

Review of the doctoral dissertation by Rev. Kingsley Mbamar Sabastine, M.A., "John Henry Newman's Clash with the Heritage of Modernity" written under the direction of Prof. Dr. habilitated Jan Klos at the Institute of Theoretical Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (discipline Philosophy)

I am submitting this review in reply to the letter written by Prof. Dr. habilitated Piotr Kulicki, Director of the Institute of Philosophy, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. In its scope, the doctoral dissertation falls within the area of humanities in the discipline of philosophy and covers issues in the philosophy of man, epistemology, philosophy of religion, and politics.

1. A brief description of the content of the dissertation

In his dissertation, the doctoral student undertook the important and philosophically bearing issue of showing John Henry Newman's views in a clash with the heritage of modernity in relation to religion, politics, and truth. He does this by drawing on John Henry Newman's texts as well as secondary studies and supporting literature on the subject in question. The author tries to bring the actuality of Newman's thought closer to the contemporary debates on the relations between politics and religion and other related issues, such as power and reason, faith and reason, and Church-state relations.

In this context, the doctoral student wonders how should contemporary liberal society and the state uphold religion and politics without compromising their autonomy while maintaining their mutual coexistence? What is the place of religious values and beliefs in a secular society and a democratic state?

The author of this paper suggests that the contemporary conflict between politics and religion is located within the clash of secular and religious worldviews. At the same time, he wonders whether government, authority, law, and rights have any transcendent value basis? Some contemporary philosophical theories, based on rationalistic assumptions while searching for answers to these questions - according to the author of the dissertation - ignore and negate their religious foundations and connections with traditional Christian morality, which has been at the basis of the legal system and political and social order for centuries. The dissertation author suggests that the victim of this kind of thinking is truth. The rejection of truth has led to a situation where instead of its transfer, it is negotiated. The doctoral student

chose John Henry Newman as a scholar who grappled with most of these issues. He witnessed the beginnings of rationalism in the nineteenth century, the impact of secularism, and the gradual loss of faith. His philosophical and theological thought on politics or religion can be an important contribution to contemporary debates on these issues.

As we follow the history of many nations, we notice that politics and religion interact. For many centuries man's worldview was defined by religion. This is no longer the case today. The modern worldview is a secular worldview and it is from this worldview that modern political thought draws ideas about values, morals, truths, and principles that inspire action and shape the character of the individual and the nation.

The doctoral student accepts that political thinking today is secularized. It is based on a secular worldview, at least in Western democracies. The essential feature of a secularized worldview is the rejection, denial, and ignoring of the transcendent dimension of reality. Therefore, secular politics, according to the doctoral student, seeks to order human society and affairs using only practical and pragmatic ideas (such as utilitarianism, pluralism, tolerance, and multiculturalism) rather than the ultimate goals of opening human beings to transcendence. In this way, the secularization of politics, according to the dissertation author, has undermined appeals to ultimate goals and truth revealed by God. Politics and religion are treated as mutually exclusive spheres. This, in turn, creates room for treating politics as an autonomous enterprise, free from religious values and moral principles, in which what matters is only the effectiveness in achieving the goals set by the one who governs. Then religion is treated as a private matter and has nothing to contribute to public values. Newman, the doctoral student believed, understood this process and its consequences.

Following Aristotle and Aquinas, Newman maintains that the true object of our intellect is truth. However, he emphasizes that reason arrives at religious truth if it is properly used and employed. Thus, the conflict between politics and religion can be resolved through a common recognition of basic principles and acceptance of truths that are accepted by reason.

Therefore, the doctoral student seeks to reconstruct Newman's view of truth and show its place and importance in religion and politics in a secular state where a common life of citizens with different views develops. The doctoral student assumes after Newman that the common search for and recognition of truth as a universal value indicates how religion and politics are directed and united without losing their autonomy as independent spheres. Hence, the working hypothesis of the dissertation: truth, as understood by Newman," is compatible

with and is essential for religion and politics” (s.6). This paves the way for the Aristotelian-Thomistic view that at the ontological foundation is truth (ultimate reality) that binds everything together. Truth is what creates the world. It holds the world together. Religion and politics are parts of the world. So there are religious truths and political truths. There are truths and there is truth, and there is unity of truths. Truth governs the world. Thus, there are no competing, contradictory, or opposing truths.

The above research objective is pursued by the doctoral student in four chapters of the dissertation. First, he presented the main aspects of modernity and described how Newman himself experienced the modern world. He also presented the consequences of modernity and the contemporary discourse on religion, politics, and truth. Thus, he brought out the actuality of Newman's thought and the application of his insights to some contemporary issues.

In the second chapter, he showed the sources and causes that Newman believes lie at the root of the condition of modern man and society. In view of the challenges posed by modernity, the doctoral student presented a modified proposal of epistemology in Newman's view as a foundation for better understanding his thought and for broadening the research perspectives of other cultural fields affected by modernity.

In the third and fourth chapters, the doctoral student discussed Newman's conception of faith and reason as independent and complementary sources of knowledge. Moreover, he showed Newman's vision of politics and religion from a broader perspective. The explication of this concept demanded a closer look at the concept of the human person and society as an integrated whole.

