NEWMAN AND HERESY

The Anglican Years

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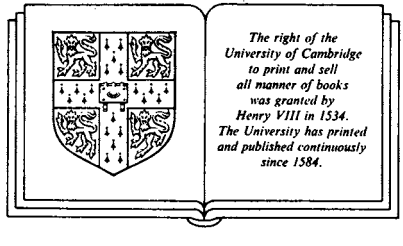

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Introduction

Orthodoxy is my doxy: heterodoxy is another man's doxy
(Bishop William Warburton)

Two Jews, three opinions
(Rabbinic joke)

Christians have always disagreed about fundamentals, a cause of much perplexity – if God's truth be one. No Church Father would have been happy to proclaim, with one contemporary theologian, that Christianity's very essence may be best defined as a chronic set of disagreements.[1] The Fathers were made of sterner stuff: they spoke of orthodoxy, right belief and worship, and of heresy, the sin of preferring one's own opinion to what Christ had revealed and the Church taught. The vehemence of this view conceals a difficulty: in practice it is often hard to distinguish heretic from orthodox. An orthodoxy eventually emerged concerning the natures of Christ and the Trinity, held by Byzantium and the medieval West, but leaving behind major rifts in the East, in Egypt and Palestine. Later, Protestant and Catholic argued about other things. When Michael Servetus, a sixteenth-century denier of the Trinity, escaped burning by Catholics only to be burnt by Calvin, he found out the hard way that there were some things all the big churches still agreed about. This consensus went up in smoke with Servetus. In the protest about his treatment, the modern idea of toleration was born.[2]

By 1800, toleration was fashionable in England, and dogmatism had itself almost become a heresy. The Unitarians, or Socinians, were an articulate and well-educated minority, the heirs of earlier anti-trinitarian movements, who argued for a rational monotheism, untrammelled by dogma. Along with other, more orthodox, Dissenters they were demanding their place in the sun. Not all

Anglicans felt they could long be denied it. Since the Revolution of 1688, an influential school of Hanoverian theologians had argued that, whenever doctrinal disagreement arose, latitude should be given to the other man. Bishop William Warburton's often-quoted witticism only takes latitudinarianism a little further, into comedy. The Church Fathers and Councils were much sniped-at by latitudinarian cleric and atheist alike. The Fathers were presented as repulsively narrow-minded and hopelessly confused – nowhere more amusingly than in the atheistic Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.*

Some were not amused. A school of eighteenth-century divinity, deriving especially from the Non-Jurors, made a spirited defence of early Church dogma. The young John Henry Newman was not amused. He joined with his friends John Keble, Hurrell Froude and Edward Bouverie Pusey on the side of ancient credal orthodoxy. They were emphatically against latitude and comprehensiveness.

Newman differed in one important respect both from his friends and from the dry seventeenth- and eighteenth-century divines he often over-praised. He was a writer of genius, a brilliant storyteller, a biting polemicist. He was a provocative, alarming and romantically compelling personality. He started a reactionary revolution, challenging the idea of toleration just as it was beginning to dominate. Does toleration mean, Newman asked, that one belief is as good as another? Newman always used the word 'latitudinarian' derogatively. He introduced another term, its synonym, still acridly resonant in ecclesiastical circles today – liberalism. To call a man 'liberal' was, for Newman, the worst thing that one could say of anyone.[3]

Newman's interest in the Early Church has as much to do with the controversies of the early nineteenth century than the impartial investigation of scholarship. This is why the story of Newman's treatment of heresy cannot be straightforwardly told: his writings have a makeshift and improvised quality. A more systematic theologian than Newman might have restricted himself to specific treatises, which could then be interpreted and compared, and a theory of their relation constructed. Not so with Newman. There is the problem of how to relate a thematic investigation of heresy to historical background and biography. His treatment of heresy cannot easily be presented in terms of a chronological progress in

his understanding: several ways of treating heresy co-exist; a treatment of heresy characteristic of one temporal point abruptly re-emerges later; some attitudes to heresy are there all the time. Heresy appears to be rather a function within a shifting set of strategies than the object of sustained reflection. It is, perhaps, for this reason that no account of Newman's treatment of heresy has hitherto appeared, despite its obvious importance in his writings.

The *terminus a quo* for Newman's treatment of heresy is the period of his early manhood: the troubled times from Waterloo to the Reform Bill, which illustrate the political and social roots of his first treatment of the Arian heresy (1832). Newman's *Arians of the Fourth Century* is a scholarly examination of the first great heresy to split the Church; it was the view that Jesus was something less than divine. The bitter debates culminated in the Church's first Ecumenical Council, at Nicea (AD 325), where the divinity of Christ was defined. But Newman's narrative is also an oblique satire upon liberalism in his own age. The dual currency of the word 'Arianism' is significant here: as well as meaning the fourth-century heresy, it was also a term used, along with 'Socinianism', to describe contemporary Unitarians. Newman's point was that too much toleration would eventually result in a virtually unitarian Church of England. His treatment of Arianism is, then, *rhetorical*: he is trying to persuade his contemporaries of present dangers by a skilful comparison with Christian Antiquity. This rhetorical exploitation of history characterises all his discussions of heresy. Paradoxically, it was the *heretics* that Newman described as rhetoricians, as arguers too clever by half. The fact that Newman is himself a rhetorician is not so obvious, because his rhetoric is a matter of a strategy underlying his narratives, rather than logical surface brilliance. Part I examines the origins of this strategy in the early 1830s and shows how Newman continued this method of narrating Antiquity throughout the decade.

