

Newman and the Gospel of Christ

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by Rev Roderick Strange, D.Phil. Oxford University Press £12.50

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This work has taken most of the last decade to come to fruition, beginning as a doctorate in Philosophy in 1970 that was supervised by Fr Stephen Dessain of Newman's Birmingham Oratory, before his untimely death in 1976. We can take it, then, that the accumulated experience of 'the prince of Newman scholars' has guided the author to the theological foundations of Newman's spirituality. Newman preached Christ (as any good preacher should) first and foremost; yet he never put together a sustained treatise on Christology. His work on the subject covered all of his preaching and writing years, unevenly and at various stages of theological development. Here is a careful attempt to turn all of that into a single ordered and logical treatise.

It might be thought necessary to present such a body of thought coming from such a spiritual pilgrim (from Evangelical to Tractarian to conservative Catholic to liberal Catholic in steady strides) in biographical terms, with a strong eye upon dating; and indeed with a close eye to the dating of edited reissues of works originally conceived during former periods of theological allegiance. Instead, and with the attendant disadvantages thereby imposed, Fr Strange has chosen to present the mass of material analytically, as though it were a single satisfying treatise. Every historian will want to give the warning that what a subject wrote in 1828 may, in setting and meaning, be very different from what he came to write in 1878; and yet, we should consider that Newman was fond of keeping his whole opus in view and in trim throughout his life, the preacher being willing in his last days to take responsibility for nearly all he had uttered in his earlier days. With that caveat, we should be grateful for such an excellently ordered account of such a mind on such a subject.

It is often said that Newman, by his early thirties (the 1830s) had acquired a remarkably complete grasp of the central truths of Christian revelation, and particularly revelation as it touches on Christ. After then his mind on the matter changed little, consistency being a hallmark of his thought. That is a justification of such an approach as Fr Strange offers us. As he judges, 'an impres-

sively coherent understanding of the Christ emerges. It lies at the heart of Newman's spirituality and preaching'.

Newman's devotion to Christ, never explicitly addressed in any work, remained implicit in all his writings – 'those great and burning truths which I learned when a boy from evangelical teaching', viz Christ's divinity and atonement, his real presence, and communion in his divine and human person. He set out on his first opus in 1830, producing *The Arians of the Fourth Century* two years later, a work which at once placed him in the forefront of patristic studies. He remained with Athanasius throughout his life, indeed publishing his last work upon that great anti-Arian.

Newman's study of Christ's divinity began in earnest with his *Arians*. He set out as his principal theme the *monarchia* or *principatus* of the Father, showing how the Son cohered as *filius*, as Word and Wisdom, and by consubstantiality shared divinity. 'The Father is greater without the Son being lesser', said Newman, quoting Hilary; but he did not allow of subordination. However, he stressed that there is an order in the Trinity, the Persons being distinctive in a way involving subordination without prejudice to perfect unity and equality.

Newman, keeping close to Athanasius, stresses the sonship of the Son in perfect image of the Father, without being a reflection of Fatherhood. 'God is not solitary . . . [the Son is] not separate from God, but ever one with and in the Father, and indivisible'. Always so: Father never without Son, for generation is eternal, not temporal. Now can these hold together, the aspects of equality and of subordination? Newman in a sermon suggested that the object of religious assent is not the complexity of the trinitarian doctrine, but 'the full number of propositions, one by one, in which, when viewed together, the whole doctrine and mystery consist'. The religious mind, given the evidence in its parts, can hold it as a whole.

Newman was intent on identifying the eternal Son with the incarnate. For him, the Son – divine, yet distinct – became man. He began to wrestle with the problem in 1836, in face of exemplarist and unitarian tendencies en vogue. He insisted that 'he who is the subject of the Gospels is God' – perhaps overemphasising Christ's divinity at the expense of his creaturehood. Yet Newman realised how close Apollinarianism was to Arianism, though they were formally opposite heresies, one denying humanity, the other divinity. If Christ were not fully man, the result for his soteriology would be disastrous: redemption depends upon Christ assuming the common nature of man – living as men do, without evidence of his numinous power. He was man born of a mother.

Without being a Platonist, Newman saw Christ as man's 'pat-

tern specimen' from which spiritual life flows. Christ offers more than an opportunity for imitation, namely 'a powerful internal grace . . . to convert the human heart'. From Christ inward grace is given to us so to respond to his example. (It is a fatal Apollinarian weakness to deny human *nous* in Christ, which makes this impossible). Christ was a pattern of holiness and humanity -- of loving, suffering, self-denial -- of solidarity with man in all save sin.

Newman was sensitive to the mystery that divine Incarnation imposed; that each nature of Christ subsumed his whole being so that 'it was as if he had [in adding a new nature so intimately] actually left his former self'. Yet he remained one Person, in the Cyrilline formula 'one incarnate nature of the Word of God'. Newman insisted that that nature (*physis*) was a second one within a single persona, an additional attribute within a pre-existing substance. Does this reduce Christ's humanity? Newman answered, yes: one nature gave way, God assumed manhood. Christ's manhood lacked a human father or sovereign principle; he was without sin or corruptibility of body; he was transcendent in knowledge and sanctity. He was one, perfect and unalterable in his being (*ousia*), nevertheless his humanity, however perfect, was an 'adjunct of God the Word'.

