

Newman and the Religion of the Future

Anthony Fisher OP

Abstract

Although underappreciated in his own day, Catholic convert John Henry Newman was remarkably prophetic about the challenges that lay ahead for the Catholic faith. In his 1873 sermon titled, 'The Infidelity of the Future', Newman warned of a time when the Church would face not only the cold indifference of agnosticism but also the targeted hostility of those opposed to both God and religion. Yet Newman was not without hope or wisdom for the future Church. This essay examines Newman's insistence upon the need to cultivate an 'ecclesiastical spirit' and an 'intelligent faith'. It specifically explores how Catholic institutions of higher education can respond to Newman's call and assist in bringing about a renewal in the evangelical mission of the Church, providing a much-needed alternative to the wisdom of the world.

Keywords

Church, Newman, Future, Faith, Higher Education

1. Introduction: Newman's Nightmare for the Church

Among the many titles given to the great Anglican divine, historian, poet and Catholic convert John Henry Newman, perhaps none capture his prophetic impulses more clearly than the designation 'the invisible *peritus*' of the Second Vatican Council. Underappreciated in his own day (1801-90),¹ Newman was a thinker able to see what lay ahead, identifying points of theological conflict and offering prescriptions and remedies with both clarity and persuasiveness. This essay will explore

¹ Bernard Dupuy, 'Newman's Influence in France', in John Coulson and A.M. Allchin (eds), *The Rediscovery of Newman: An Oxford Symposium* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1966), p. 170 and Louis Bouyer, *Newman's Vision of Faith: A Theology for Times of General Apostasy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 9. Both suggested that that Newman was misjudged in his own day in part because he often spoke of a future not yet visible to the perceptively challenged and intentionally incredulous. If they are right, we are in some ways better situated to appreciate his insights today than were his contemporaries.

Newman's thought on the 'religion of the future' and its implications for the mission of the Catholic University.

Newman's prescience was hauntingly demonstrated in a sermon delivered 150 years ago at the launch of the new seminary in Birmingham. Entitled, *The Infidelity of the Future* (1873),² Newman bleakly prophesied that:

The trials which lie before us are such as would appal and make dizzy even such courageous hearts as St Athanasius, St Gregory I, or St Gregory VII. And they would confess that, dark as the prospect of their own day was to them severally, ours has a darkness different in kind from any that has been before it.³

How different? Well, much current thinking is allergic to religion, dismissing mystery as obfuscation, narrowing reason within materialist parameters, appealing to cultural influencers and demanding loyalty to reigning ideology. In predicting much of this, Newman preceded Charles Taylor and others on modernity's 'disenchantment'.⁴ He feared that 'the educated world, scientific, literary, political, professional [and] artistic' would increasingly be not merely agnostic

² John Henry Newman, 'The infidelity of the future', *Nine Sermons*, Sermon 9 (2 October 1873), <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/ninesermons/sermon9.html>, 113-28. Commentators on Infidelity include: Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), A Biography, pp. 676-7; Ryan Marr, 'Newman contra Liberalism: Conscience, authority, and The Infidelity of the Future', Public Discourse 22 July 2019 <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/07/54164/>;

³ Newman, *Infidelity*, p. 116-17.

⁴ Today there is a whole literature on secularity and secularism, of which the classic text is Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). See also: Hunter Baker, *The End of Secularism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009); Joseph Baker and Buster Smith, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems* (New York: NYU Press, 2015); Peter L. Berger, 'Secularization falsified', *First Things* February 2008; Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (eds), *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: OUP, 2011); Andrew Copson, *Secularism: Politics, Religion and Freedom* (Oxford: OUP Very Short Introductions, 2017); Terence Cuneo (ed), *Religion in the Liberal Polity* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Collin Hansen, *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* (Bannockburn: Gospel Coalition, 2017); Thomas Howard, *Chance of Dance? A Critique of Modern Secularism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2018); Peter Kurti, *The Tyranny of Tolerance: Threats to Religious Liberty in Australia* (Brisbane: Connor Court, 2017); Pierre Manent and Ralph Hancock, *Beyond Radical Secularism: How France and the Christian West Should Respond to the Islamic Challenge* (South Bend: St Augustine's Press, 2016); David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005); Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism* (London: Tauris, 2008); James Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); Rodney Stark, 'Secularization R.I.P.', in William Swatos & Daniel Olson (eds.), *The Secularization Debate* (Washington DC: Rowan & Littlefield, 2000), 41-66, and *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious than Ever* (ISI Books, 2015); Michael Warner and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (eds), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

but anti-God and carry much of the population with them.⁵ This put Christianity in ‘unchartered territory’, competing for souls not with other religions but with anti-religion.⁶

Furthermore, Newman thought Catholics could no longer presume others will share much of their faith and morals. Where others were once ‘of great service to us in shielding and sheltering us from the assaults of those who believed less than themselves or nothing at all’, Catholics of the future would no longer be camouflaged by Protestant orthodoxy, protected by public institutions, or carried by the culture.⁷ Indeed, a rise in anti-Catholic and anti-Christian sentiment might be expected.⁸ In a highly prophetic allusion to the the coming sexual abuse crisis, Newman observed that ‘no large body can be free from scandals from the misconduct of its members’. Media and state scrutiny mean the reputation of the Church will be ‘at the mercy of even one unworthy member’. He predicted allegations—both real and imagined—regarding transgressions of Church members would intensify and with them disillusionment and hostility toward the Church.⁹

