



## Ex Umbris: Newman's New Evangelization

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### Abstract

Newman wrote many works arguing for the truth of the Christian faith. At the same time, he wrote positively regarding non-Christian beliefs and practices. This article investigates Newman's arguments for Christianity in light of his acceptance of non-Christian religions. Drawing primarily on the *Grammar of Assent* and the Oxford University Sermons, as well as Newman's poetry, prayers, and other works, I argue that Newman's acceptance of other religions forms the foundation of his Christian apologetic. I first look at Newman's view of non-Christian religions, where he sees an ascending movement of humanity searching for God and a descending movement of God revealing himself to humanity. Second, I look to Newman's understanding of human reasoning, which works holistically and not according to the rules of strict logic alone. Third, I argue that, for Newman, religious conversion models other types of assent, so religious knowledge and practice outside of Christianity are what allow a believer to recognize the truth of the Christian message. Finally, I present Newman's reflections on scriptural examples of evangelization, in which he sees a model of evangelization based on the principles discussed in this article.

### Keywords

Newman, world religions, conversion, evangelization, faith, intercommunion of religions.

*"That belief belongs to the mere intellect, not to the heart also. . . this is the principle of philosophies and heresies, which is very weakness."*<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his life, John Henry Newman returned repeatedly to questions of the "ultimate basis of religious faith."<sup>2</sup> The Oxford

<sup>1</sup> Newman, John Henry, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), p. 358.

<sup>2</sup> Newman, John Henry, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), p. 172.

University Sermons, delivered between 1826 and 1843 and first published in 1843, examined this issue. One of his last books, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, published in 1870, is a more systematic approach to the same question. Through his career, from Anglican don to Catholic cardinal, Newman's position on the reasons for religious faith is consistent. In fact, shortly after publishing the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman issued a third edition of the University Sermons with the addition only of an explanatory preface and a few clarifying footnotes.<sup>3</sup>

Cardinal Avery Dulles has argued that "Newman made a major contribution by bringing out the importance of what he called 'natural religion' as a presupposition for the effectiveness of any *demonstratio christiana*."<sup>4</sup> Against the prevailing apologetics of Italian manuals, which attempted to convert by sheer logic, Newman developed a holistic apologetic that sees Christianity as the fulfillment of humanity's natural religious inclinations. As a result, Newman's view of religious conversion cannot be understood apart from two other key positions: first, his view of what he called natural religion; that is, religion outside of Judeo-Christian revelation, where religion means "the knowledge of God, of His will, and of our duties towards Him",<sup>5</sup> second, his investigations into inference and assent—humanity's ability to recognize and accept truth in general. These two positions, one theological and the other psychological, unite to create Newman's understanding of conversion and the ultimate basis for religious faith.

Analyzing Newman's argument for religious faith, this article will combine four elements of his thought. Newman argued, first, that religion can be good and true outside of Christian revelation; second, that even in non-religious assent, people are not convinced by reason alone; third, that assent to Christianity models other types of assent, which means that religious knowledge outside of Christianity provides the foundation of conversion to Christianity; and finally that the New Testament provides examples of evangelization that follows this model. With this understanding of what Newman calls the "intercommunion of religions,"<sup>6</sup> religious truth and experience outside of Christianity constitute the best foundation for Christian apologetics.

<sup>3</sup> Tillman, Mary Katherine, "Introduction," in John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. vii-xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Dulles, Avery, *Newman* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Newman, John Henry, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 303.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

## A. Catholicism and Non-Christians

*"Christ's love o'erflows the bounds His prophets trace  
In His reveal'd design."<sup>7</sup>*

Newman accepted some elements of non-Christian religions and rejected others, but his approach was generally positive. He writes, for example, "All Religion, so far as it is genuine, is a blessing, Natural as well as Revealed."<sup>8</sup> His appreciation of natural religion comes out in two ways: humanity's ability to know God, and God's action outside Christianity.

These two ways can be seen as two movements: the soul's movement to God and God's movement to, or in, the soul. Conceptually distinct, they cannot in reality be separated.<sup>9</sup> God created the soul able to know him, and he acts in the soul and in creation to make himself known. Meanwhile the soul can use its God-given potential to seek God. In a prayer entitled "God Communicated to Us" Newman speaks to God as communicating himself to humanity through creation, faith, and divinization.<sup>10</sup> While divinization is distinctly Christian, creation and faith are accessible to all humanity.

Regarding the ascending movement—humanity's ability to know God—Newman writes of "Human nature, so excellent, so dangerous, so capable of divine purposes"<sup>11</sup> and of "the spontaneous piety of the human mind."<sup>12</sup> Newman believes that every human being, made in the image of God, is made for God and can only be satisfied in knowing him. In a prayer titled "God the Blessedness of the Soul" Newman writes, "To possess Thee, O lover of Souls, is happiness, and the only happiness of the immortal soul! To enjoy the sight of Thee is the only happiness of eternity. At present I might amuse and sustain myself with the vanities of sense and time, but they will not last for ever."<sup>13</sup> Naturally seeking God, humanity can assent to him by reason and conscience.

