

NOTES

NEWMAN ON NICAEA

Cardinal Newman describes in the first part of *The Arians of the Fourth Century* the marvelous experiment of the Christians of the third century. Chiefly at Alexandria and under the influence of Origen, Christians had been carrying on a dialogue with their non-Christian contemporaries. Newman writes of this effort and of its culmination at Nicaea in the height of the Arian storm, a paradoxical and complex culmination. He writes of the leading ideas that guided the third-century experiment in dialogue, of its methods, its conditions, its fruit, its perishing. By the end of the next century, Arianism had grown so as to seem to dominate the Christian world, at least in the East; a great saint cried out in anguish: "Has all the world gone Arian?" Furthermore, there was a resurgence of pagan thought and Jewish thought; a syncretic naturalism kept pace with Arianism. Had something gone wrong at Alexandria? Had the effort to leaven pagan thought with the news of Christ only ended in the loaf neutralizing the leaven?

Newman does not think so; quite the contrary. It was Alexandria that remained the living center of tradition and of faith through a most adventurous century. It was Alexandria's sons who seemed to possess a mature and daring faith, vigorous through past efforts to understand itself and to express itself to nonbelievers.

Newman sees that the Oriental Church of the fourth century was at a parting of the ways; thanks, perhaps, to Tertullian's speculative originality, the West had already entered on the new path. Human intelligence was making its demands upon Scripture and the tradition of the early generations. Memories of the apostolic testimony were less and less vivid; like a questioning adolescent, the young Church was beginning to reflect upon its origins—not to love them less, but more suitably to its maturing needs. Repetition of the words of Scripture or of the Fathers did not always suffice to answer questions. Clarifications were asked; contradictory passages or interpretations were pointed out. Strangely, Newman remarks, the bishops hesitated to supply the needed guidance. The lively advantages of primitive adherence to tradition appealed to them immensely. To venture explanations in unprecedented words might seem a departure; not to, might prove more costly still; hesitation itself was a risk.

How was Alexandria prepared for such an unforeseen crisis? Extremely well, finds Newman. Since the second century, Clement's great efforts to understand his new faith in the light of his thorough knowledge of Greek philosophy and letters had been lending flexibility to the Christian mind.

Origen's efforts to explain the faith to nonbelievers and to teach the sciences and arts to his Christian students helped create an intellectual charity, keenness, and dedication to honesty and meaning. The nonbelievers themselves, as Origen confesses, inspired the breadth of his efforts by their questions.

Three main ideas guided the Alexandrian approach to dialogue. The first of these was that Jesus Christ was not just one way to understand existence among many ways: Jesus Christ was at the end of all ways, and the fulness of all. Signs of Him were everywhere. The pagan nations had the discoveries of intelligence. The Jews had a written law and a progressively meaningful national history. Christ is the full Word and the perfect Image of all that the Creator meant to say in creation and in history. The second idea was a conclusion from this first one. If Christ by His very being spoke of the intimacy and love at the center of creation, and all other lines of thought more or less approached the same center, then all the arts and attainments of human culture opened upon the brink of revelation. There was a vast distance between natural and supernatural, but not a contradiction. The arts can ready an apostle for his own fuller reception of Christ; they can enable him, as with stepping stones, slowly to lead others near to Him. Only in abstraction is creation divided between natural and supernatural. Actually, God is everywhere, and the Christian ought not to let perish any skill or any effort that might come upon His traces. Origen spoke of this Christian hunger for the joy of understanding in every event and in every place as "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth!"

The third idea of the Alexandrian catechetics concerned methodology, a methodology based on keen insight into the workings of the human mind. The mind does not grasp things all at once; there are things that are too high for it, which must be approached gradually. Still again, the mind does not assimilate things all at once, even when it has grasped the core of the idea; a long time is required for newly accepted ideas to work their way deeply and effectively into a man's patterns of judgment and of action. Furthermore, *until* they work their way there, the man does not habitually and easily see according to the new ideas; his judgments do not yet feel their entire force. There are blind spots and inconsistencies. Growth into the Christian faith, then, must be a slow affair. Not only ought its highest reaches, which are so humanly incredible as to sound like myth or rank abuse of mind, to be kept as jealously guarded secrets from the public eye, but candidates for baptism must by moral seriousness give proof of ever more ardent intellectual hunger and capacity. Pearls ought not to be thrown¹ before swine, nor real gestures of divine love be opened to men whose response could be no more than merely notional.

