



John Henry Newman: faith, reason and education

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Abstract

This issue is a contribution about John Henry Newman's thought on faith, reason and education. These dimensions are strictly linked together, not only because Newman's conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism (1845) is the result of a path of faith, that is considered by himself as an act of implicit reason (and reason is something greater than the evidences of logic), but also because the assent the faith requires is the result of "cumulation of probabilities": faith, since it's not an idea but a living faith, can develop within life and culture and, as he explains in *The Idea of a University*, means not only a reason rightly exercised, that corresponds to liberal education of gentleman, but also catholic faith, because, according to him, "liberal" means not "indifferentism", but "catholic".

Keywords: Newman; university; education; faith and reason

Conversion (1)

«Is religion to be at a dead-lock? Is Christianity to die out? Where else will you go?» (Newman, 1906a, p. 220): John Henry Newman, one of the most relevant thinkers of the nineteenth century English and European Catholicism, summarized the reasons which led him to convert from Anglicanism to Catholicism (1845) through these words pronounced by the protagonist of his novel *Loss and Gain* (1848), the first Catholic novel in English, which inaugurated «the Catholic revival in English literature», to use the expression that Ian Ker has chosen as title of his book (Ker, 2003).

Newman was born in London in 1801 and was trained in Oxford, «the sacred city of Anglicanism, into which nothing common or unclean could enter, and where neither Popery nor Dissent could obtain a foothold», as Christopher Dawson wrote in his book on the Oxford Movement in 1933 (Dawson, 2001, p. 86). Here, in 1833, as Vicar of the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin and university tutor, Newman joined the Oxford Movement – later becoming its main leader –, through which he tried to renovate the Anglican Church, defending the same from the influence of the liberal legislation adopted by the current government.

His studies on the origins of the Anglican Church which he begun, in order to prove that the Anglican Church, having the characters of ortodoxy (apostolicity and catholicity), could not submit itself to the State (*The Arians of the Fourth Century* (Newman, 1908b), *The Church of the Fathers* (Newman, 1906), *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Newman, 1906a), to quote only the main titles), led him to an unexpected result, as soon as he realized the schismatic nature of the Anglican Church and the orthodox one of the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, in 1841, the Anglican Church proved itself to be a dead-lock in joining the "Jerusalem Bishopric", a new Episcopacy into a new Evangelical religion, which was intended to embrace both the Lutheran and Calvinistic bodies in that country.

Was that, from Newman's point of view, a sufficient reason to leave the Church of England and to pass to the Church of Rome? Actually, according to Newman, it is man's duty, instead of beginning with criticism, to involve himself generously into that form of religion to which he belongs: from this point of view, it is wrong to start with the «private judgement» (to quote a famous expression which gave the title to an article written by Newman on «The British Critic» in 1841), which is with an act of reason which is totally independent of circumstances.



In matter of religion is, instead, fundamental the central question of Newman's autobiography, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, written in 1864, fourteen years after his joining in Catholic Church:

The simple question is, Can I (it is personal, not whether another, but can I) be saved in the English Church? Am I in safety, were I to die tonight? Is it a mortal sin in me, not joining another communion? (Newman, 1908a, p. 231).

From this perspective it is evident that the answer to this question could be positive only in the case of true fulfilment: Newman's conversion to Catholicism was not a simple rejection of the Anglican tradition, but the result of a path of faith, which he considered a spontaneous and an implicit act of reason, capable of leading him to accept the signs offered by the circumstances of life: «By one's sense of duty one must go; but external facts support one in doing so» (Newman, 1907b, p. 230), for «circumstances are the very trial of obedience» (Newman, 1909b, p. 141) as he wrote in one of his *Oxford University Sermons*, preached between 1826 and 1843 and in which he also explained what faith is:

Thus Faith is the reasoning of a religious mind, or of what Scripture calls a right or renewed heart, which acts upon presumptions rather than evidence, which speculates and ventures on the future when it cannot make sure of it (Newman, 1909d, p. 203)

The kind of faith that Newman is now considering is not to be intended only as the Christian faith in divine revelation, but also as a form of implicit reason possessed by every man, either believer or non believer: this is one of the most relevant philosophical contribution of Newman before his conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism.