Newman's social and political thought, according to the doctoral student, stems from his religious foundations. That is, Newman's conception of politics flows from his understanding of (divine) truth and the commitment it engenders. This is why it is so important to have a concept of truth and to establish why truth matters not only in religion and politics but in life in general. As a conclusion to his reflection on thought Newman, the doctoral student found a proper understanding of truth that can be the basis for a better model of the interaction between religion and culture today.

The result of the doctoral student's analysis is the conclusion that political thinking needs help from reason combined with faith.

Regarding the methodology used in the dissertation, we will say that the author applies philosophical analysis, which consists in applying the tools of general logic to Newman's writings in order to find his main theses and arguments on the topics taken up.

2. Evaluation of the dissertation

The doctoral student has demonstrated great erudition and knowledge of the literature in the research project undertaken. He defines and organizes particular concepts based on the analysis of selected texts. Individual parts of the dissertation are logically connected with each other. The material that the doctoral student submits is very rich and quite carefully elaborated.

At this stage, I will allow myself to extract and discuss the more important threads contained in the whole dissertation.

The author of the dissertation rightly notes that the process of secularization, which intensified during the Enlightenment and the Modern Age, was combined with the removal of all religious elements in the sphere of political and social culture. It was supposed to be an expression of the spirit of the times and the triumph of reason, but it resulted only in confusion and conflicts in various spheres of public life. As a result, despite the so-called triumph of reason, we are still unable to come to an unequivocal consensus on the question of basic human rights.

The liberals' confidence in human reason and belief in progress in human development meant that man in the future could achieve by his own efforts all that was thought to be impossible and that could only be bestowed by God. It was, according to Newman, an attempt to replace religion with science and "an attempt by philosophy to accomplish what had been accomplished by religion." However, as he pointed out, this kind of education, gained through science, does not assure man of overcoming all the limitations of the human condition.

Newman's diagnosis of the modern age may also be relevant today since our contemporary culture is in many ways typically scientific, technical, naturalistic, and mechanistic. Newman, on the other hand, challenged the general reduction of rationality to a single approach and articulated the relationship of interdependence between reason and faith as his most significant contribution to this issue.

The doctoral student has succeeded in bringing out the essential elements of Newman's epistemology, which rejects the narrow rationalist/empiricist epistemology and warns against "usurpations of reason," that is, the error of taking the features of one cognitive habit as the standard or norm for others. In maintaining this distinction, Newman takes a rationalist/empiricist position in a broader sense. He is open to adding other forms of reasoning where a particular human being reasons and engages all of his or her faculties, since all faith has some degree of rationality in it.

Moreover, faith, according to Newman, requires a view of life and an intellectual and real assent to the reality beyond oneself. As the doctoral student points out in doing so, according to Newman, natural knowledge is the basis for supernatural knowledge. In other words, natural knowledge prepares the mind to accept supernatural knowledge. When reason has exhausted its resources and reached its appointed limits, there is a decisive transition from reason to faith. Following Newman's thought, the author of this dissertation defends the rationality of faith in the face of the challenges posed by the rationalist-empiricist, who demands an explicit demonstration of knowledge from evidence/facts as the ideal form of reasoning in all disciplines.

Particularly noteworthy is the doctoral student's mining of the connection between truth and conscience in Newman's thought, which forms the basis of his philosophical thought. Joseph Ratzinger is invoked here, who pointed out that in Newman's project conscience is the capacity for truth and obedience to truth, both in the moral sense and in moral judgment.

Consequently, Newman places obedience to conscience ahead of obedience to reason, and not just reason to any external power or authority. Newman is careful not to trivialize or overstate the function and role of personal conscience or the authority of the Church. He desires to show how the Church and conscience in mutual service and interdependence articulate God's design.

Following Newman's thought consistently, the doctoral student states that religion is rooted in conscience as its source. In the experience of conscience, the human being discovers God, and religion is born as a consequence. Conscience becomes the means or the way to transcendence. It is achieved by obedience to the dictates of conscience. Therefore, conscience is not only the creative principle of religion, "but our great inner teacher of religion."

The author of this dissertation is aware of the possibility of a subjectivist interpretation of such a concept of conscience and therefore supplements it with Newman's view, which indicates that the witness of humanity, embodied and expressed in and through culture, shows the universality of religion and its naturalness for man and society, form consciences that awaken and strengthen the consciousness of God, His will and duties towards Him. They are the source of rituals, rites, and cultural practices since they indicate transgressions against God. In effect, culture, the voice of humanity, and conscience are manifestations of natural religion.

The doctoral student emphasizes that Newman's treatment of religion in this way is a phenomenological and personalistic approach. Religion, as a phenomenon growing out of the inner experience of conscience, also realizes the highest moral potential of the individual. Understood in this way, religion functions as a bridge connecting the moral with the supramoral, the natural with the supernatural. This aspect of religion highlights the multidimensional way of life. Therefore, the Doctoral Student rightly notes that religion understood in this way inspires and attracts individuals more than the vision of human existence defined by non-religious worldviews.