Newman believes that while in principle reason without revelation can discover God and attain true religious knowledge, in practice things are more difficult. In the *Grammar of Assent* he reprises the

<sup>7</sup> Newman, John Henry, *Prayers, Verses and Devotions* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), p. 573.

<sup>8</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 311.

<sup>9</sup> "How far this initial religious knowledge comes from without, and how far from within, how much is natural, how much implies a special divine aid which is above nature, we have no means of determining" (Newman, *Grammar*, p. 105).

<sup>10</sup> Newman, *Prayers*, pp. 440–442.

<sup>11</sup> Newman, *Apologia*, p. 344.

<sup>12</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 313.

<sup>13</sup> Newman, *Prayers*, p. 360.

classical argument that the order of nature implies a creator.<sup>14</sup> However, although "Right reason" can ideally come to know God, "reason as it acts in fact and concretely in fallen man" is more complicated:

I know that even the unaided reason, when correctly exercised, leads to a belief in God, in the immortality of the soul, and in a future retribution; but I am considering it actually and historically; and in this point of view, I do not think I am wrong in saying that its tendency is towards a simple unbelief in matters of religion.

Continuing on this theme, Newman argues that the Church's authority is a gift from God to limit the "suicidal excesses" of reason in order to "preserve religion in the world," even in "defense of natural religion."<sup>15</sup> Newman pushed back against what he saw as a naïve overemphasis on reason's ability to bring people to truth. Reason has a role to play, but other elements of life do as well.

Specifically, Newman placed great weight on the importance of conscience, which gives certainty of God's existence and knowledge of God himself. He writes, "As then we have our initial knowledge of the universe through sense, so do we in the first instance begin to learn about its Lord and God through conscience."<sup>16</sup> Conscience touches us at a deeper level than reason, giving a powerful, heart-touching knowledge of God himself: "[T]he phenomena of Conscience, as a dictate, avail to impress the imagination with the picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive, and is the creative principle of religion."<sup>17</sup> Through conscience one can experience God and come to real knowledge of him.

Describing the role of conscience in the development of natural religion, Newman writes that natural religions are all "gloomy." While mocking sin and living immorally, practitioners of natural religion go to desperate lengths, such as animal holocausts, child sacrifice, and bodily tortures, to expiate their sin. This desperate attempt at atonement, Newman says, is the most common element of natural religion, but "even these are insufficient to lull the sharp throbbing of a heavy-laden conscience." Christians may be tempted to label these practices superstition, but "it is man's truest and best religion, *before* the Gospel shines on him. If our race *be* in a fallen and depraved state, what ought our religion to be but anxiety and remorse, till God comforts us?"<sup>18</sup> Through conscience, humanity is naturally

<sup>14</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, pp. 72–75.

<sup>15</sup> Newman, *Apologia*, pp. 336, 337–8.

<sup>16</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101; cf. *Apologia*, pp. 333–4.

<sup>18</sup> Newman, John Henry, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 116, 117.

aware of a moral law, a divine lawgiver, personal transgressions of the law, and the need to make atonement for those transgressions.<sup>19</sup> This, in Newman's view, is all good and true.

Newman makes a key distinction here. Some practices may be good outside of historical revelation even if they are sinful within it. Revelation changes the rules: "Those very self-appointed ordinances which are praiseworthy in a heathen, and the appropriate evidence of his earnestness and piety, are inexcusable in those to whom God has spoken . . . . The emblems of a Deity might be invented by Egyptian faith, but were adopted by Jewish unbelief."<sup>20</sup> Obedience to God's will is key, but one can only obey what one knows to be obligatory:

[W]hat is superstition in Jew or Christian is not necessarily such in heathen; or what in Christian is not in Jew. Faith leads the mind to communion with the invisible God; its attempts at approaching and pleasing Him are acceptable or not, according as they are or are not self-willed; and they are self-willed when they are irrespective of God's revealed will. . . . [S]acrifices of blood were not necessarily superstitious in heathen; they would be most superstitious and profane in Christians.<sup>21</sup>

This understanding helps Newman respect both non-Jewish religions and Old Testament prohibitions of non-Jewish worship. It was sinful for Israelites but may even have been virtuous in Gentiles.

Regarding the descending movement—God's self-revelation to man—Newman writes in various places of God's action outside Christianity. In the third Oxford University Sermon, he mentions almost off hand "mere ordinary religious obedience, such as the Holy Spirit may foster among the heathen."<sup>22</sup> Many years later he echoes this comment: "Our supreme Master might have imparted to us truths which nature cannot teach us, without telling us that He had imparted them,—as is actually the case now as regards heathen countries, into which portions of revealed truth overflow and penetrate, without their populations knowing whence those truths came."<sup>23</sup> Newman makes this point very strongly in the poem "Heathenism":

'MID Balak's magic fires  
The Spirit spake, clear as in Israel;  
With Prayers untrue and covetous desires  
Did God vouchsafe to dwell;  
Who summon'd dreams, His earlier word to bring  
To patient Job's vex'd friends, and Gerar's guileless king.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., *Grammar*, pp. 304–8.

<sup>20</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, p. 173.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 242–243.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>23</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, pp. 301–302.