From this idea of the discursiveness of man's mind and of the effect of moral habit upon the hungers and capacities of man's mind sprang the two fundamental principles of the Alexandrian catechetics: the "discipline of the secret" and the "economy." The discipline of the secret was the public silence established around the great mysteries of the faith: the life of the Trinity, the life of the Eucharist. Not that Christianity was to be secretive or clannish; far from it! But that the very outward-going ardor of the Christian sprang from and was for the sake of a cherished and precious *truth*. He would not risk statement where it could not be understood. Truth, he knew, is not an all-at-once acquisition; it is a discipline; it is a thing grown into; it is a goal labored for—a goal ever ahead of any earthly attainment. Morally, then, the neophyte must right himself so as to see life unselfishly; intellectually, he must mount slowly, reality by reality, so as to reach to the fullest of his capabilities a grasp of the inner force and movement of existence as the Lord revealed it. It is important to note that the moral path and the intellectual path lead to the same point. Both end in the vision that sacrificial love is the highest lesson of human life. As unselfish, unnecessary, creative love was the moving force of all things even in the bosom of the Creator, so in His Image, Jesus Christ, the sacrificial love symbolized by the cross is the fulfilment of the Old Law, the whole being of the New, the Alpha, the Omega. Asceticism, theology, even "pagan" speculation and art begin and end in the same point: the compassion and love that harmonize men with the movement of reality.

Secondly, the "economy" was a pedagogical restraint in meting out the secret, the "good news." God Himself had taken centuries. Each man would repeat in himself the slow discipleship of the chosen people. The catechist would judge by prudence and sympathy when next to reveal another aspect or ascend another step. "Linked to our listeners," said St. Augustine generations later, "with a brother's, a father's, and a mother's love." The pivotal principle of the economy was this: in every statement the catechist should strive for substantial truth, but he should not burden the listener with more than he can bear. The adherence to substantial truth assured intellectual integrity throughout the instruction; the measured presentation assured real communication. With nonbelievers, then, the catechist would lead towards the sort of thing that raises further questions—just beyond the listener's ken. With beginners, he would encourage always more intense moral repentance and familiarity with the Lord and the perspective of eternity; this alone required a great revision of values and of judgments. With the newly baptized, the catechist could proceed to instruct in the inner, sacramental life of the Church. With the proven, he would begin to sketch

the humanly incredible intimacy of the Eucharistic and Trinitarian life upon which the Christian was entering.

The discipline of the secret and the economy, of course, were delicate instruments. Toward the end of the third century, Newman notes, they were already being rendered less and less effective. Apostates divulged the mysteries; pagan theatres picked them up and laughed at them; a renascent Jewish intellectualism flatly opposed them. Further, the informal, prudential instructions of the "economy" began to precipitate aberrations. For there had been no insistent use of a uniform creed. There was Scripture, it is true, appealed to in support of what was taught; there were traditional formulas of faith—even as those that appear already in the Acts and in St. Paul. Still, what was taught was as yet informal, free, aimed at provoking understanding rather than at ensuring uniformity. The appeal to the past, whether to Scripture or to the Fathers, thus brought with it many difficulties as understandings increasingly diverged.

W. K. Wimsatt has written recently, in *The Verbal Icon*, of the many-levelledness of language and of the origins of modern literary studies in the problems presented by the many-levelledness of the language of Christian revelation. The ambiguities of language in the communication of revealed data are at the very heart of the problem of revealed religion. Fourth-century Alexandria had gradually to face that problem. Apostasy and heresy, as well as simply the effort to express the data of faith and one's understanding of it, soon illustrated the fact that the data responded differently according to what was sought from it. The more one appealed to the words of Scripture or the Fathers as the font of his faith, the more he found himself leaving these words behind to search for reasons supporting his way of taking them. This is an irony familiar to all students of verbal art. Words are, after all, nothing but sounds or written marks; only a living mind in some sort of unison with the living mind that spoke or wrote the words makes the words come to life as *understood*. The union of living minds is the reality. Hence, as the living spirit of apostolic times waned from Christian memories, and as the once-guarded mysteries of the Church came more and more under public gaze and abuse, at the very same time appeal to the words of Scripture or the Fathers was losing its immediate cogency. A union of minds was no longer present or so fervent; similar interpretations could no longer be expected.