Overlapping this, was a more theological and philosophical approach to liberalism, characteristic of the mid-1830s. Its immediate occasion was a squabble about whether Dissenters should be allowed to study at Oxford, then a purely Anglican preserve. This coincided with Newman's study of two heresies; first, Sabellianism, which argued that the persons of the Trinity were only names for the activities of a single God, rather than eternal distinctions, and, secondly, Apollinarianism, which denied that Christ had a human

intellect. It is difficult to see where academic activity ends and polemic begins. Part II describes how Newman found correspondences between these heresies and modern theology.

In the 1840s, Newman's interest turned to the fifth-century Christological heresies; Monophysitism, the view that Christ had only one nature, and that a divine, and Nestorianism, a heresy, which, if it ever existed, was supposed to teach that Christ was actually two persons, a divine and a human. At roughly the same time Newman re-examined Arianism, concentrating on the moderate party of so-called 'Semi-Arians'. This was the period when Newman's confidence in his own, Anglo-Catholic, 'Via Media' position was cracking: he was on the path to Rome. Part III shows the importance of the idea of heresy in the long process leading to Newman's conversion in 1845, and the reformulation of his whole picture of orthodoxy in the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.

The *terminus ad quem* for this book is the end of Anglicanism for Newman. As a Tractarian, he tried to strengthen an Anglicanism which was losing political power and influence by proposing it as the inheritor of patristic orthodoxy – as the Catholic Church in England. He presented Anglican orthodoxy as a bulwark against the crypto-infidelity of Dissent. But like all such apologists before him – like his seventeenth-century forebears – he had to hold a steady course to avoid drifting Romewards. By 1845, he saw his Anglican position as hopelessly compromised. Thereafter, Newman proposed the stark alternative of Roman Catholicism as the Church of the Fathers, the only bulwark against the infidelity towards which all other forms of Christianity, 'Via Media' Anglicanism included, either openly or secretly tended. Although this story ends at 1845, two works from the Roman Catholic period will be considered, as they bear upon the collapse of the 'Via Media': both *Difficulties of Anglicans* (1850) and the *Apologia* (1864) are sources, albeit problematic ones, for the period 1839–45.

In his Roman Catholic period (1845–90), Newman's interest in heresy waned. In the years following his conversion, he compared Anglicanism with Monophysitism – but this is really a sequel to his Anglican period, as he turns his guns upon his former self in a final dismissive act of repudiation. The writings on heresy published during his Roman Catholic period are re-workings of what he had written as an Anglican. His obsessive heresy-hunting

belongs almost entirely to the embattled and contested background of his attempt to maintain the Catholicity of the Church of England. Once 'safe'[4] in the Roman fold, the impulse to find heresy *everywhere* waned.

Although 'safe', he was by no means comfortable with the neo-ultramontanism fashionable throughout his life in the Roman Church. The mind-set of ultramontanism was hostile to criticisms made even on patristic grounds. Newman found himself to be a liberal within Roman Catholicism; actually delated to Rome for heresy without his knowledge in 1859,[5] he was regarded by Mgr Talbot as 'the most dangerous man in England'.[6] Suspected, marginalised, cut off from the forum provided by his beloved Oxford, his attitude towards heretics, or those suspected of covert heresy, softened. In *The Trials of Theodoret*, Newman cannot repress his sympathy for the maligned and misrepresented Theodoret of Cyrrhus, who was accused of Nestorianism, nor can he stifle the suspicion that Cyril, the great Alexandrian upholder of orthodoxy, was, nevertheless, a bit of a scoundrel.[7] Concerning assent to doctrines in the Roman Church, Newman consistently pursued the line allowing the greatest freedom of conscience.[8] On the matter of the promulgation of dogma, such as Papal Infallibility, he took the view that it was inopportune to define.[9] Always professing the most humble obedience to authority, he was often nevertheless regarded by his superiors much as he had himself regarded the latitudinarian Hampden: as a man of dangerous tendencies. Newman's ambiguous position as a Roman Catholic, then, is so different from his Anglican situation as to be quite a distinct area from the one being pursued in this book.

Newman the Roman Catholic became a very different person from the intense young clergyman of Tractarian times. But he did not *want* to be different: he liked to see himself as the same as he had always been. Accordingly, he usually attempted to adjust his earlier texts to something resembling his later position. He was an inveterate tinkerer. Sometimes, when an earlier position is hopelessly irreconcilable with Romanism, he disagrees with his earlier self in footnotes.[10] But, more often, he will make a minor adjustment, edit out, smooth over or conflate, usually without acknowledgment. As a result, the text of the (Longmans) *Collected Edition* is not necessarily a reliable guide to what he actually wrote when he was an Anglican. First editions, original articles or manuscripts

have therefore been consulted and have been cited when they differ from the Collected Edition. The object of this study is Newman's Anglican period – the very tract of time which later he strove so seductively to re-tell. All efforts have been made to resist the seduction.