If such o'erflowing grace  
 From Aaron's vest e'en on the Sibyl ran,  
 Why should we fear, the Son now lacks His place  
 Where roams unchristen'd man:  
 As though, where faith is keen, He cannot make  
 Bread of the very stones, or thirst with ashes slake.<sup>24</sup>

The Moabite King Balak (Num. 22–24), Job's pagan friends<sup>25</sup> (Job 2:11–13), the Philistine King Abimelech (Gen. 20), and the pagan Sibyl are examples of God's wide action. Similarly, referencing Clement of Alexandria and Origen, Newman speaks of "the various Economies or Dispensations of the Eternal,"<sup>26</sup> and elsewhere he uses the word "revelations"<sup>27</sup> to describe God's work outside Judaism and Christianity.

Newman makes a distinction between revelations within Judaism and Christianity and without. In the *Development of Doctrine*<sup>28</sup> and the *Grammar of Assent*<sup>29</sup> he explains that revelation in Judaism and Christianity is recognized as a revelation, but in natural religions it is not. More specifically, Newman denies that "Islamism or Buddhism was a direct and immediate revelation from God."<sup>30</sup> However, the qualifiers "direct and immediate" allow for a more subtle action of God such as the dispensations and various revelations mentioned above. Judeo-Christianity is, for Newman, a special revelation, but not the only one.

As a further distinction, Newman occasionally writes negatively of non-Christian religions. He speaks of demon worship and calls some pagan practices "infected with evil."<sup>31</sup> He does not resolve the contrast in the *Development of Doctrine*, but he comes closer

<sup>24</sup> Newman, *Prayers*, p. 555.

<sup>25</sup> Current scholarship may be unsure whether the friends were pagan, but Newman took them to be such (Newman, John Henry, *Sermon Notes of John Henry Cardinal Newman 1849–1878* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 328).

<sup>26</sup> Newman, *Apologia*, p. 128.

<sup>27</sup> Newman, *Development*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>28</sup> "There are various revelations all over the earth which do not carry with them the evidence of their divinity. Such are the inward suggestions and secret illuminations granted to so many individuals; such are the traditionary doctrines which are found among the heathen, the 'vague and unconnected family of religious truths, originally from God, but sojourning'; the difference with Christianity is that "it is a revelation which comes to us as a revelation, as a whole, objectively, and with a profession of infallibility" (ibid., p. 79).

<sup>29</sup> "Our supreme Master might have imparted to us truths which nature cannot teach us, without telling us that he had imparted them,—as is actually the case now as regards heathen countries. . . . But the very idea of Christianity in its profession and history, is something more than this; it is a 'Revelatio revelata;' it is a definite message from God to man distinctly conveyed by His chosen instruments, and to be received as such a message; and therefore to be positively acknowledged, embraced, and maintained as true, on the ground of its being divine" (Newman, *Grammar*, pp. 301–2).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 128–9.

<sup>31</sup> Newman, *Development*, p. 368.

in the *Grammar of Assent*. Admitting that some natural religious practices were “notoriously immoral” and “their objects of worship were immoral as well as false” Newman argues, “There is a better side of their teaching; purity has often been held in reverence, if not practiced; ascetics have been in honour; hospitality has been a sacred duty; and dishonesty and injustice have been under a ban.” He then gives his criteria for judging natural religions: “I take our natural perception of right and wrong as the standard for determining the characteristics of Natural Religion, and I use the religious rites and traditions which are actually found in the world, only so far as they agree with our moral sense.”<sup>32</sup> The moral sense, or conscience, as has already been noted, is shared by all people and guides them to God. Newman here acknowledges that it is not always clear or faithfully followed.

As a final distinction, Newman separates natural from “civilized” or “artificial” religions. Not all change is good, and Newman fears that some civilization “is not a development of man’s whole nature, but mainly of the intellect” so that “the religion in which it issues has no sympathy either with the hopes and fears of the awakened soul, or with those frightful presentiments which are expressed in the worship and traditions of the heathen.”<sup>33</sup> The main characteristic of artificial religion is that it rejects rather than embraces the natural religious impulses of humanity.

At this point the ascending and descending movements meet. Newman judges a supposed revelation (claiming to descend) based on how it fits the ascending movement (humanity itself). Similarly a movement that ascends not holistically but only partially, using reason alone, is to be rejected.

Newman’s acceptance of natural religious practices comes from his respect for human nature. In the poem “Messina,” written as he was touring Italy and Sicily, Newman asks, “Why, wedded to the Lord, still yearns my heart/ Towards these scenes of ancient heathen fame?” Why does a soul that knows Christ seek anything else? The answer is contained in the superscript Newman applies to the poem, quoting the pagan Roman poet Terence: *Homo sum; humani nil à me alienum puto*.<sup>34</sup> Much of the “ancient heathen fame” is simple human truth. It comes from human nature and so cannot be foreign to anyone. Though outside historical revelation, it has value because it is true to humanity.

Thus Newman writes approvingly of early saints who allowed the people their popular feasts and other practices as long as they

<sup>32</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 325.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 307–8.

<sup>34</sup> Newman, *Prayers*, p. 550.

could be directed to something holy like a martyr or a Holy Day.<sup>35</sup> These practices are fundamentally human. Feasts, songs, smells, and candles may be pagan, but rather than evacuating their validity, the pagan origin speaks to their importance: "What is not universal has no claim to be considered natural, right, or of divine origin."<sup>36</sup> The natural desire for God, inspired by God's own action, brought about these practices, and the religion of Christ does not deny them but further hallows them.