Lastly, while higher levels of literacy and greater ease of communication have many benefits, Newman foretold a proliferation of half-truths, ‘fake news’ and ill-informed opinion, as well as a lack of patience with nuanced answers. Catholics would not be immune to this disinformation revolution, and some would abandon the apostolic tradition as a result.¹⁰

While Newman’s diagnosis of ‘a world irreligious’ is challenging, he was not without hope. The best response, he said, was the cultivation of an ‘ecclesiastical spirit’ or what we call today a more *intentional discipleship*.¹¹ Every Christian must recognise their baptismal vocation as ‘a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ and be ready, as St Peter said, to give reasons for the hope that is in them.¹² Theirs must be an intelligent faith, marked by a spirit of seriousness or recollection and aware of God’s ever-watchful eye. The clergy especially, but others also, need ‘a sound, accurate, complete

⁵ Newman, *Infidelity*, p. 126.

⁶ Newman, *Infidelity*, p. 122-25.

⁷ Newman, *Infidelity*, p. 117-18.

⁸ Newman, *Infidelity*, p. 119.

⁹ Newman, *Infidelity*, p. 121: ‘If there ever was a time when one priest will be a spectacle to men and angels, it is in the age now opening upon us’.

¹⁰ Newman, *Infidelity*, p. 121-22.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World* (2013); Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2022); and other books by Weddell, Robert Barron and James Mallon.

¹² 1Pet 2:9; 3:15.

knowledge of Catholic theology' which readies them for conversation, disputation, and mission in our age.¹³

A first reason for Catholic institutions of higher education, therefore, is to provide a sympathetic environment where spiritual matters can be explored with openness, patience, and nuance, and where an intelligent, recollected discipleship can be cultivated. Faith will in the future be intelligent or not at all.

2. Newman's Confidence in the Survival of the Church

Declining affiliation and practice; families, schools, and parishes less effective in transmitting faith; disillusionment with the criminal behaviour of some church personnel and its mismanagement; distraction by competing narratives and interests; remorseless media critique and increasingly hostile legislation; the march of secularism and anti-Catholicism through the institutions: Newman rightly foresaw much of this.

'Secularization theory' asserts that religious belief inevitably declines as individuals and communities modernize.¹⁴ Yet despite the power of scientific culture and technocratic thinking, religious belief is projected to rise from 5 in 6 people worldwide to 7 out of 8 by 2060.¹⁵ Agnosticism and atheism are in greater danger of extinction than Christianity. Indeed, the demise of Christianity has often been bemoaned or celebrated in history, yet it has repeatedly recovered after catastrophic declines. Furthermore, secular liberalism is still largely parasitic upon Christian ideas, and the faithful of each have found ways of co-existing and even collaborating.¹⁶

In his essays *In Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) and *On the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1878), Newman suggests that Christianity is *sui generis* and not just one more philosophy on the buffet of ideas.¹⁷ Only the incarnational-sacramental principle upon which

¹³ Newman, *Infidelity*, pp. 126-28.

¹⁴ Though going back at least to the Enlightenment, this theory is most commonly associated with the sociologists Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. More recent authors include Talcott Parsons, Thomas Luckmann and (the early) Peter Berger. This is critiqued by Peter L. Berger, 'Secularization falsified', *First Things* February 2008 and Rodney Stark, 'Secularization R.I.P.', in William Swatos & Daniel Olson (eds.), *The Secularization Debate* (, pp. 41-66. Stark has written on this matter for over 50 years, including *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious than Ever*.

¹⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

¹⁶ See for example Austin Dacey, *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 2008); Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (Boston: Little & Brown, 2019).

¹⁷ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/grammar/index.html>, p. 430-31, 487. Commentators on the

Christianity is established can give access to all reality, seen and unseen, and make sense of it. Christianity's survival is divinely secured as both embedded within history and transcending it. And where natural religion and the other faiths falter on the problem of evil, the decline of civilization or the remedy for sin, Christians have some answers and cause for confidence.

This was at the heart of Newman's own conversion(s) as described in his *Apologia pro vita sua* (1865).¹⁸ If Christ's coming was for all humanity, and not just the Jews around 33AD, then his promise to be with us always was already implicit in the Incarnation, long before it was made explicit at the Ascension; so, too, the institution of an indefatigable Church was logically required, long before Christ