Problems of interpretation were keen. Scripture, for example, is full of hard sayings: "If thy right eye scandalize thee, pluck it out." "This is my Body. . . . This is my Blood." "Love your enemies." By what rule could Christians determine when to take these sayings literally and when only

allegorically? Newman explains how Arius, talented cleric expelled for his teaching from Alexandria but received at Antioch, made the establishing of any such rule impossible. Arius had been trained in sophistics, in dialectic, whose characteristic marks were a corrosive questioning that attended on no answer and an irreverent dryness that thrived on notions, not on living faith. Arius used allegory to flee direct statement, direct statement to cut short a higher meaning. He rendered Scripture and tradition helpless by approaching them not as data but as occasions for dispute. Having the offensive, as heresy always does, Arius had the more colorful role: to appear superior and more perceptive, he only had to keep moving.

The Alexandrians had put their trust in two things: in dialogue with non-believers and, implicitly, in reverence. Reverence assured a habit of mind that could grow from seriousness to seriousness, from lower notions to ever more difficult ones, much as the Jewish nation had grown under the patient pedagogy of the Revealer Himself. Reverence assured a canon of interpretation. There *is* a primary meaning of Scripture and tradition; it is the business of the seeker for truth to listen for it—to listen for all the intelligible echoes of the spoken word, or contextual meanings of the written word, and to slight none of them. The mind of the believer would have to be docile to figure and to fulfilment, to fact and to symbol, to rite and to historic-eternal significance. Somewhere in the possibilities of the data lay *the* fulness of meaning; revelation had not come to leave men once more in a morass of skepticism and conflict. Reverence made it possible for dialogue to bear fruit. But the appeal of Arius to the multitudes, the winning stature of his moral personality as he openly questioned received interpretations, the popular songs he wrote to be laughingly hummed and sung by the crowds, the advantage he took of the insufficient accuracy in the Fathers' economic method of explanation—these rendered dialogue impossible. Not search for understanding but polemic began to occupy men's minds.

Sixty years before the storm began to break, Origen had detected the trend toward sophism, literalism, and flight from meaning. He loved the realization that revelation was mystery: that is, was given from above, was introduction into a secret finally exceeding human questioning. He shrank from reducing mystery to mere human dialectic or, worse, mere words. For when it is, Christ and God cannot help becoming humanized and anthropomorphized. The groundwork of the Arian heresy was already laid in its methodology. On the other hand, the very adequacy of the Alexandrian methodology—its awareness of the transcendence of the mystery, of the discursiveness of the human mind, of the relation of moral unselfishness to objective vision—made its students cautious of logicism, lovers of under-

standing. Because they loved understanding, they were creative: loyal to tradition by forging new terms to carry it beyond the impasse of verbal and notional controversy.

What method, then, would the Alexandrians use with Arius? Alexandria had trained up a corps of first-rate intelligences, Gregory, Athenodorus, Dionysius, Alexander, Athanasius; and more, men of high seriousness. They saw the need for a change in the Church's presentation of her belief: a change not because the best thing but because the required thing. The Church would have to decide on a nonscriptural, nontraditional word to express what she understood of the Son of God. The Church needed a public creed, a creed based not on ambiguities but on understanding, exact understanding, of what the Lord had revealed. The Church of the councils would have to come into being as the maturing continuator of the Church of the secret and of the economy. The Arians were saying that Christ was the Son of God, but not really of the substance of God—not really God. Very well, then, is this what the Church believed or not? Exact understanding, new words or old—this is what the Alexandrians were in effect demanding. The courageous decision-making of the councils had begun.

Still, the adventure did not begin without a great deal of hesitation. Newman relates how even after Nicaea the issue was not clear nor the decision firm. No man sat back and planned the development of doctrine; it took place, tremulously, on an *ad hoc* basis. Newman remarks the unexpected fact that the majority of the bishops seem to have resisted the credal development; the people supported it. He cites the chiding that Hilary and Gregory of Nazianzus give their fellow bishops. He also narrates some of the motives that made authorities hesitate: some were willing to countenance ambiguity; some tried their own interpretations; some did not recognize the issue as a crisis of understanding; some hated to see the old order, an order of such simplicity and acceptance, pass away. A creed would mean saying all at once what habits of mind could grow into only gradually. A creed would mean formalism and would perhaps encourage an exterior logic, a notionism, where until now the secret and the economy had encouraged solid, slow, and growing comprehension. Scripture and tradition might lose their sacredness and their provocativeness. The way might be opened to all sorts of departures.