These ascending and descending tendencies of humanity and God attain real hints, reflections, and shadows of truth, and together they create the positive natural religion that Newman sees as building the foundation for revealed religion. Newman concludes a chapter titled "Natural Religion" in the *Grammar of Assent*: "Such, then, in outline is that system of natural beliefs and sentiments, which, though true and divine, is still possible to us independently of Revelation, and is the preparation for it."<sup>37</sup>

## B. Before Conversion: Limits of Reason in Assent

*"It is as absurd to argue men, as to torture them, into believing."*<sup>38</sup>

Moving to the realm of psychology, Newman was throughout his career skeptical of the ability of reason<sup>39</sup> alone to discover and convince a person of truth. For that reason he argued, against prevailing views both inside and outside the Church, that pure logic is too blunt an instrument to reach something as intricate as truth. In place of reason alone, Newman writes of assent by antecedent probabilities and the illative sense. Ultimately Newman argues that the primary criterion of truth is life itself.

Newman considered truth to be a mysterious concept. Even when discussing non-religious truth, he writes with a sense of religious mystery; that is, of a reality that can be recognized, assented to, and spoken about, but never completely grasped: "Truth is vast and far-stretching, viewed as a system; and, viewed in its separate doctrines, it depends on the combination of a number of various,

<sup>35</sup> Newman, *Development*, pp. 371–3.

<sup>36</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 314.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>38</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, p. 63.

<sup>39</sup> Newman uses the word reason in different ways in his various works. In the University Sermons he generally uses the word to mean the popular abuse of reason or the narrow view of reason as logic alone, discounting other ways of arriving at truth. At other times and particularly in the *Grammar of Assent*, the word generally refers to the entire reasoning faculty, including logic, antecedent probabilities, and the illative sense. Let the reader beware.



delicate, and scattered evidences; hence it can scarcely be exhibited in a given number of sentences."<sup>40</sup> Truth is more than logic alone can handle.

Newman touched upon the issue of assent in many of his early works, in particular the *University Sermons*, but he did not systematize his views until the *Grammar of Assent*. To understand the process of assent as Newman presents it, one must grasp the distinctions he makes between assent and inference, between real and notional assent, and between formal and informal inference. These distinctions are the foundation of the *Grammar of Assent*.

Assent is the unconditional conviction that something is true, regardless of reasoning. People may accept something as true without being able to defend their position, or having once been convinced by argument, one may forget the argument while the assent remains. Inference is the conditional conviction that something is true based on reasoning. Whereas assent may leave the reasoning process behind, inference is always connected to it.

Real assent is assent to a particular and concrete matter; Newman gives examples such as "Philip was the father of Alexander" and "the earth revolves around the sun." Notional assent is assent to abstract propositions, such as "a line is length without breadth, to err is human, to forgive divine."<sup>41</sup> An assent may move from notional to real by direct experience. For example, a boy may give notional assent to the proposition "Riding your bike down that steep hill is dangerous" because he trusts his mother who so tells him. Yet should the boy, under the influence of peer pressure, decide to ride his bike down the hill anyway, he will soon have real knowledge of the hill's danger. Newman argues that real assent has a much stronger pull on the human will than notional, so the boy will have a much stronger conviction of the hill's danger after he has taken the ride.

Formal inference is inference according to the rules of logic or strict reason. Here Newman's critique of reason unaided appears again: "Inference, considered in the sense of verbal argumentation, determines neither our principles, nor our ultimate judgments. . . it is neither the test of truth nor the adequate basis of assent."<sup>42</sup> Logic is not useless, but assent is more complex than acceptance of logical demonstration.

Before looking to informal inference we must note Newman's argument that the processes of inference and assent are deeply personal. However logical a person aims to be, "we judge for ourselves, by our own lights, and on our own principles; and our criterion of truth is not so much the manipulation of propositions, as the intellectual

<sup>40</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

and moral character of the person maintaining them, and the ultimate silent effect of his arguments or conclusions upon our minds." For example, citing contrary positions of Pascal and Montaigne, Newman writes, "truth there is, and attainable it is, but... its rays stream in upon us through the medium of our moral as well as our intellectual being." Reason alone is weak because, for human beings, truth is filtered through who we are and what we already know and believe. This is why Newman can say, "Many of our most obstinate and most reasonable certitudes depend on proofs which are informal and personal, which baffle our powers of analysis, and cannot be brought under logical rule." Arguments that lead one person to notional assent may not convince another, and the experience that leads to real assent can only be had by an individual. Thus Newman is convinced, "Logic then does not really prove; it enables us to join issue with others; it suggests ideas; it opens views; it maps out for us the lines of thought; it verifies negatively; it determines when differences of opinion are hopeless; and when and how far conclusions are probable; but for genuine proof in concrete matter we require an *organon* more delicate, versatile, and elastic than verbal argumentation."<sup>43</sup> This more delicate process is informal inference, and it works with antecedent probabilities and the illative sense.

