



Review of Dissertation: "John Henry Newman's Clash with the Heritage of Modernity"

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Paul J. Wojda", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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General Comments:

The stated aim of the dissertation is to "reconstruct Newman's view on truth and show how his understanding can determine the proper relationship between truth, politics, and religion" (4). Five substantive questions inform, though in the order given (*ibid.*) do *not* structure the author's pursuit of this aim.

- 1) What does Newman claim [regarding truth]?
- 2) How does Newman justify his claim?
- 3) What do Newman's claims and arguments presuppose?
- 4) What is the contemporary view on the place of truth in politics and religion?
- 5) Does Newman's view respond adequately to the problem of truth in politics and religion?"

Chapter 1 ("The Main Aspects of Modernity") focuses on question 4). Drawing on well-known and respected sources, the author surveys some of the major characteristics of modernity, as well as "post-modernity," emphasizing the emergence by the late 20th century of what Pope Benedict XVI famously referred to as a "culture of relativism." The culminating section of this chapter (1.5 "Contemporary Discourse on Religion, Politics, and Truth") emphasizes the dangerous fragmentation and incoherence of contemporary public discourse, a discourse untethered from objective reality, and thus without the resources necessary to avoid a descent into tyranny.

The story the author tells is a very familiar one. Accordingly, some of his sources might have been used to better effect, e.g., MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Others not mentioned might

have helped frame the conceptual issues more coherently, e.g., Jeffrey Stout's, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (1981). Alternatively, a single focus on the later work of Jürgen Habermas, e.g., *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, would help to show how the very same question the author is asking (relationship between truth, politics, and religion) have become acute *within* post-modern philosophy itself.

Of the five sections of Chapter 1, this final section is, unfortunately, the weakest, not for lack of content, but for the difficulties in presenting that content in a clear and coherent manner. Section 1.5.2 ("Religion and Secular Constitution") requires more elaboration/development, for example. And there is quite a bit of repetition in the next section (1.5.3 "The Conflict between Religion and Politics"). Given the importance of this section for the overall thesis (presumably what is said in response to question 5) presupposes a coherent answer to question 4)), the lack of clarity here is potentially fatal.

Chapter 2 turns, for the most part, to question 2), above, though responses to questions 1), 3), and even 5) are also evident. The author's familiarity with Newman's epistemology, primarily from Newman's own writings, but also the many important secondary sources on which he relies, is commendable. In fact, sections 2.4 through 2.6 are among the strongest pages of the dissertation. It was a pleasure to read them.

Chapter 3 ("The Autonomy of Faith and Reason") turns ostensibly to question 1), above, as it addresses directly the question of Newman's claim regarding truth, (e.g., 3.6 "The Notion of Truth"). The chapter title is somewhat misleading, however, in that Newman famously sees (and the author in fact demonstrates this) that faith and reason, while distinct "habits of mind" are in fact subtly related to each other. Perhaps a better title then? The larger, structural question is whether this chapter is misplaced, and would be better switched with the previous chapter. Newman's early remarks on the relationship between faith and reason (*University Sermons*), were developed and deepened by the time he turned to the *Grammar*, where his "epistemology" is most fully displayed. An alternative would be to be far clearer in the introductions and conclusions to each of these two chapters (2 and 3) about what they aim to accomplish.

Chapter 4 aims to answer the central question of the dissertation (question 5) above). Given the breadth with which the previous two chapters cover Newman's accounts of truth and faith, it is perhaps inevitable that there would be overlap and even repetition in a chapter dedicated to Newman's views on "religion and politics," as indeed there are in subsections 4.1-3. Sections 4.4-4.5 move closer to "unpacking" Newman's views on politics, on which the author rightly notes that Newman has no systematic "theory" on offer. There are, however, some tantalizing moments when the author notes Newman's engagement with some concrete political questions of his day (e.g., the Reform Act of 1832, p. 160), but

generally does not examine at great length the theoretical assumptions underlying that engagement. The view proposed by the end of the chapter (the response to question 5) above) is that Newman defended what might be called a modified liberalism, one that shows up, in fact, on the pages of Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae*. (The presuppositions of that document, the inherent drive of the human person to truth; the dignity of conscience; the duty of the state to protect *res sacra in homo*, and the limited powers of the state, etc., are very much of a piece with Newman's thought.)

If there is a weakness here, then it is in the neglect of some very recent arguments by some Catholic jurists and philosophers (e.g., Adrian Vermeule of Harvard) that call into question the idea that the secular State ought to remain neutral with respect to religion. Some of the author's sources, and language, nod in the direction of this "new integralism," but do not pick up this thread explicitly. In fact, in reference to the utility of Newman's ideas in countries such as the author's native Nigeria, this new integralism appears to be rejected as an option. So too are similar proposals (perhaps unique to the United States) that in response to the crisis of liberalism, orthodox Christians (Catholics) should "retreat" from the political altogether, taking up MacIntyre's cry to create smaller communities of virtue and so discover new "St. Benedicts" capable of preserving western culture through our current "dark times."

For more specific comments (and corrections) see my many marginal notes in the scanned copy of the dissertation.

Perhaps one final comment and suggestion: the dissertation could use a hard-nosed copy editor to clean up the many, many obscurities caused by awkward syntax. As a former copy-editor myself I could not help but note the more egregious cases, but many more remain.

The author's command of the primary sources and secondary (and tertiary) literature is impressive. The thesis itself is timely, and, given current events, even urgent. It would be a shame if syntactical problems were allowed to obscure his achievement.

Final Recommendation:

Taking into consideration all the aforementioned pros and cons of the dissertation, I see no reason why it cannot move forward to further stages of the doctoral procedures, and recommend that it do so.