Reason

According to Newman – at still at the age in which he composed the *Oxford University Sermons* – faith and reason are strictly related not only because the act of faith is a kind of implicit reason, but also because reason itself is something broader than that «clearness in argument», which «is not indispensable to reasoning well»: actually, «the process of reasoning is complete in itself and independent; the analysis is but an account of it» (Newman, 1909c, p. 259).

This is also the reason which led him to think that

however full and precise our producible grounds may be [...] yet, when our argument is traced down to its simple elements, there must ever be something assumed ultimately which is incapable of proof, and without which our conclusion will be as illogical as Faith is apt to seem to men of the world (Newman, 1909d, p. 213).

It is only the rationalistic perspective which sometimes makes impossible to recognize that reason, since «it is the faculty of gaining knowledge without direct perception, or of ascertaining one thing by means of another» (Newman, 1909c, p. 256) and since «it is the concrete being that reasons» (Newman, 1908a, p. 69), it is not reducible to the evidences of logic, but makes progress by personal endowments and by practice, rather than by rule:

In this way it is able, from small beginnings, to create to itself a world of ideas, which do or do not correspond to the things themselves for which they stand, or are true or not, according as it is exercised soundly or otherwise. One fact may suffice for a whole theory; one principle may create and sustain a system; one minute token is a clue to a large discovery (Newman, 1909c, p. 256).



Living faith

The rationalistic view of reason is the other face of the reduction of faith to a personal feeling separated from the real life. Actually, as «paper logic is but the record» (Newman, 1908a, p. 69) of reason, so faith is not an idea: when he was still an Anglican, in his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Newman (in contrast with the Evangelical vision) talked about a living faith, embodied within the ordinary life, for which good works are very important and in which is affirmed the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic sacrifice «verily and indeed, in His body and in His Blood» (Newman, 1907c, p. 90)

As it is testified by the latter quotation, Newman, in his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, anticipated many of the themes he developed, as *champion* of the catholic faith, in *Grammar of Assent* (1870), where he explained that the assent to revealed truth does not require abstract arguments or formal logical sequences, but living proofs, as the assent in general (not only to revealed truth) is the result of a «cumulation of probabilities», which springs up from the nature and circumstances of the particular case considered:

As a man's portrait differs from a sketch of him, in having, not merely a continuous outline, but all its details filled in, and shades and colours laid on and harmonized together, such is the multiform and intricate process of ratiocination, necessary for our reaching him as a concrete fact, compared with the rude operation of syllogistic treatment (Newman, 1903, p. 288)

According to Newman's judgment, faith, since it is not an idea but a living faith, can develop within life and culture: in the *Lectures on Present Position of Catholics in England* (written in 1851 after the restoration of Catholic hierarchy in England), he invited the English Catholic world to defend the reasonableness of Catholicism, in order to educate «men who know their religion, who enter into 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» (Newman, 1924, p. 390).

By saying that, Newman did not intend to deny that in England Roman Catholics were distant from this perspective, but he meant still to be «exorbitant» (*Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*, p. 390) in his demands, because, as he wrote in *Grammar of Assent*, theology «always is notional, as being scientific; religion, as being personal, should be real; but, except within a small range of subjects, it commonly is not real in England» (Newman, 1903, p. 55).

Liberal education

So faith, in becoming a living faith and in developing within culture, becomes also a form of enlarged reason, as Newman wrote in the quoted passage of *Lectures on Present Position of Catholics in England*:

I wish you to enlarge your knowledge, to cultivate your reason, to get an insight into the relation of truth to truth, to learn to view things as they are, to understand how faith and reason stand to each other, what are the bases and principles of Catholicism, and where lie the main inconsistencies and absurdities of the Protestant theory (Newman, 1924, p. 390).

Still, as he himself explained in *The Idea of a University* (Newman, 1907a), the collection of lectures he delivered as first Rector of the Catholic University of Dublin which was set up in 1851, the meaning of the expression "living faith" was not reducible to a reason rightly exercised, which corresponds to the ideal of gentleman's liberal education (cultivation and enlargement of mind), but it is also a genuine religion, the same Catholic faith, because, according to him, "liberal" does not mean "indifferentism", but "catholic": freedom is not complete if it is not aimed to reach the truth; and, since catholic truth is



more complete than the others, the authentic freedom is the one which welcomes the catholic truth. On this point Newman could not be more clear and this was one of the most relevant contribution of Newman once he converted to the Catholic Church.