Christ's manhood was -- as Athanasius put it -- instrument of his divinity. Newman took on that phrasing: 'Having clothed himself with a created essence, he made it the instrument of his humiliation'. His analogy was that Christ's divinity related to his humanity as our souls to the organs of our bodies, but more intimately: 'He took upon him our nature, as an instrument of his purpose, not as an agent in the work'. Inseparability of natures in Christ is assured, the would-have-been humanity being united from the outset to the Word, who is all-absorbing.

Such deductions coloured Newman's view of what constitutes a saint. Some saints allowed divinisation to supersede their humanity, others to build upon it. The relationship was of course in inverse experience from that of the God-Man, yet analogously the same. Athanasius, by overstressing the power of the Logos to swamp the soul's activity in Christ, weakened the character of his inner experiences: Newman avoided that pitfall, allotting the soul of Christ its due place.

Newman faced the problem of the supposed two minds of Christ -- 'he must have had two different ranges of thought', perhaps undermining the unity of person. At the Incarnation, the Word assumed into himself that over which he had absolute and sovereign command: it was complete, but completely subserving. What then of Christ's knowledge? Newman described Christ as 'all knowing, yet partially ignorant'. In that, Newman was one with

the fourth century Fathers, but at odds with the Church's later doctrine. Modifying his position, he later described Christ's knowledge as liable to ignorance, 'partially ignorant, as other human souls'; yet, in enjoying the Beatific Vision, knowing 'all things which the human soul can know'. Modern critics wonder whether Newman allowed enough scope to Christ's developing human knowledge. He himself in 1868 altered his 'partially' to 'apparently ignorant'. Ignorance for him had become coupled with sinfulness, as one of the four wounds of fallen nature.

Man's estate involves sinfulness. Christ's sinlessness puts him beyond fallen human nature – so how much can he share human infirmity? It is our fallen nature that Christ has assumed, not the first nature of Adam; it is 'our infirmities, not our guiltiness'. Christ's nature enjoyed an inherent holiness. Our sinfulness springs not from our nature, but from a fault of our wills, which the divine power in Christ overcame. Christ in his manhood shared our infirmities 'except such as is of the nature of sin'; though he was subject like us to temptation. He was a stranger only to our sinful infirmities, which does not preclude him from sharing our humanity outright.

So Christ suffered. But he suffered voluntarily, 'submitting to death of his own free will, and not as obeying the express command of the Father'. Again Newman: 'The human will of the Saviour is in absolute harmony with the divine, though psychologically distinct'. Each will in Christ had its proper individuality not trespassed by the other.

The sufferings of the divine Christ only intensified the human experience; for the experience of pain depends for its quality on sensibility and intellect. So pain was greater since 'God was the sufferer', though 'God suffered in his human nature', since 'Divinity has no flesh to suffer in . . . and cannot be said to suffer at all'. Nature, rather than Person, suffers -- though the person registers suffering in his consciousness. It is the transcendently intimate consciousness of Christ's two natures which allows his Divinity to experience human suffering. In fragmentary writings, Newman has given a surprisingly thorough account of that problem.

Newman's teaching upon Christ's atonement took a long time to develop, perhaps half a century. He came to call it 'the middle of all Gospel doctrine -- the lowest point of the great condescension of God in our redemption' looking to previous truths of Trinity and forward to after truths of the Resurrection. For Newman, the doctrine of the atonement required consummate reverence and reserve amounting to awe -- a mystery 'to be adored secretly'. It should not be an instrument of conversion for the unconvinced, as employed by Evangelicals, but 'the supreme object of devotion'.

In this as in all his Christology, Newman found little in the medieval scholastics, everything in the Fathers. He followed their idea of Christ as illuminator, especially in 'The Cross of Christ (as) the measure of the world' and pattern for mankind; and the idea of Christ as victor over Satan, sin and death – not by inflicting blows, but by bearing blows. Christ however, cannot be wholly our exemplar; 'his sufferings must be adored as our atonement, not our pattern'. Christ was sufferer and atoning sacrifice, able to be so because he was sinless.

Was Newman a Thomist, seeing Christ's purpose on earth as 'to be our atonement of blood for all sin' to raise believers from the grave? At first he was, but his 1840s study of Athanasius *et al* brought him to believe, with Scotus, in a larger economy of grace, wherein it was God's creative will that his Son should become incarnately immersed in creation for its fulfilment, not merely for its redemption. The Incarnation, pace Scotists, did not absolutely depend upon the fall. It was the Cross which so depended upon the fall, and Christ's sufferings.

