

by J. Derek Holmes

During recent years, a great deal has been written about Newman as an historian, but, somewhat surprisingly, comparatively little on his deeper understanding of history. This, of course, is a vast subject with many different aspects. In spite of an essential scepticism about the possibility of a philosophy of history, Newman himself did indulge in occasional excursions into this dangerous field, but because he was basically a religious thinker, he ultimately saw history in the light of his belief in a divine revelation. Faith enabled the Christian to see the reality beyond the shadows, the works of divine providence and the manifestations of the sacramental principle. This is the theological background to the apologetic contrast which he made between the nature or permanence of the Church on the one hand, and shifting or temporary human organizations on the other. It is also significant that his historical realism in the context of the nineteenth-century belief in progress, was the result of a theological, in fact an eschatological, position.

There are, however, two particular lines of thought which are of more than specialized interest; the situation of the Church in the world and the role of the individual. The more accurately the history of the world was investigated and put into shape, the more it evidently appeared to advance according to fixed laws both as regards time and place, but this did not interfere with individual responsibility (*Sermons Preached on Various Occasions* (O.S.), p. 189). Throughout his life, Newman was convinced of the fundamental significance of the individual like the Liberal Anglicans whose philosophy of history was firmly grounded on that ultimate historical reality, the individual will.<sup>1</sup> Living movements did not come from committees, no great work was done by a system, systems rose out of individual exertions. Luther was an individual. Individuals and not the Holy See took the initiative and gave the lead to the Catholic mind in theological inquiry (*Apologia (Apo.)*, pp. 39, 42, 265). There was only one Homer, Cicero and Caesar, one Constantine or Charlemagne, one Paul and John, one Athanasius, Augustine or Thomas, one Patrick, Martin and Boniface, one Anthony, Jerome and Chrysostom (*Historical Sketches* (H.S.), II, p. 365). The Holy Land was small yet subdued the world, Attica was poor but formed the intellect. Moses, Elias, David and Leo were all individuals. Grace always worked by the keen vision, intense conviction, indomitable resolve of the few. The

<sup>1</sup>See D. Forbes, *The Liberal Anglican Idea of History*, pp. 58-9, 86, 150.

blood of the martyr, the prayer of the saint, the heroic deed, the momentary crisis, the concentrated energy of a word or a look, was the instrument of heaven (*Present Position of Catholics (Prepos)*, pp. 382, 387, 389-90).

The usual way of regarding history was to generalize, to lay down laws, and then contemplate and act towards these creations of the mind as if they were the real things, dropping what was more truly such. National greatness meant that a distinct and definite number of individuals happened for a few years to act together and on one another so that they were also able to act on the world at large. They gained power and wealth, they were talked of or respected as one, and for a short time, this they appeared to be, but the component parts were the realities. Historical accounts of slaughters, pestilences or conflagrations often regarded collections of people as individual units and forgot that a multitude was a collection of immortal souls. History was read as a tale or fiction, rather than as concerning immortal souls who could not be swept away, who were what they were however the earth might change (*Parochial and Plain Sermons (P.P.S.)*, IV, pp. 81-5).

Society did not move on a law which was independent of the conduct of its individual members. Newman condemned those who believed that individuals could not materially retard its progress nor be answerable for it, and consequently that the law could only be referred to the will of God. The fact that society moved by a certain law through different stages, various elements coming into operation at different periods, was undeniable. It was wrong, however, to speak as if what had been, ought to be; that because a class gained power, it therefore gained it lawfully. Some writers argued that it was wise to submit to a power which could neither be circumvented nor persuaded, but the Christian could not take any guide of conscience except the rule of duty and could not prefer expediency to principle. Even if the march of society were conducted on a superhuman law, it could not be God's ordinance while it moved against scripture. Although it might shatter all earthly obstacles to its progress, it must and would finally perish before God himself (*Oxford University Sermons (U.S.)*, pp. 150-2).

Newman's view of history was consistently apocalyptic and not like that of most of his contemporaries—progressive.<sup>1</sup> He was conscious not simply of the nineteenth century but of all time and all existence, being concerned with the perennial plight of fallen man rather than the local or the transient (*Apo.*, pp. 241-6). According to Acton, history mocked and depressed Newman because he discerned no progress, but for Acton to deny progress was to deny the divine government, without it the world had no meaning.<sup>2</sup> For Newman on

<sup>1</sup>B. Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, p. 86. See also P.P.S., IV, pp. 210, 216-25, 319-33; V, pp. 1-12; VI, pp. 234-69.