Grammar include: John Caioazza, 'Religious belief in Newman's Grammar of Assent', *isi.org* 8 October 2014 <https://isi.org/intercollegiate-review/religious-belief-in-newmans-igrammar-of-assent-i/>; John Cornwell, *Newman's Unquiet Grave*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 183-91; Avery Dulles, *Newman* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 11-12, 39-42, 53-58; Stanley Jaki, 'Meditation on Newman's *Grammar of Assent*', *Faith & Reason* (Spring 1980); Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: OUP, 2010) pp. 618-50; Jeff Mirus, 'The meaning of Newman's *Grammar of Assent*', *Catholic Culture.org* 16 November 2009 <https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/meaning-newmans-grammar-assent/>; John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1878), <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/index.html>. Commentators on *Development* include: Cornwell, *Newman's Unquiet Grave*, pp. 84-91; Dulles, *Newman*, pp. 7-8, 70-79, 90-96; Bruno Forte, 'Historia Veritatis: On Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*', in I. Ker & T. Mewrrigan (eds), *Newman and Faith* (Louvain: Peeters/Eerdmans, 2004), 75-92; Ian Ker, 'Introduction', to 1994 Notre Dame edition; Ker, *JHN: A Biography*, pp. 298-330, 702-13; David Long, 'John Henry Newman, infallibility, and the development of Christine doctrine', *Heythrop Journal* 58(2), 181-94; Joshua Madden, 'Newman, Aquinas, and the development of doctrine', *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* 30 June 2021; Gerard McCarren, 'Development of doctrine' in Ker and Merrigan, *Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography*, pp. 475-89; Stephen Morgan, *John Henry Newman and the Development of Doctrine: Encountering Change, Looking for Continuity* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2021); Chau Nguyen, 'Encountering truth: Newman's theological method in *An Essay on the Development of Christine Doctrine*', *Newman Studies Journal* 8(1) (Spring 2011), 40-55; James Pereiro, 'Newman, tradition and development', in Lefebvre & Mason, *JHN: Doctor*, (Oxford: Family Publications), 239-51; Erich Przywara SJ, *The Heart of Newman* (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), p. 85; Roderick Strange, *A Mind Alive*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2009) p. 25; Juan Velez, 'Development of an idea and of doctrine—Cardinal Newman', *St John Henry Newman* (1 December 2014) <https://www.cardinaljohnhenrynewman.com/development-of-an-idea-and-of-doctrine-cardinal-newman/>.

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua* (1865) <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/apologia65/index.html>. Commentators on the *Apologia* include: Hilaire Belloc, Forward to 1930 edition <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/apologia65/belloc.html>; Cornwell, *Newman's Unquiet Grave*, pp. 154-72; Dulles, *Newman*, pp. 90-94, 123-26; Ker, *JHN: A Biography*, pp. 540-82, 617-8, 698-9; Linda Peterson, 'Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua* and the traditions of the English spiritual autobiography', *PMLA* 100(3) (October 2020); Michael Ryan, 'The question of autobiography in Cardinal Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua*', *Georgia Review* 31(3) (Fall 1977), 672-99; Edward Short, 'St John Henry Newman's *Apologia* revisited', *Catholic World Report* 21 June 2020.

explicitly promised it at Caesarea-Philippi.¹⁹ That the gates of Hell will not prevail against the Church does not immunize it against all hell's sorties, nor exclude persecution, diminishment, or faithlessness in places. But its essence and mission continue, at least in a faithful few.²⁰ The Church's power is always in the present and its gaze perpetually on the future.²¹ Thus the Mass recalls a sacrifice past, makes it present to worshippers now, and offers a foretaste of heaven to come.²² The Church is always more than buildings, hierarchies, or present behavior: it is the continuing mission of Christ sent by the Father to all the world and of the Spirit extending to all nations and souls.²³

Authentic Catholic tertiary institutions are concrete examples of the continuing missions of God and the Church in the world; they are a witness to the continuing relevance of Christian faith in people's lives; and they reflect the fact that God's revelation is for public sharing, research, and debate. The religion of the future will testify to Christian resilience against the forces of secularity, to an ecclesial sensibility amongst its adherents, and to the apostolic tradition humbly but confidently proposed anew in every age.

3. Newman on the Development of Doctrine

Newman's memorial epitaph is *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*—from shadows and images into truth.²⁴ For him that truth was something 'living' and knowledge a process of uncovering through this life into the next. His famous adage that 'To be alive is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often' captured both his own progress and how he thought humanity advances, including Christian doctrine.²⁵ The Church, as Newman taught, is not a museum for ancient artefacts and ideas. Its faith and practice have developed down the centuries and, if it is faithful to the Spirit, such development continues: 'No one doctrine can be named which starts complete at first, and gains nothing afterwards from the investigations of faith'.²⁶ Yet Christianity, is also, as G.K. Chesterton observed, the 'democracy of the dead': it gives tradition the fullest respect, so that the dead have a say in the faith of the living.²⁷ In what sense can these two competing claims be reconciled?

¹⁹ Mt 16:18; 28:20.

²⁰ Newman, *Infidelity*, p. 118.

²¹ Newman, *Apologia*, pp. 487.

²² Newman, *Apologia*, pp. 488.

²³ Newman, *Apologia*, pp. 489.

²⁴ Forte, '*Historia Veritatis*', p. 83. Ian Ker offers the translation 'Out of unreality into reality'.

²⁵ Newman, *Development*, p. 40.

²⁶ Newman, *Development*, p. 107.

²⁷ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), p. 85.