Informal inference is not easily definable. It is inference not according to the rules of strict logic—a process of recognizing truth that is personal and instinctual, based on probability and a number of individual judgments and understandings.<sup>44</sup> It is more easily described than defined.

In the *Grammar of Assent* Newman describes informal inference as "the cumulation of probabilities, independent of each other, arising out of the nature and circumstances of the particular case which is under review; probabilities too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circuitous to be convertible into syllogisms, too numerous and various for such conversion, even were they convertible."<sup>45</sup> Antecedent probabilities make all the difference for Newman: "The main instrument

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 240, 247, 239, 217.

<sup>44</sup> One key passage of the *University Sermons* shows Newman's early, unformulated thought regarding what he would later call informal inference: "The mind ranges to and fro, and spreads out, and advances forward with a quickness which has become a proverb, and a subtlety and versatility which baffle investigation. It passes on from point to point, gaining one by some indication; another on a probability; then availing itself of an association; then falling back on some received law; next seizing on testimony; then committing itself to some popular impression, or some inward instinct, or some obscure memory; and thus it makes progress not unlike a clamberer on a steep cliff, who, by quick eye, prompt hand, and firm foot, ascends how he knows not himself; by personal endowments and by practice, rather than by rule, leaving no track behind him, and unable to teach another. . . . And such mainly is the way in which all men, gifted or not gifted, commonly reason,—not by rule, but by an inward faculty" (Newman, *Fifteen*, p. 257).

<sup>45</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 230.

of proof in matters of life is 'antecedent probability.'<sup>46</sup> The terms antecedent probabilities, antecedent grounds, antecedent impression, and other variations appear frequently in his works, referring loosely to what is already known, even implicitly, through prior reasoning or experience. Antecedent impressions, which could more negatively be called biases, are profoundly influential in assenting to new ideas. When faced with a new concept, human beings cannot help but judge it according to what they already know.

Newman is aware that antecedent probabilities may be misused. If the probabilities are untrue or unsound, the conclusion will be as well.<sup>47</sup> In his *Apologia* Newman condemns his opponent Charles Kingsley for making use of the British public's "antecedent impressions" that Catholics are not trustworthy to paint Newman as a fool and a knave: "Controversies should be decided by the reason; is it legitimate warfare to appeal to the misgivings of the public mind and to its dislikes?"<sup>48</sup> However, he argues elsewhere that it is meaningless to ask in general whether the role of antecedent probabilities is good or bad. That we judge things based on what we already believe to be true is an unavoidable fact,<sup>49</sup> but having recognized the existence of antecedent probabilities it is incumbent upon us to analyze them. The point is to ask

whether they are in the particular case reasonable or not. When the probabilities we assume do not really exist, or our wishes are inordinate, or our opinions are wrong, our Faith degenerates into weakness, extravagance, superstition, . . . but when our prepossessions are unexceptionable, then we are right in believing or not believing, not indeed without, but upon slender evidence.<sup>50</sup>

Antecedent probabilities are a key factor in human assent, and reason has a role in judging whether or not they are valid.

As important as antecedent impressions are, they are merely the material by which one judges. The instrument of judgment perfected,

<sup>46</sup> Newman, qtd. in Tillman, "Introduction," p. xi.

<sup>47</sup> "In all matter of human life, presumption verified by instances, is our ordinary instrument of proof, and, if the antecedent probability is great, it almost supersedes instances. Of course, as is plain, we may err grievously in the antecedent view which we start with, and in that case, our conclusions may be wide of the truth; but that only shows that we had no right to assume a premiss [sic] which was untrustworthy, not that our reasoning was faulty" (Newman, *Development*, pp. 113–4).

<sup>48</sup> Newman, *Apologia*, p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> "Assent on reasonings not demonstrative is too widely recognized an act to be irrational, unless man's nature is irrational, too familiar to the prudent and clear-minded to be an infirmity or an extravagance. None of us can think or act without the acceptance of truths, not intuitive, not demonstrated, yet sovereign. If our nature has any constitution, any laws, one of them is this absolute reception of propositions as true, which lie outside the narrow range of conclusions to which logic, formal or virtual, is tethered" (Newman, *Grammar*, p. 150; cf. pp. 272–6 and *Fifteen*, pp. 187–90).

<sup>50</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, pp. 189–90.

Newman says, is the illative sense.<sup>51</sup> He first mentions the illative sense in the *Grammar of Assent* in a chapter on informal inference, in which he argues that reasoning often works like an “instinct,—that is, the process is altogether unconscious and implicit.” He describes at greater length,

The Illative Sense, that is, the reasoning faculty, as exercised by gifted, or by educated or otherwise well-prepared minds, has its function in the beginning, middle, and end of all verbal discussion and inquiry, and in every step of the process. It is a rule to itself, and appeals to no judgment beyond its own; and attends upon the whole course of thought from antecedents to consequents, with a minute diligence and unwearied presence, which is impossible to a cumbrous apparatus of verbal reasoning.<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately Newman's understanding of the illative sense rests upon two principles. First, assent—or personal conviction or certitude—for most of the people most of the time, is not a matter of sheer logic. Humanity is quite capable of comprehending an argument and stubbornly withholding assent. This may not be a positive quality, but it is a fact. Yet there is a positive side; we are capable of seeing the truth of things that are not or cannot be logically proven, and many of humanity's great discoveries have resulted from brilliant insights pursued through trial and error rather than syllogisms. Insight, instinct, gut, genius, experience, trust, faith, and imagination are part of the human condition. What a person knows, believes, experiences, and hopes for colors his view of the world, for good or ill. Second, a person may be very insightful in one area and hopeless in another. In Newman's terminology, one may have a strong illative sense for physics and become a brilliant professor, but at the same time have a weak illative sense for personal relations, making for the stereotypical absent-minded professor.