In the era of contemporary debate around politics and religion, the author of the dissertation managed to bring out Newman's essential thought on this issue. It turns out that he did not completely reject the adoption of a particular religion by the state. However, he advocated the adoption of the ideals and principles of religion, especially Christianity, in political and social institutions rather than the establishment of Christianity or Roman Catholicism by the state. Neither religion nor religious traditions depend on politics for their survival and development. Religion can do without the patronage of political power, and often should even dispense with it, to its own benefit.

Newman offers an alternative understanding of politics, religion, and truth that does not contradict Thomism or scholasticism, but rather complements them. By defining terminology, concepts, and language outside of Thomistic categories, he thus expands the ability of Christian political thinkers to engage in public discourse. I consider the approximation and embedding of Newman's ideas, which I have discussed above, in a contemporary cultural and political context to be a great value of the PhD student's work.

Critical comments:

- In some parts of the paper, the PhD student does not consistently analyze the views of the selected author, but cites texts by other authors on the issue under discussion. The reader expects a fairly complete reconstruction of J.H. Newman's views and only later, in a comparative study, can reference be made to other authors on the issue under discussion.

- Another criticism is related to this. It happens that in order to prove the rationale of his thesis, the Doctoral Student gives the thought of another author. It would have been better if the author of the dissertation had made an effort to give an in-depth and exhaustive analysis of the views of Newman himself, and only then discussed the views of other authors. In this way, it is a kind of conglomeration of various thoughts of other authors and matching their quotations with Newman's views. The philosopher/researcher gets into the essence of a particular author's thought based on his texts, and only later relates it to other authors.

- The PhD student has not taken a more independent and mature stance of the issues discussed. He clings to and is too close to the views of the discussed author and selects comments and views of other authors that suit him. What is missing here is a confrontation with representatives of liberal and postmodern thought.

Positive comments:

- The doctoral student has realized in his dissertation the intended research goal and has shown that religion and politics, while preserving their separateness and autonomy, complement each other and there is no internal contradiction between them. Their common basis is the truth, in which they participate in their own way.

- The author of the dissertation skillfully moved, in the final part of the work, from the level of reporting and reconstruction to his own in-depth philosophical reflection and gave possibilities for practical understanding of religion and politics and the application of their specific spheres of influence in solving specific problems in the life of individuals and whole societies in a peaceful manner.

- The doctoral student has demonstrated clear thinking in the work. The work is characterized by a compact argument and in some places contains the author's own reflection. The author could be even more courageous in independent thinking, without rigid adherence to quotations from selected authors, but this is only the beginning of his scientific path.

- From the editorial point of view, the work deserves praise. The doctoral student demonstrated clarity of thinking. Moreover, he took up an important and current topic. He did it in a scientifically correct and creative way.

- The submitted dissertation contains much new cognitive content in the field of contemporary philosophy of politics and religion.

- The bibliography is carefully refined according to appropriate criteria. The footnotes are correct and testify to the author's great erudition. The doctoral student has familiarized himself with the main texts of the author in question as well as with the commentaries of other authors in the field.

While reading the dissertation I had some doubts and questions:

1. On p. 144 the doctoral student writes: "Religion is the connection or bridge between man and God, and conscience is the personal communication channel between God and man. The point of this connection can only be reached and expressed or explained by the individual and presumably by God, who has access to the nature, extent, and manner of their religion. Religion or religious experience is primarily a personal, subjective reality. Its reality is expressed in the first person." My question is: "Is religion only something subjective and can it be objectified in some way"?


2. The author writes on p. 188: "Newman has demonstrated orthodoxy and sensitivity sensibleness in using a different philosophical system and language. Although of great importance, Metaphysics outside Roman Catholic scholarship is largely ignored, particularly Thomistic metaphysics. It is relevant today to note that Newman did not overtly reject metaphysics. He merely did not base his politics on metaphysics and, at the same time, did not disconnect politics from religion and morality. Instead, he retained his heritage of empiricism and realism, which puts him in a more likely philosophical and intellectual position to influence all those who have difficulties accepting metaphysics and Thomism" The PhD student's proposal seems interesting and promising. Could he explain and concretize it more?

Final conclusion

The submitted doctoral dissertation of Rev. Kingsley M.A. Mbamar Sabastine, with its in-depth analysis and substantive correctness, with its simultaneous contribution to the development of the chosen philosophical discipline, meets the requirements for doctoral dissertations set by the current Law on Higher Education. Drawing on the available literature in the field, the Doctoral Student has organized this material and set a clear thesis of the dissertation, and has consistently pursued it during his arguments. This kind of research goal requires erudition, methodological structuring of the topic and independent thinking. He fulfilled this task very well.

I believe that the Doctoral Student has sufficiently presented the solution to the researched scientific problem. Moreover, he demonstrated good knowledge in the scientific discipline of philosophy. I am convinced that the public defense of the doctoral dissertation will be a good opportunity to expose his knowledge, competence, and communication skills. With full conviction, I request the Council of the Institute of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin to admit Rev. M.A. Kingsley Mbamar Sabastine to further stages of his doctoral dissertation.

Kraków, 30. 04.2022 r.


Ks. prof. dr hab. Władysław Zuziak