Since revelation is first and foremost an encounter not with creeds but with the person of Jesus Christ, it is essentially dynamic. This is not to say that truth is born from history and fashioned according to culture and milieu. Newman was no relativist.²⁸ At a Newman symposium in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Newman's lifelong search for truth; his insistence on its objective reality and the mind's proper subjection to it; his surrendering his own interiority to 'the objective truth of a personal and living God'; and his determination faithfully to live that truth once recognized.²⁹ He labored upon the relationship between truth's transcendental character and its communication in history through living individuals and communities. This understanding played a crucial role in his essay *On the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Newman made the point that true doctrinal development is not simply accepting whatever idea is *en vogue*, nor being victim to irresistible historical forces, but rather adhering to the very conditions of revealed truth and faithfully expressing the apostolic tradition.³⁰

Comparing the development of a doctrine with the organic development of acorn into an adult plant or an embryo into an animal, Newman famously offered seven 'notes' for distinguishing true development from false: species, continuity, assimilation, durability, anticipation, coherence and conservation. Corruptions, on the other hand, involve revolutionary rather than evolutionary changes, reverse or contradict

²⁸ Newman, *Development*, p. 364: 'That truth and falsehood in religion are but matter of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that; that no one is answerable for his opinions; that they are a matter of necessity or accident; that this is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess; that our merit lies in seeking, not in possessing; that it is a duty to follow what seems true; that it may be a gain to succeed, and can be no harm to fail; that we may take up and lay down opinions at pleasure; that belief belongs to the mere intellect, not to the heart; that we may safely trust ourselves in matters of faith, and need do other guide—this is the principle of philosophies and heresies, which is very weakness'. See also *Via Media* xli, as referenced in Przywara S.J., *The Heart of Newman*, p. 161 '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'.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Message to the Symposium of the International Centre of Friends of Newman* (2010), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20101118_newman-friends.html. See also Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Presentation on the Occasion of the First Centenary of the Death of Cardinal Newman* (1990), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900428_ratzinger-newman_en.html. See also St Paul VI, *Address to the Cardinal Newman Academic Symposium* (1975), 'faithful throughout his life, with all his heart devoted to the light of truth', https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1975/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19750407_symposium-newman.html

³⁰ Newman, *Development*, p. 40; 324;

earlier developments, involve contamination and loss of identity, are incoherent or disintegrative.³¹

Applying such criteria is not straightforward: important questions remain for those steeped in hermeneutics, history, and theology, who are faithful to the magisterium. So, a third purpose of Catholic institutions of higher learning is to enable healthy development of doctrine, and to test putative developments for their fidelity to revelation. Here faithful and informed scholars respond to the signs of the times through the lens of the Gospel and assist the magisterium in its role as authentic interpreter of the doctrinal tradition. By producing scholars and students with a holistic and robust understanding of Christian teaching, the academy helps ensure that the Church is, in St Paul's words, 'the pillar and bulwark of truth'.³² The religion of the future will know developments of doctrine, morals, and customs we do not yet fully foresee but which are faithful to Christ and all he revealed.

4. Newman on the Growing Role of the Laity

Archbishop William Ullathorne OSB (1806-89) was Newman's bishop. When the Oxford converts' magazine, *The Rambler*, started treating theological subjects, identifying clerical shortcomings and recommending bishops take lay advice—all of which outraged the London *Tablet*—Ullathorne was expected to fix things. He tapped Newman to assume the editorship and in his first editorial he acknowledged most fully the prerogatives of the episcopate and apologized for any apparent disrespect. But Newman also asserted that 'their Lordships really desire to know the opinion of the laity on subjects in which the laity are especially concerned' and for good reason, as sometimes in history the laity were more solid in matters of faith or more prudent in matters of policy than the pastors.

Newman's editing of *The Rambler* lasted only two months, but before departing he published anonymously what came to be known as *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859).³³ As a

³¹ Newman, *Development*, pp. 169-206; on which see International Theological Commission, *The Interpretation of Dogma* (1989)5, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1989_interpretazione-dogmi_en.html

³² 1Tim 3:15

³³ John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859) <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/rambler/consulting.html>. Commentators on *Consulting the Faithful* include: Cooper, *JHN: A Developing Spirituality*, pp. 154-58; Cornwell, *Newman's Unquiet Grave*, pp. 138-53; John Coulson, 'Introduction' in the Sheed & Ward edition; Dulles, *Newman*, pp. 105-07; Hermann Geissler, 'The witness of the faithful in matters of doctrine according to John Henry Newman', *International Centre of Newman Friends* <http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/en/wp->

true Catholic, he thought ‘the gift of discerning, discriminating, defining, promulgating, and enforcing any portion of [the] tradition resides solely with the *Ecclesia docens*’—the pope and the bishops.³⁴

So, without doubt, Newman was Episcopalian: he believed in the divine constitution of the Church and the particular charism of the bishops. Still, following the Fathers, he thought the relationship between pastors and faithful must be more than superiors and subordinates: it must be a *conspiratio*, ‘put together, as one twofold testimony, illustrating each other, and never to be divided’.³⁵ His thinking in this regard was influenced by the Italian Jesuit theologian Giovanni Perrone (1794-1876).³⁶ Newman now offered twenty-two instances of the *consensus fidelium* being more responsible for the preservation of orthodoxy than the *consensus clericorum*, including during the Arian crisis of the fourth century, about which he was an acknowledged authority.³⁷ He also quoted Ullathorne on how, at the definition of the Immaculate Conception (1854), the faithful ‘mirrored’ the pastors, reflecting and confirming each other’s faith.