One question remains: How can one know whether a judgment of informal inference is true? How does one know whether to trust the illative sense? Newman's answer is that ideas are proven to be real or not by life itself: “We prove [ideas] by using them.”<sup>53</sup> An idea that works in the real world is a fact; if it does not, it remains a mere (and useless) idea.<sup>54</sup> If the choice is between a presumption for denying everything and a presumption for believing everything, Newman believes that the “true way of learning” is to begin by

<sup>51</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 276.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 260, 283.

<sup>53</sup> Newman, *Development*, p. 101.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Newman's critique of his former *via media* position, which he rejects as not “objective and real” but simply a “paper religion” (*Apologia*, p. 168). It does not matter to him how many learned treatises can be written on it if it is not being lived out. Newman's position illustrates the point even if it is not fair to the *via media*.

believing everything and letting things settle as they will: "In that case, we soon discover and discard what is contradictory to itself; and error having always some portion of truth in it, and the truth having a reality which error has not, we may expect, that when there is an honest purpose and fair talents, we shall somehow make our way forward, the error falling off from the mind, and the truth developing and occupying it."<sup>55</sup> The case of believing everything is an extreme example, but the point is that real life will prove truth and shed light on error. In general, Newman is profoundly convinced of the power of truth to win out and the power of experience to convict. A "mere abstract argument" is "impotent when directed against good evidence lying in the concrete."<sup>56</sup>

An open mind and an honest desire for truth are the most important tools in finding truth. Approaching life in this way allows one to gain from experience, reasoning, and the wisdom of others, thus building up a store of accurate antecedent probabilities. Continuing in such a path, one will be able to judge wisely and generally assent to what is true. Even if one makes a mistake, a habitually open mind and persistent desire for truth will allow one to recognize when an erroneous idea comes up against solid fact.

### C. Conversion: From Shadows into the Truth

*"They who are not superstitious without the Gospel, will not be religious with it."*<sup>57</sup>

We can now ask the question, what is the ultimate basis for religious belief? Put more concretely, why do people convert? By now it should come as no surprise that Newman does not regard reason alone as useful here; first because many who believe heroically cannot give a rational explanation for their belief;<sup>58</sup> second, because many are unconvinced by rational arguments for Christianity;<sup>59</sup> and finally, because even if sheer argument is successful, it makes for a

<sup>55</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 294.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>57</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, p. 118.

<sup>58</sup> "Will any one say that a child or uneducated person may not savingly act on Faith, without being able to produce reasons why he so acts? What sufficient view has he of the Evidences of Christianity? What logical proof of its divinity? If he has none, Faith, viewed as an internal habit or act, does not depend upon inquiry and examination, but has its own special basis, whatever that is" (*ibid.*, p. 184).

<sup>59</sup> "The fact of revelation is in itself demonstrably true, but it is not therefore true irresistibly; else, how comes it to be resisted? There is a vast distance between what it is in itself, and what it is to us. . . . [T]here are those who do not recognize truth, from the fault, not of truth, but of themselves" (Newman, *Grammar*, p. 319).

shallow religion.<sup>60</sup> Rather, Newman argues that faith works similarly to other types of assent,<sup>61</sup> with antecedent probabilities, the illative sense, and life experience. For Newman, the experience and knowledge of God in natural religion provide the antecedent probabilities and skilled judgment (illative sense) that lead a person to accept the revelation of Christ.

Newman describes faith as a gift of God: “[I]t is a great *gift*, which comes from above, and which we cannot obtain except from Him who is the object of it.” He also describes faith as a process or a journey. It is “a divine light; by it we are brought out of darkness into sunshine; by it, instead of groping, we are able to see our way towards heaven.”<sup>62</sup> Words such as darkness and groping do not mean that people are completely without knowledge of God before receiving faith. Faith is “a presumption, yet not a mere chance conjecture,—a reaching forward, . . . a moving forward in the twilight, yet not without clue or direction;—a movement from something known to something unknown.” Faith may be “feeble and dim as in the Heathen, or bright and vigorous as in the Christian” but it is always “under every Dispensation, the one acceptable principle commending us to God for the merits of Christ.”<sup>63</sup> Faith, whether in a Christian or another believer, is a movement from small truth to greater truth. Newman speaks faith development on the levels of doctrine and personal conversion.

Doctrinally, Newman writes of revealed religion as an addition to natural religion: “Revealed Religion, as such, is of the nature of a positive rule, implying, as it does, an addition, greater or less, to the religion of nature, and the disclosure of facts, which are thus disclosed, because otherwise not discoverable.”<sup>64</sup> To illustrate

<sup>60</sup> “I do not want to be converted by a smart syllogism; if I am asked to convert others by it, I say plainly I do not wish to overcome their reason without touching their hearts. . . . [H]ow, after all, is a man better for Christianity, who has never felt the need of it or the desire?” (ibid., p. 330).