This is the reason why a liberal university (that is a university which pretends to educate the English middle classes under the principles of liberal education of English gentleman, as the Irish Catholic University was intended to act according to Newman himself) must include theology as a branch of knowledge: from this point of view, it's possible to say, with Sheridan Gilley, that Newman, considering university education upon the principles of *gentleman* not to be complete without religious dimension and writing that «educated mind may be said in a certain sense religious» (Newman, 1907a, p. 180), gave to the term *gentleman* «his own special sense» (Gilley, 1990, p. 303).

A University, not only as liberal, but also «by its very name» professes indeed to teach universal knowledge and, since theology is a branch of knowledge, «how then is it possible for it to profess all branches of knowledge, and yet to exclude from the subjects of its teaching one which, to say the least, is as important and as large as any of them?», asked Newman. His response was very clear: «I do not see that either premiss of this argument is open to exception. As to the range of University teaching, certainly the very name of University is inconsistent with restrictions of any kind» (Newman, 1907a, p. 19). According to Newman's perspective of university education, on one hand the model of gentleman education is certainly important, because «we perfect our nature, not by undoing it, but by adding to it what is more than nature, and directing it towards aims higher than its own» (Newman, 1907a, p. 123). «It is well to be a gentlemen, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life» (idem, p. 120).

On the other hand, however, it is true that not the world, which «is content with setting right the surface of things», but only the Church «aims at regenerating the very depths of the heart» (Newman, 1907a, p. 203): as Owen Chadwick observes, no one ever pointed out the contrast between the success of intellect and faith, more than Newman in his *Idea of a University*, and «no one ever sang a lovelier song in praise of education for its own sake», but, in the same moment, «no one ever denied so eloquently its natural crown» (Chadwick, 1983, p. 56), inasmuch as, as Nicolas Lash points out, Newman wrote an autobiographical work in the *Idea of a University*:

Newman was a Victorian Tory, an Englishman, and the superior of an Oratory whose ethos, deeply indebted, of course, to Philip Neri, yet also carried echoes of the Oriel Common Room. It was from within a world formed of these elements that he considered the idea of a university. (Lash, 1990, p. 195)

Newman's reflection on the relationship between the education of the intellect and faith, as expressed in his *Idea of a University*, animated also the activity of Pio IX, when he suggested to the Irish Hierarchy the establishment of the Catholic University of Ireland, because: as Newman himself recognised, his chief object was not to accrue the formation of his own children (science, art, professional skill, literature, the discovery of knowledge), but «the exercise and growth» of this dimensions «in certain habits, moral or intellectual» (Newman, 1907a, p. 11).

What are these moral and intellectual habits, into which, according to the will of Pio IX, knowledge has to be exercised? I think Newman gave an original answer because he didn't intend the relationship between university knowledge and moral habits rooted in Christian revelation in terms of contrast, as he argued when he said that, under the educational point of view, his mind had known «no variation or vacillation of opinion» from the times of Oxford to the catholic ones:

Those principles, which I am now to set forth under the sanction of the Catholic Church, were my profession at that early period of my life, when religion was to me more a matter of feeling and experience than of faith. They did but take greater hold upon me, as I was



introduced to the records of Christian Antiquity, and approached in sentiment and desire to Catholicism; and my sense of their correctness has been increased with the events of every year since I have been brought within its pale (Newman, 1907a, p. 4).

Considering the place of theology in university knowledge, he wrote that the human mind cannot keep from speculating and systematizing; and if theology is not allowed to occupy its own territory, adjacent sciences, which are quite distant from theology (painting, architecture, sculpture, music, anatomy, history, political economy, archeology) will take possession of it (Newman, 1907a, p. 76)

and concluded: «we cannot do without a view, and we put up with an illusion when we cannot get a truth» (idem).

Only the search for truth (which is an attempt to understand reality according to all its factors) can be the "lifeline" of human knowledge.

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Notes

(1) I consider the main topics of this article in Bonvegna, 2008 and 2009.

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