Newman was delated for these radical views to Rome, where his enemies contrived to deny him a hearing. His nemesis, Monsignor Talbot, warned Cardinal Manning that the laity are,

beginning to show the cloven foot... putting into practice the doctrine taught by Dr. Newman... What is the province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle in ecclesiastical matters they have no right at all... Dr. Newman is the most dangerous man in England.³⁸

As the dispute dragged on, Ullathorne wondered publicly ‘Who *are* the laity and what have *they* to do with the Church?’, about which Newman famously quipped ‘The Church would look rather foolish without

content/uploads/2012/06/on-consulting-english1.pdf; Ker, *JHN: A Biography*, pp. 480-8, 604-9; Edward Miller, ‘Newman’s teaching on the Sense of the Faithful’, in Lefebvre & Mason, *JHN: Doctor*, 145-62; Richard Penaskovic, ‘Newman, the laity, and the reception of doctrine’, in Lefebvre & Mason, *JHN: Doctor*, 163-172; Fáinche Ryan, ‘On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine: From Newman to the Second Vatican Council and Beyond’ in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 106 (423) (2017) 340-58 at p. 340; Michael Sharkey, ‘Newman on the laity’, *Gregorianum* 68(1) (1987) 339-46; Strange, *A Mind Alive*, pp. 88-9.

³⁴ Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful*, p. 63.

³⁵ Newman, *Consulting the Faithful*, pp. 25, 33-34, 71-72. Cf. Drew Christiansen, ‘A conspiracy of bishops and faithful: Reading Newman’s “On consulting the faithful” today’, *America* 27 September 2010.

³⁶ Newman frequently corresponded with Perrone about the nature and history of the *sen-sus fidelium*: Strange, *Mind Alive*, p. 91.

³⁷ Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful*, pp. 75-7. Newman’s study in this field culminated in his 1833 work ‘*The Arians of the Fourth Century*’ published in 1833.

³⁸ See Coulson in *On Consulting the Faithful*, p. 41.

them'.³⁹ Ullathorne had no use for a theologically literate laity and feared it would be divisive. But Newman understood that the apostolic deposit is expressed:

sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes the doctors, sometimes by the people, sometimes by the liturgies, rites, ceremonies, and customs, by events, disputes, movements, and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name *history*.⁴⁰

Newman's claims were endorsed by the Second Vatican Council, and increasing numbers of lay faithful now belong to international and local Church bodies, run chanceries, schools, universities, hospitals, and other agencies, lead ecclesial movements, charities, and head various ministries. The emphasis on 'synodality' in recent times echoes some of Newman's thought. He would, like Pope Francis, encourage real listening, dialogue, and joint witness; he would also, like Pope Francis, repudiate any parliamentary or opinion poll model of how the Church identifies the truth. If the laity are to contribute to the 'two-fold testimony', they must be informed by the spirit that stirred the faithful at the time of Nicaea, built upon baptismal vocation and apostolic faith.

To this end, Catholic institutions of higher learning play a fourth indispensable role: as centers for forming and expressing lay leadership; cultivating excellent minds and courageous wills to fertilize Church and society; eschewing any 'parallel magisterium' and instead collaborating in giving joint witness. Though the principal field for the lay apostolate is always the world beyond the Church, the religion of the future will also include an enlarged role for the laity within.

5. Newman on an Educated Faith and Conscience

Newman's 'intelligent, well-instructed laity' would obviously require an appropriate education. In a journal entry from 1863, Newman wrote that 'from first to last, education... has been my line'.⁴¹ Though his conversion cut short his time as an Oxford don, his influence in the realm of higher learning continued with the invitation to establish a Catholic University in Dublin.⁴² This gave rise to lectures including those that contributed to *The Idea of a University* (1852), described by Jaroslav Pelikan as the 'most important treatise on the idea of a university ever

³⁹ John Ford, "'Who are the laity?'" I answered that the Church would look foolish without them', *Newman Studies Journal* 3(2) (Fall 2006) 3-5.

⁴⁰ Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful*, p. 63.

⁴¹ Ian Ker, *The Achievement of John Henry Newman* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 2.

⁴² David Begg, 'John Henry Newman and the *Idea of a University*', in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 109 (433) (2020) 41-47 at p. 42.

written in any language'.⁴³ In this work, Newman makes his famous advocacy for a liberal education, the chief aim of which being 'the real cultivation of mind'.⁴⁴

But what did he mean? In modernity scholarship is divided into multiple distinct disciplines and degrees, increasingly narrow teaching units and research tasks. For all the talk of being cross- or interdisciplinary, most academics stick to their corners and many universities gave abandoned or ideologized the humanities. Certain skills are privileged in the market for 'job-ready' graduates. Newman, on the other hand, proposed an education offering breadth and depth, vision, and virtues. His scholars would be characterized by an appreciation for 'the whole' of reality, for possessing a 'philosophic habit of mind' and an interest in many disciplines, and for bringing such an integrated mind to the rest of life.⁴⁵ All this requires comprehension of spiritual matters, and so—contrary to the self-consciously 'secular' institutions being established in his day—Newman was convinced that 'divinity' had a rightful place not just in the seminary but the university. As the divine logos permeates all of creation, our rational faculties, while truly natural and human, rely upon the divine mind.