<sup>61</sup> Comparing the assent of faith to other types of assent Newman argues that “Assent is ever assent” even if faith is superior because of its “supernatural origin.” Elsewhere he writes, “For me, it is more congenial to my own judgment to attempt to prove Christianity in the same informal way in which I can prove for certain that I have been born into this world, and that I shall die out of it. . . . I prefer to rely on. . . an accumulation of probabilities, . . . [because] from probabilities we may construct legitimate proof, sufficient for certitude” (ibid., pp. 155–6, 319–20).

<sup>62</sup> Newman, *Prayers*, p. 264.

<sup>63</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, p. 249.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 171. Newman makes similar points in the *Grammar of Assent*, calling Christianity “a religion in addition to the religion of nature. . . . Christianity is simply an addition to it; it does not supersede or contradict it; it recognizes and depends on it, and that of necessity: for how possibly can it prove its claims except by an appeal to what men have already? Be it ever so miraculous, it cannot dispense with nature; this would be to cut the ground from under it”; and saying “Revelation begins where Natural Religion fails. The Religion of Nature is a mere inchoation, and needs a complement,—it can

this point, Newman uses the language of “principles” in the *Development of Doctrine*<sup>65</sup> and of “convictions” in the *Grammar of Assent*.<sup>66</sup> Principles are abstract ideas, and doctrines are concrete facts that develop from these ideas. Some of the ideas and core “principles” of natural religion may be the same in Christianity. Doctrine without principle, such as “zeal for an established Church and its creed on merely conservative or temporal motives” is hollow. On the other hand, “principle without its corresponding doctrine may be considered as the state of religious minds in the heathen world, viewed relatively to Revelation; that is, of the ‘children of God who are scattered abroad.’”<sup>67</sup> Ideas concerning God’s existence, the moral law, sin, and the duty of atonement are all principles. They are concepts for which revelation provides the content, or frames for which revelation provides the picture.

Newman writes of personal conversion as a development or addition as well. Referring specifically to religious conversion, Newman writes, “a gradual conversion from a false to a true religion, plainly, has much of the character of a continuous process, or a development, in the mind itself, even when the two religions, which are the limits of its course, are antagonists. Now let it be observed, that such a change consists in addition and increase chiefly, not in destruction.” He then quotes an earlier tract, saying, “if a religious mind were educated in and sincerely attached to some form of heathenism or heresy, and then were brought under the light of truth, it would be drawn off from error into the truth, not by losing what it had, but by gaining what it had not. . . . True conversion is ever of a positive, not a negative character.”<sup>68</sup>

This concept of addition leads to Newman’s striking phrase of the “intercommunion of religions.” He explains, “There are few religions which have no points in common; and these, whether true or false, when embraced with an absolute conviction, are the pivots on which changes take place in that collection of credences, opinions, prejudices, and other assents, which make up what is called a man’s selection and adoption of a form of religion.” If this “intercommunion of religions” holds good for falsehoods, “much more natural will be the transition from one religion to another, without injury to existing certitudes, when the common points, the objects of those certitudes, are truths.”<sup>69</sup> A faithful non-Christian will hold key

have but one complement, and that very complement is Christianity” (Newman, *Grammar*, pp. 302–3, 375).

<sup>65</sup> Newman, *Development*, pp. 178–85.

<sup>66</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, pp. 198–200.

<sup>67</sup> Newman, *Development*, p. 181.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200–1.

<sup>69</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, pp. 200–1.

principles or convictions of his own religion. If those convictions are true and if Christianity is true, Christianity will purify, confirm, and fulfill what is already believed.

These certitudes are desires for which revelation offers the true fulfillment. Similarly, the intuitions and desires of the soul that led people to develop religions without historical revelation are the same intuitions and desires that will lead them to accept revelation when it comes: “[A]s a general rule, religious minds embrace the Gospel mainly on the great antecedent probability of a Revelation, and the suitability of the Gospel to their needs.”<sup>70</sup> The convictions and desires that make natural religion are the antecedent probabilities that lead a person to embrace the Gospel once it has been proclaimed.

Similarly, the natural piety that guides and grows with faithful religious practice forms the illative sense. Speaking negatively, Newman is pessimistic about the possibility of conversion to Christ for someone who is not already religious. He even writes that he “will not argue about Christianity” with people who are not “imbued with the religious opinions and sentiments which I have identified with Natural Religion.”<sup>71</sup> Newman explains this position in the *University Sermons*, saying that the world’s great error is “to think itself a judge of Religious Truth without preparation of heart. . . . Gross eyes see not; heavy ears hear not.”<sup>72</sup> A heart that is not well prepared cannot judge validly of religious matters.

Speaking positively, Newman argues that in the first Christian evangelization, “The foolish things of the world confounded the wise” and “unlearned Faith, establishing itself by its own inherent strength, ruled the Reason as far as its own interests were concerned.” He explains in an 1872 footnote, “That is, unlearned Faith was strong enough, in matters relating to its own province, to compel the reasoning faculty, as was just, to use as its premisses in that province the truths of Natural Religion.”<sup>73</sup> Unlearned faith formed the illative sense.

