal doctrine of development.

That doctrine is discussed in the last sermon of the series. It was preached in 1843, when he was near his end as an Anglican. The Oxford Movement had had ten years of life: the *Tracts for the Times* had been issued regularly until 1841, when *Tract 90* was condemned. In the summer of that year Newman retired to Littlemore and the bishops began their charges against him. But the *Via Media* had been discredited in his eyes two years earlier, in 1839, when a study of Chalcedon and the Monophysites had shown him the position of the Papacy in the Early Church. Rome, he had held, was guilty of innovations, of adding to the *depositum fidei*. His study of the Fathers made him realise the development of dogma in the earlier centuries, and he saw that its development followed certain laws, and that what he had called the innovations of later decrees were in reality analogous to these early developments: the results of a necessary process in a living religion. His reflections were to culminate in the great *Essay on Development* in 1845 and in his conversion. Meanwhile the ser-

¹⁶ *Reason and Faith*. Hilary J. Carpenter. BLACKFRIARS, March, 1931.

mon was a preliminary survey and illustrates the fateful direction of his thoughts. It contains the essential point of his theory, namely, that development of dogma is the making explicit what has been implicit in the *depositum* from the beginning. He remarks significantly, 'Nor am I here in any way concerned with the question, who is the legitimate framer and judge of these dogmatic inferences under the Gospel, or if there be any. Whether the Church is infallible, or the individual, or the first ages, or none of these, is not the point here'¹⁷ In the back of his mind he must have known that the theory would remain an academic one until that point was settled. In the same sermon there is a passage which puts in brief the point we have been attempting to make in this article. In the sermon there is a strange passage in which he unconsciously (we presume) writes the epitaph of the whole series, of his entire creative effort. The University Sermons represent the return of *the idea* of theology to England: that is their importance for nineteenth century religious thought. In themselves they are not a theological work: as we have indicated they form a prolegomena to theology, putting reason and faith in their respective positions, giving faith the franchise of its own domain. But by the very fact that he had marked out the boundaries, Newman's mind was orientated towards the problem of the nature of theology itself, and this orientation is more than hinted in the closing sermons—the book, we remarked, is the *beginning* of a synthesis. Now theology is certainly a science, but a divinely inspired science: its deductive process is carried on under the light of faith; its principles are the data of revelation and its results must harmonise with revelation. It is, to use a phrase of Gardeil, 'the prolongation of revelation,' and it is 'the work of living faith seeking to understand its object.' During no moment of the process does the theologian abstract from the faith, further, its 'system

¹⁷ Sermon: *The Theory of Development in Religious Doctrine*. pp. 319-320.

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does not consist in the mechanical external unity of dogmas otherwise scattered. It is the co-ordination of various elements which are, not forced into a unity, but seen to be organically unified as manifestations of God as He is known in the Christian Revelation. In other words, there can be no theologian without faith, no theology without a definite revelation—and no certification of that revelation without a teaching Church. Doubtless any acute mind may make deductions about this or that dogma, and some of the deductions may be true. But the data cannot be fully understood if the mind is not assisted by faith, nor the results assured if there is no living Custodian of Revelation to check them. There is only one theology, the science of the undivided faith. This was the idea that Newman came to grasp. He saw that theology was necessary. Once he had stated the idea its exigencies were evident. A theology demanded certain data, a definite faith depending on a definite revelation, assured by a teaching Church. The passage with which we conclude suggests that he was beginning to realise the conclusion we have suggested.

‘Here, too, is the badge of heresy; its dogmas are unfruitful; it has no theology; so far forth as it is heresy, it has none. Deduct its remnant of Catholic theology, and what remains? Polemics, explanations, protests. It turns to Biblical Criticism, or to the Evidences of Religion, for want of a province. Its *formulae* end in themselves, without development, because they are words; they are barren because they are dead . . . It develops into dissolution; but it creates nothing; it tends to no system; its resultant dogma is but the denial of all dogmas, any theology, under the Gospel. No wonder it denies what it cannot attain.’¹⁸

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¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 318.