One area where the faith-reason relationship plays out is in formation of conscience, a topic Newman addressed most famously in his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875).⁴⁶ Unlike modern readings of conscience as subjectivist sincerity or relativist tribalism, Newman insists that 'Conscience is... a messenger from Him, Who, both in nature and grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ'.⁴⁷ Newman foresaw that the tradition on conscience was being 'superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it... It is the right of self-will...

⁴³ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852, 1858, 1873) <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/index.html>. Commentators on *Idea* include: Begg, *JHN and the Idea*; Cornwell, *Newman's Unquiet Grave*, pp. 122-37; Dulles, *Newman*, pp. 102-9, 134-47; Ker, *JHN: A Biography*, pp. 206-12, 376-96, 461-2; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of a University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 9.

⁴⁴ Newman, *Idea*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ Newman, *Idea*, pp. 70 and 127.

⁴⁶ John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk on the Occasion of Mr Gladstone's Recent Expostulation* (1875) <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/index.html>. Commentators on *Duke of Norfolk* include: Anthony Fisher, 'Conscience, relativism, and truth', *Nova et Vetera* 18(2) (Spring 2020), 337-53, and sources therein, especially Ratzinger; Ker, *JHN: A Biography*, pp. 680-94; Luke Terlinden, 'Newman and conscience', in Lefebvre & Mason, *JHN: Doctor*, 207-20.

⁴⁷ Newman, *Duke of Norfolk*, p. 248. This is quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church 1778*. Cf. Gerard Magill, *Religious Morality in John Henry Newman: Hermeneutics of the Imagination* (Springer, 2015), p. 129.

an Englishman's prerogative to be his own master in all things'.⁴⁸ Revelation, tradition, community, even reason itself, were increasingly deplored as rivals of free agency. But just as the value of memory is in remembering accurately, so the value of conscience is in yielding right judgment and action: only for this reason do we take it so seriously. Left to its own devices, 'though it tells truly at first, [conscience] soon becomes wavering, ambiguous, and false; it needs good teachers and good examples to keep it up to the mark and the line of duty; and the misery is, that these external helps, teachers and examples, are in many instances wanting'.⁴⁹

What's more, the 'seeds' of faith and morals that natural conscience plants in the soul point toward the Gospel. With the gift of Christian faith, this natural voice is transformed into the Christian sense of responsibility before God. 'Conscience has its rights because it has its duties' – duties to self, fellows, God.⁵⁰ But:

The sense of right and wrong is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressive by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous; and the Church, the Pope, the Hierarchy are, in the Divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand.⁵¹

On Newman's account, a truly liberal education, including some theology, is essential for formation of sound Christian consciences. A fifth reason for Catholic universities, then, is to prepare intelligent, well-instructed people to act well in this life and so serve the betterment of self and society. This requires a more expansive and holistic conception of education than is offered in highly specialized and job-focused programs, one that addresses character and ethics. The religion of the future will require the faithful to be better and more roundly educated in spiritual and moral matters.

6. Newman on Catholicism *versus* the Zeitgeist

Not all Church-sponsored institutions of higher learning will serve Newman's goals and so the religion of the future. Some subscribe to ideologies incompatible with Christianity or are led and staffed by

⁴⁸ Newman, *Duke of Norfolk*, p. 130.

⁴⁹ John Henry Newman, 'Saintliness the standard of Christian principle', *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, Discourse 5 <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/discourses/discourse5.html>, p. 83.

⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Letter on the First Centenary*, 4, quoting Newman, *Duke of Norfolk*, p. 250.

⁵¹ Newman, *Duke of Norfolk*, p. 132.

people more comfortable with the secular gods of ‘diversity’, ‘equity’ and ‘inclusion’ than with the much richer Catholic intellectual tradition. Some reimagine Christianity as little more than feel-good slogans, social causes, and pastoral care. These colleges turn out graduates inculcated with dead or weakened strains of Christianity against the kind of ‘full-on’ faith that might carry them through life and convert others.

In his sermon *The Religion of the Day* (1839), Newman bemoaned the reduction of Christianity to a consoling belief system, requiring no Scripture or Tradition, making no moral or ascetical demands, not even eschewing sin and its disastrous effects.⁵² This ‘lukewarm’ Christianity’ does not oppose Christianity so much as fasten on to:

one or other of its characteristics, professing to embody this in its practice; while by neglecting the other parts of the holy doctrine, it has, in fact, distorted and corrupted even that portion of it which it has exclusively put forward... He who cultivates only one precept of the Gospel to the exclusion of the rest, in reality attends to no part at all... Half the truth is often the most gross and mischievous of falsehoods.⁵³

Thus, Christianity is reduced to a hybrid of Gospel kindness and human justice; conscience is dulled, fear of hell eliminated loyalty to the Church reduced, ‘religion is pleasant and easy; benevolence is the chief virtue; intolerance, bigotry, excess of zeal, are the first of sins [and] austerity is an absurdity’.⁵⁴