The realities of the human mind and the courageous convictions of Athanasius and of later men like him triumphed at Nicaea and thereafter. Yet Christians have continued over the centuries to hesitate about the significance of creeds as against Scripture and tradition, of understanding as against faith, of theology as against personal commitment. What, then,

was entailed in this venture at Nicaea? Newman was one of the very first, in other books than the historical survey we have been so far considering, to wrestle with the question consciously and significantly. In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* he wrestled with the fact of development, saw the roots of the fact in the discursiveness of the human mind, and offered as a hypothesis a number of criteria for distinguishing true development from departure or betrayal. In his *Grammar of Assent* he strove hard to delineate the great psychological-intellectual difference between "notional assents" and truly self-committing "real assents"—trying to capture the elusive difference between formal, logical ways of knowing, and living, self-involving ways. The problem of creeds with their increasingly scientized expressions, capable of glib repetition and even glib mental assent, and the slow economy of living growth in understanding plagued his thinking insistently.

Can an advance be made in Newman's formulation of the issue? It seems that the modern sciences offer now a better analogy for the development of doctrine than they did in Newman's day. True, in any time there are differences between scientific progress and dogmatic development. The fund of data for the sciences grows even faster than the development of scientific theory; but the data of revelation are complete since the death of the last apostle. And there are other differences. But the modern sciences have forced on modern life an opposition similar to the one between theology and faith. The sciences and the humanities seem to be at war. Science seems inhuman, abstract, lifeless—much as theology does. The artists rail equally at scientists and at theologians. Life, existence, concrete man! Away with your abstractions and logical missing of the point! Einstein's notion of relativity ought to have given the artists—and the scientists—a hint about the fallacy that is causing their discomfort. Fr. Bernard Lonergan, for one, has caught the hint. The fallacy lies in overlooking the different levels and roles of human life and understanding. A science or theology that includes an inadequate philosophy of man does fall into inhuman and unrealistic notionism, into mere abstractions and systematization and logic. But a science or theology grounded in an accurate conception of its own role in human understanding, even while it will remain abstract and systematic and rigorously logical, is the safeguard most worthy of intelligent men for the less rigorous roles and levels of human understanding. Einsteinian relativity has powerfully illustrated that the concern of the sciences (and of theology) is with the very abstract relations of things among themselves, not with the relations of things to the observer. Science and theology leave the concrete observer behind. He gathers the data, he even creates the first formulation of scien-

tific questions in terms of partly abstract, partly concrete methods of classification and division of predicaments. But the longer the scientific process moves onward, the more it leaves behind the concrete reference points of the observer. Thus modern mathematical physics seems so "dehumanizing." Thus, too, the definitions of the Vatican Council seem so dreadfully abstract and far removed from the definitions of Scripture or the Fathers. The artists are misled by this different goal and method; they shout "unreal" where they mean "uncongenial." In short, the scientific and theological approach to reality is quite *real*: it aims to attain things in their relations among themselves. The other human approaches include *ourselves* in their perspective, and of course that is more congenial to us, even though less satisfying to a restless science.

On the other hand, not every approach to science and theology is valid and real: the Arian approach was not. Again, Whitehead has pointed out that a materialist, mechanical philosophy of man is inadequate to account for recent scientific progress: the mechanist world of simple location and time must give way to a world view of complex relations in process and in movement. Lonergan has pointed out, further, that a notional, merely logical epistemology is inadequate to account for the process of knowing as for the process of being. The creative act of understanding leaps above logic, as life seems to leap above mechanism; and no amount of mere conceptualizing is the equal of a single penetrating grasp of necessity that illuminates and vivifies both mind and data. (A student may handle the definition of a circle, or a catechism definition, superbly, by scrupulous attention to the laws of noncontradiction, and never once achieve an understanding of why the definition *must* be as it is.) Concepts, logic, dialectic are at best mere instruments—the mechanism, as it were. They by no means account for the full and living dynamism of intelligence. Alone they lead eventually to death.