From the above comments it should come as no surprise that Newman places great importance on prevenient grace. Discussing conversion itself he says,

Love of the great Object of Faith, watchful attention to Him, readiness to believe Him near, easiness to believe Him interposing in human affairs, fear of the risk of slighting or missing what may really come from Him; these are feelings not natural to fallen man, and they come only of supernatural grace; and these are the feelings which make us think evidence sufficient, which falls short of a proof in itself.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, p. 197.

<sup>71</sup> Newman, *Grammar*, p. 323.

<sup>72</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, p. 198.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.



All religious truth and practice comes from the grace of God. Together they build up antecedent probabilities in the soul and teach the reasoning mind to reason well, laying the foundation for conversion to Christ. A proper evangelization will recognize this grace and build upon these antecedent probabilities, watering rather than uprooting the shoots.

#### D. Evangelization, Dialogue, and the Seeds of the Logos

*"When we would persuade others, we do not begin by treading on their toes."<sup>75</sup>*

Given the importance of the good that already exists in a soul as the foundation for evangelization, missionaries must build on, and not destroy, the faith they encounter. Putting this theory into practice, Newman presents several scriptural examples of evangelization based on the principles of addition and intercommunion.

Jesus and the apostles began with the beliefs their audience held and tried to lead them on. Newman looks to

[T]he preaching of our Lord and His Apostles, who are accustomed to appeal to the religious feelings of their hearers; and who, though they might fail with the many, did thus persuade those who were persuaded—not, indeed, the sophists or the politicians of Rome, yet men of very different states of mind one from another, the pious, the superstitious, and the dissolute, different indeed, but all agreeing in this, in the acknowledgment of truths beyond this world, whether or not their knowledge was clear, or their lives consistent,—the devout Jew, the proselyte of the gate, the untaught fisherman, the outcast Publican, and the pagan idolater.<sup>76</sup>

He writes specifically of Paul's oration at Athens (Acts 17:16–34). Paul "was anxious to pay due respect to the truths which they already admitted, and to show that the Gospel was rather the purification, explanation, development, and completion of those scattered verities of Paganism than their abrogation." For that reason, "He drew them on, not by unsettling them, but through their own system, as far as might be," so that,

What they already were, was to lead them on, as by a venture, to what they were not; what they knew was to lead them on, upon presumptions, to what they as yet knew not. . . . [H]e appealed to that whole body of opinion, affection, and desire, which made up, in each man,

<sup>75</sup> Newman, *Apologia*, p. 435.

<sup>76</sup> Newman, *Fifteen*, pp. 196–7.

his moral self; . . . to constrain all who loved God under the Religion of Nature to believe in Him as revealed in the Gospel.<sup>77</sup>

In a poem discussing how “the Apostles tamed the pagan breast,” Newman writes, “They argued not, but preached, and conscience did the rest,” and in another discussing his own conversion he relates, “For conscience craved, and reason did accord.”<sup>78</sup>

Newman's position here is based on the conviction that there is something in humanity ready to respond to God. Non-Christian religions, inasmuch as they are driven by piety and the search for truth, are built on this innate capacity for God. Thus a wise evangelization will not destroy what came before but will look for seeds of the *Logos* and build on them.

### E. Conclusion and Consequences

*“I am very ignorant—very sinful, . . . but one thing I know, that there is but One to love in the whole world, and I wish to love Him.”<sup>79</sup>*

Newman's apologetic is essentially based on two convictions: religious faith is rooted in natural religion, and we are not convinced by reason alone. True natural religion comes from the ascending movements of reason, conscience, and an innate desire for God, and from the descending movement of God's wide action throughout the world. Assent in all matters of life comes from experience, prior beliefs, and internal convictions rather than reason alone. Religious conversion, then, is rooted in prior religious knowledge and practice, and Christianity is the fulfillment of religious truth already believed and lived.

Because conversion is a movement from partial to fuller truth, a Christian must be willing to recognize truth and goodness outside Christianity. This recognition is not a denial of the centrality of Christ but an affirmation of God's power and action throughout history. Nor is it a rejection of evangelization. Truth in *umbris et imaginibus* seeks fulfillment in the One who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

This article aims to show that accepting religious truth and wisdom outside of Christianity does not mean denying the centrality of Christ. Since this is so, it is possible and indeed essential for a completely convicted Christian to honestly engage a non-Christian on the level of

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247, 248–9.

<sup>78</sup> Newman, *Prayers*, pp. 580, 586.

<sup>79</sup> Newman, John Henry, *Callista: A Tale of the Third Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 347.

faith. If even Christian theology exists *in umbris* and every believer has a certain amount of truth *in imaginibus* Christians can engage in honest dialogue with other believers. A non-Christian will have authentic insights, questions, understandings, and experiences that a Christian lacks. At the same time, the Christian has the same to offer the non-Christian. If Christianity is true, honest dialogue may lead to acceptance of Christianity as true, but such an assent would be the result of a mutual search for truth rather than an argument or an imposition. If Christianity is not true, honest dialogue will lead elsewhere. If Newman is correct, truth will ultimately triumph when seekers are open.

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