Some proponents of this truncated version of the faith have claimed Newman as one of their own, latching onto statements about development, conscience or the laity. Newman biographer Ian Ker thinks he would be horrified to see his words hijacked in this way.⁵⁵ In his *Biglietto Speech* (1879), given on the occasion of his being created cardinal, Newman said that:

to one great mischief I have from the first opposed myself. For thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion. Never did Holy Church need champions against it

⁵² John Henry Newman, ‘The religion of the day’, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 1, Sermon 24, pp. 309-24 <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume1/sermon24.html>. Commentators on *Religion of the Day* and on *the Biglietto Speech* include: Robert Barron, “‘A great mischief’: Newman on liberalism in religion”, in Lefebvre & Mason, *JHN: Doctor*, 99-114; Dulles, *Newman*, pp. 14, 72, 151; Robert Pattison, *The Great Dissent: John Henry Newman and the Liberal Heresy* (Oxford: OUP, 1991); Edward Short, ‘Holding liberalism to account: The prescience of John Henry Newman’, *Mercatornet* 11 October 2019.

⁵³ Newman, ‘Religion of the day’, pp. 310

⁵⁴ Newman, ‘Religion of the day’, pp. 311-14.

⁵⁵ Ker, ‘Newman, the Councils, and Vatican II’ in *Communio: International Catholic Review*, Vol 28 no (4), Winter 2001: 708-728.

more sorely than now, when, alas! it is an error overspreading, as a snare, the whole earth.⁵⁶

Renewing his protest against the idea that revealed religion ‘is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and [that] it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy’, Newman argued that this puts religion beyond rational critique, encourages the privatization and bracketing of belief, and at best generates tolerance but never devotion or evangelization.⁵⁷

Newman predicted that Christian societies and polities would increasingly forget their roots and ‘throw off’ faith in what he called ‘the great apostasia’.⁵⁸ But what would then underpin law and order was unclear. He speculated that the first step would be to substitute ‘a universal and thoroughly secular education, calculated to bring home to every individual that to be orderly, industrious, and sober, is his personal interest’. There would be moves to deChristianize institutions, to exclude faith (as divisive) from the public square, and to win ‘great numbers of able, earnest, virtuous men’ to secularity. Finally, religion would be relegated to the class of ‘private luxury, which a man may have if he will; but which of course he must pay for, and which he must not obtrude upon others, or indulge in to their annoyance’.⁵⁹

Newman’s response was to call on intelligent Catholics to rediscover the ‘dogmatical principle’:

That there is a truth... one truth... that [error] is to be dreaded... that the mind is below truth, not above it, and is bound, not to descant upon it, but to venerate it; that truth and falsehood are set before us for the trial of our hearts; that our choice is an awful giving forth of lots on which salvation or rejection is inscribed; that ‘before all things it is necessary to hold the Catholic faith’.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ John Henry Newman, ‘Response to the Announcement of his Cardinalate (The Biglietto Speech)’, 12 May 1879, *The Times* 13 May 1879 and *L’Osservatore Romano* 13 May 1879, <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/addresses/file2.html>.

⁵⁷ And, since for modernity ‘religion is so personal a peculiarity and so private a possession, we must of necessity ignore it in the intercourse of man with man. If a man puts on a new religion every morning, what is that to you? It is as impertinent to think about a man’s religion as about his sources of income or his management of his family. Religion is in no sense the bond of society’. (Newman, *Biglietto Speech*)

⁵⁸ John Griffin, ‘The meaning of “national apostasy”’: A note on Newman’s *Apologia*, *Faith & Reason* 2(1) (Spring 1976), 1–8.

⁵⁹ Newman, *Biglietto Speech*. In *Development*, p 357–58. Newman warned that modernity will then be wedded to views like: ‘That truth and falsehood in religion are but matter of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth... that no one is answerable for his opinions... that it is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess; that our merit lies in seeking, not in possessing; that it is a duty to follow what seems to us true, without a fear lest it should not be true... that we may take up and lay down opinions at pleasure... that we may safely trust to ourselves in matters of Faith, and need no other guide’.

⁶⁰ Newman, *Development*, p. 357.

So, a sixth role for the Catholic academy is to humbly and intelligently critique truncated views of reason in liberal thought and of religion in ‘lukewarm Christianity’, offering a more animating version of each worthy of minds and hearts. Reclaiming a central place for the reality of truth; providing a ‘safe space’ for people to explore faith intelligently and intelligence faithfully; exploring and proclaiming all of faith and reason, not avoiding the hard bits—Catholic institutes can out-narrate prevailing worldviews and their emaciated epistemologies and anthropologies. That, too, will be a gift to the future, as religion recovers its intelligence and confidence.