The notion of things as related to themselves and that of things as related to us seem much more pointed, then, than Newman's "notional assent" and "real assent" for getting at the heart of the difference between theology and belief, or science and the arts. For it seems that Newman's "notional assent" describes the notions of theology and science prevalent in the nineteenth century, preoccupied as men were with the merely logical-conceptual activity of our minds, not at all the whole scientific activity; it describes, in short, a conceptualist approach to science—a most common one, but today clearly an inadequate one. Newman's "real assent" likewise seems too vague today. It includes three activities of the mind: not only the living act of understanding common to science and to ordinary knowledge of all kinds, but also the self-consciousness that scrutinizes one's own relation to

the reality to be affirmed, and the practical demands of that relation. Newman, in short, posed the problem of scientific theology and living faith in the face of a conceptualist science that was based on the merely logical principle of noncontradiction and not on the search for understanding. His psychological acuity led him to transcend that basis and to offer tools of analysis that are highly fruitful, directive, and yet hard to handle.

Newman deserves immense credit for focusing our attention in the right direction; a sign of his stature is that the issue posed at Nicaea is even today very difficult to resolve. All the more understandably, of course, the men who wrestled with the issue in the fourth century could hardly see exactly what it was they fought; much less could they lay out a methodology for resolving it. Thus Nicaea seems to illustrate, at least for Newman, that even in learning about itself and its own laws the human mind works slowly. Nevertheless, as Newman also saw, the Alexandrians possessed enough light to answer to the need of the moment. Rarely does God give more. A creed was decided on, with its creative advance. The creed would grow more exact, more adequate, more abstract, with succeeding councils. The Church would seek unity not by a lowest common denominator but by a penetration of what revelation had meant, in terms technically elaborated to express it. Not human compromise, but the Spirit guiding an authority conscious of its past, insured faithfulness. But of course the roving human mind can still find in revelation (and in human knowledge) endless spaces in which to travel, countless areas to ignore, balances to omit, meadows to prefer exclusively, direction to forget. It is of the nature of the human mind to see things only partially; to move gradually from vantage point to vantage point; to court first one extreme and then the opposite, back and forth, in climbing the ascent of wisdom. And the irreverence or mere logicism of the Arian mind is always a threat to each of us en route.

The statement of a creed is perhaps, at first glance, too psychologically like a fence for the undetermined spirit. We hate to relinquish the pleasure of loitering where our inclinations lead; we hide then behind our natural indeterminateness. And yet a creed is but a statement of data: "This is what revelation says." It expresses data or their understanding in a way not entirely different from the way physics presents its facts or laws to physicists. Data are *given* precisely because their determination by each man alone is so arduous a task that no one of us, perhaps, would resist his own predicted loitering along the way or have the time or stamina to reach conclusions. In a world of possibility, determination is a fence; in the world of reality, it is the steppingstone of advance. When there is question of the inner life of God, in which men are called to share, only a free gift—*data*—and

a living understanding of that gift can enable men to reach with sure and gradually fulfilled desire toward unimaginable possession.

Newman grasped the essentials of what had happened at Nicaea. Dialogue had prepared the Alexandrians to appreciate the ins and outs of the human mind, and they were not afraid of the intellectual endeavor to understand, even though the Arians could quote Scripture and the Fathers on both sides of every question. Now that reverence had broken down, dialogue would be for a long time impossible. Meanwhile it had given the Church a rich and unforgettable experience—an experience which Newman dreamed of making actual again. It had helped form two or three generations of men of magnificent human outlook, not for the sake of earthly culture but for the sake of the Lord. They would be faithful to Him, and intelligently so, through exile, persecution, betrayals, death. The value of dialogue, then, was not that it produced conversions automatically, arrived at conclusions that compelled embracing of the faith; its chief value seems to have been what it did for Christians themselves. It taught them the difficulty of understanding the great human significance of the Christian faith, the patience required to follow its sweep through the whole of human culture, the insights that the questions of unbelievers compel it to struggle for, the flexibility and change required for growth. It taught them by experience the gravitational pull exerted sideways on the intellect's straight vision by ill will, disinclination, and irreverence. Objectivity, or preparation for the totality of truth, is no swift achievement. Faith does not understand itself or express its understanding quickly or with ease or with instant satisfaction for all who hear. Growth, as Newman and the Alexandrians saw, is the great law of human life.

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