Yet there is an essential unity in the act of redemption, in Divinity, Incarnation and Atonement. Following the Fathers, Leo the Great sees it all as a single sacrament ending in our regeneration and justification, through the intercommunion of Christ's person and ours. Athanasius calls it our 'divinization'; so also does Newman. But Newman saw the Incarnation, from the divine aspect, as a condescension – unmerited kindness. God came to live in obedience, to be mistreated, imprisoned, crucified, to remain present in the Eucharist. He condescended to create and sustain. In this, both Athanasius and Newman safeguarded the distinction between God as 'only-begotten', relating to the Godhead; and as 'first-born', relating to the salvific economy: the nexus was the Word's act of condescension. It was that which made the grace and glory possible, which would divinise creation.

Newman, again following Athanasius, properly stressed that redeemed man receives divinization through his relationship with the humanity of Jesus. In 1845 he wrote that Christ communicated to his saints human nature 'deified by becoming his, that them he may deify'. In 1832 he had written similarly, 'the divine Word is priest in and according to his manhood'. By means of his manhood did Christ usher men into a new state, into the highest grace that their nature could sustain. Nevertheless the saving Cross, which separates graced men from the world, which afflicts as it sanctifies, 'must be brought home to us, not in word but in power'; and this, wrote Newman, is the work of the Spirit. Cross and Resurrection, Ascension and sending of the Spirit – all are a single economy of redemption.

Newman remarked on the two chief parts of Christ's work in mercy, as atonement, in which he was principal agent; and continual application of that atonement, in which the Spirit was the principal agent. Christ, so to say, returned in the person and power of the Spirit. Christ, wrote Newman in 1834, still is with us, not in mere gifts, but by the substitution of his Spirit for himself in Church and individual. The Spirit, far from supplying Christ's absence, accomplished his presence. There is a satisfying unity in the whole economy of grace, borne out in sermons and lectures from Newman down the years.

Athanasius, in using the epithet *arche* for Christ as first in all humanity, invoked both divinity as unchanging ideal, and humanity as mutual experience. Newman assented: for him Christ was the origin (*arche*) of the gift (*charisma*) of new life bestowed on man. That gift is inward and real, changing man as far as it may without his losing identity: it is the indwelling of the divine presence, by which we become temples of the Spirit. The gift of new life was bestowed on man by means of 'mystical conjunction', Christ in his manhood having in him 'a vital efficacy' needed for the task of being for all men the source of their new life. Newman characterised it as a real, mystical indwelling of Christ in the believer, of the very gift of life.

Christ repeats in all believers in mystery all that he achieved in the flesh; his divine presence constitutes the title of each of us to heaven. The believer, then, becomes as a sacrament of Christ in the world; having in him that spirit which is the Word which is in the Father, more closely present to the believer than was the physical Christ to his mother.

Spirit and Son act together in their separate Persons in man, so that it is hard for him to distinguish what belongs to which. Revealed events are associated with both or each, but always the other being present: always there is unity of Son and Spirit in the divine economy, even when the distinctiveness of their acts is recognisable. Modern theology is now recovering this insight: Newman's soteriology is being vindicated, together with that of Athanasius before him.

To sum up: Newman did not develop a formal Christology. Rather he sought out Christ's identity and the nature of his saving work. His approach was nevertheless full and balanced, even if gaps are covered only by unpublished letters to friends. His questions were traditional, his answers orthodox, his presentation sensitive and searching, his overall view unified and thereby cogent. Here was harmony which carried inner authority. No part of the divine economy jeopardised another's being – as when it is shown that God became man and offered mankind salvation in and

through the manhood he assumed, acting in and through what he had made.

Thomas Arnold and Evangelicals called Newman and the Tractarians in 1836 idolators who substituted for Christ's person the Church, the sacraments, the ministry. Newman, by then with a large body of writing relating to Christology behind him, was easily able to refute the charge; for all those were, in his doctrine, contingent to Christ whose priesthood alone gave meaning to the delegated priesthood of men. The Church was indeed 'a divine indwelling' of Christ; the sacramental principle a way of communicating that to its members. Newman and Arnold in fact agreed upon the latter's sermon, 'Christ the deliverer from idols', be they so exalted as the Church herself put in a wrong light. Both agreed upon the object of religion, as 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever'; and upon faith as 'the medium through which the soul sees Christ'.

Nothing was new in the Gospel of Christ in its presentation by Newman over his ninety years of life, except the immediacy, the beauty and the powerful appeal in the way he presented it. He was, not without cause, described as 'the finest preacher of the Incarnation in the nineteenth century'. The evidence of it is here in the work of Fr Strange, a gift for us all.

Reviews

ERRATA

In Brian Davies' review of Richard Swinburne's *The Existence of God* (O.U.P. 1979) in *New Blackfriars*, May 1981, the following sentence appeared:

"These are quite different, and, since there can be a scientific explanation for the existence and order of the universe (a point on which I agree with Swinburne, who makes it very well), there must be a personal explanation if there is to be an explanation at all."

In that sentence, for "can" read "cannot".

In Margaret Pamment's review of *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought* by Benno Przybylski (C.U.P. 1980), the author's name should read BENNO PRZYBYLSKI.

On page 244, the middle left column should read:

. . . citing 1:19, 5:45, 9:13, 10:41, 23:28 and 27:19. 27:19 refers