7. Newman on Catholicism’s Missionary Impulse

Newman concluded his *Biglietto Speech* by regretting liberal modernity’s abandonment of Christianity, as it would be the ruin of many souls. But, he insisted, we should not despair as it cannot really:

do aught of serious harm to the Word of God, to Holy Church, to our Almighty King... or to His Vicar on earth. Christianity has been too often in what seemed deadly peril, that we should fear for it any new trial... What is commonly a great surprise, when it is witnessed, is the particular mode by which, in the event, Providence rescues and saves His elect inheritance. Sometimes our enemy is turned into a friend; sometimes he is despoiled of that special virulence of evil which was so threatening; sometimes he falls to pieces of himself; sometimes he does just so much as is beneficial, and then is removed. Commonly the Church has nothing more to do than to go on in her own proper duties, in confidence and peace; to stand still and to see the salvation of God.⁶¹

Newman knew that the Church had been through many highs and lows through history and proven remarkably resilient. Each time the death of God had been proclaimed or the end of Christianity predicted, a major revival was just around the corner. In his own lifetime the forces of the French revolution and the Napoleonic empire sought to wipe out Catholicism, closing churches, convents, and schools, confiscating property, and imprisoning two popes. Yet Newman witnessed how this released spiritual and missionary energies unseen in centuries. Within decades new religious orders were evangelizing the global south and populating the ecclesial infrastructure in the North. Thus, while Newman could be rather bleak about the direction of the culture, he remained confident in the power of the Gospel. Christianity had encountered superstition and false religion of many kinds down the centuries, but never before encountered the radical unbelief it does today.

⁶¹ Newman, *Biglietto Speech*.

In his Lectures on the *Present Position of Catholics in England* (1851), Newman called for an educated and mobilized laity to help defend and promote the Catholic faith:

I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not, who know their creed so well, that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it. I want an intelligent, well instructed laity...⁶²

To the missionary mandate given by Christ to of Church is attached the promise that He would be with us always. A seventh reason to persevere with Catholic tertiary institutions, therefore, is to serve the mission of the Church to the members of the university and the wider community they influence, and to provide an alternative wisdom to that ‘of this world’, the wisdom of Christ crucified and risen. The religion of the future will be the fruit of such persuasion of minds, conversion of hearts and commitment of souls to Christ.

8. Conclusion

Although Newman understood the importance of theological hope, he was under no illusion that before the fulfilment of God’s promises in the *end*, there would be times of tribulation in the here and now. A clear example being the Catholic Church in pre-Reformation England. Despite an abundance of missionaries, saints and martyrs, hierarchs and faithful, cathedrals and monasteries, universities and arts, wealth, and honor — it was all vanquished almost in the blink of an eye.⁶³ All that remained three centuries after Henry were ‘a few adherents of the Old Religion, moving silently and sorrowfully about, as memorials of what had been’. So contemptible were Catholic doctrines and believers to ‘enlightened’ Englishmen, that their return in any numbers seemed preposterous.⁶⁴ Yet all of a sudden, Catholicism was experiencing a ‘Second Spring’ in England:

⁶² John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (1851) <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/england/index.html>, pp. 390-1. Commentators on *Present Position* include: Dulles, Newman, pp. 9, 55, 109, 117; Ker, *JHN: A Biography*, pp. 361-72, 413-16.

⁶³ Newman, *Second Spring*, p. 170. At p. 171: ‘Oh, that miserable day, centuries before we were born! What a martyrdom to live in it and see the fair form of Truth, moral and material, hacked piecemeal, and every limb and organ carried off, and burned in the fire, or cast into the deep! But at last the work was done. Truth was disposed of, and shovelled away, and there was a calm, a silence, a sort of peace;—and such was about the state of things when we were born into this weary world’.

⁶⁴ Newman, *Second Spring*, p. 174.

For grace can, where nature cannot. The world grows old, but the Church is ever young. She can, in any time, at her Lord's will, 'inherit the Gentiles, and inhabit the desolate cities'... [So] Arise, Jerusalem, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee... Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come. For the winter is now past, and the... flowers have appeared in our land... Arise, Mary [Mother of God], and go forth in thy strength, into that north country which once was thine own, and take possession... and with thy thrilling voice, speak!⁶⁵

And so, if the Church today is to experience a 'Second Spring' it will not be without trial. It will require an intelligent faith ready to give witness amidst secularity, and an ecclesial sensibility willing to present the apostolic faith with humility and grace. It will greet developments of doctrine, morals and customs, and an enlarged role for the laity, with a deeper spiritual and moral formation. All of this will in turn lead to a renewal of the missionary vocation central to the faith.

The Church today looks to its institutions of higher learning to be a sympathetic environment where faith and reason are revered and integrated, where spiritual matters are explored with openness, patience, and nuance, and where an educated missionary discipleship is cultivated. Such academies will be concrete expressions of the Church's continuing mission in the world, of the continuing relevance of Christian faith to human lives, and of the application of the best minds to the highest questions. An expansive and holistic education will instill intellectual and moral character, and prepare people for a life of service to Church and society. It will facilitate genuine development of doctrine and form lay faithful to collaborate with the hierarchy in giving 'the two-fold testimony'. It will correct truncated views of faith and reason and offer modernity a more 'full cream Catholicism'. And it will serve the evangelical mission of the Church, providing an alternative to the wisdom of this world—the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, crucified and risen, our pattern and salvation.

Anthony Fisher OP
Archbishop of Sydney

Archbishop@sydneycatholic.org

⁶⁵ Newman, *Second Spring*, p. 177.