<sup>2</sup>L. Kochan, *Acton on History*, p. 113. H.S., 111, pp. 107-8; H. A. MacDougall, *The Acton-Newman Relations*, p. 175.

the other hand, the meaning of history was not to be found by human reason or in human civilization, it moved to a supernatural and divine goal.<sup>1</sup> Burkhardt thought that it was an illusion to imagine that the nineteenth century was morally, culturally, or even intellectually superior to its predecessors, and Newman suspected the nineteenth-century cult of progress, the country seemed to be in a dream, being drugged with the fallacious notion of its superiority to other countries and times.<sup>2</sup>

Although the world had certainly become more humane and generous, it had not become more religious. Man progressed in knowledge and inventive ability, and was 'in his very idea, a creature of progress'. But this did not extend to the sphere of moral truth and Newman could not base his understanding of God on the idea of progress in history (P.P.S., VII, pp. 247-9; VIII, p. 147; H.S., I, pp. 164, 167. *Grammar of Assent* (G.A.), pp. 233, 416. U.S., pp. 102-3). Man differed from the animals, precisely because he gradually advanced by acquiring knowledge to the fulness of his original destiny. This process, however, was not mechanical nor necessary, and was committed to the personal efforts of each individual.<sup>3</sup>

There is an historical realism in Newman's writings which is not usually expected from a Victorian. Current terms such as progress, liberalism, recent civilization, which seemed to arouse experiences akin to mysticism in many contemporaries were dismissed as 'the newspaper cant of the day' (*Acton-Newman Relations*, pp. 169, 172). At the same time, he was not unduly pessimistic nor antiquarian. Both the Church and human society were continually threatened by troubles, disorders, and the destructive elements of barbarism. In fact every century was like every other though appearing worse to those who lived in it than all previous times (H.S., I, p. 12. *Via Media* (V.M.), I, p. 354).

This realism was closely linked with Newman's eschatological approach and the notion that Christ Himself recapitulated, as it were, human history and consequently was the very first principle of unity in which both Old and New Testaments were centred.<sup>4</sup> Christ had come, the Earth had had its most solemn event and the time between Christ's first and second coming was an accident. The course of time or history was running, not towards the end but along or parallel to it, on the brink of it, all time being equally near that great event.

As when a man is given over, he may die at any moment, yet lingers; as an implement of war may any moment explode, and

<sup>1</sup>C. Dawson, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>2</sup>A. Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane*, p. 179; A. D. Culler, *The Imperial Intellect*, p. 81; see also *Liberal Anglican Idea of History*, pp. 5-8, 60-1, 86, 146.

<sup>3</sup>G.A., pp. 348-50; J. H. Walgrave, *Newman the Theologian*, p. 94; A. J. Boekraad, H. Tristram, *The Argument from Conscience to the Existence of God according to J. H. Newman*, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>*Acton-Newman Relations*, p. 174. L. Bouyer, *Newman, His Life and Spirituality*, p. 185. J. Seynaeve, *Cardinal Newman's Doctrine on Holy Scripture*, pp. 301-4, 299. Apo., p. 7. *Discussions and Argument*, p. 49.

must at some time; as we listen for a clock to strike, and at length it surprises us; as a crumbling arch hangs, we know not how, and is not safe to pass under; so creeps on this feeble world, and one day, before we know where we are, it will end (P.P.S., VI, p. 241).

It is interesting that Newman would have permitted a philosophy of history to the Jews precisely because they had time before them and could reckon on the future (*Acton-Newman Relations*, p. 174. *Sermons on Subjects of the Day* (S.D.), p. 10).

All human works were exposed to vicissitude and decay. Nations and individuals were mortal, they rose, flourished and fell; ideas and their manifestations were realized, prevailed and perished; nations, philosophies and religions eventually underwent the common law of decomposition; the Church alone had a vitality supported by God. All earthly power had its end, it rose to fall and grew to die. Yet one earthly power was something more than earthly, dying in the human individual but immortal in its succession because it was divine. Newman, of course, was aware and careful to point out, that this was a judgment of faith; what the Christian knew, the philosopher could not claim (H.S., I, p. 148; II, p. 426; O.S., pp. 133-8, 141, 167-9, 316). The world ever seemed to be gaining on the Church whereas the Church was actually always gaining on the world. It endured to see the ruin of its oppressors and enemies. Kingdoms rose and fell, nations expanded and contracted, dynasties began and ended, princes were born and died, confederacies made and unmade. All of them had their day when they seemed of much account, but the Church alone was eternal (S.D., p. 71).

The Church was ever militant in a world of change and conflict; sometimes gaining, sometimes losing, more often gaining and losing in different parts of its territory at the same time. Ecclesiastical history recorded the ever-doubtful fortune of a battle whose final issue was never in doubt. Peace was immediately followed by persecution, a triumph by a scandal. Progress was made by means of reverses, griefs were consolidations. Paul was gained by the loss of Stephen, Mathias replaced Judas the traitor (H.S., II, p. 1; and see pp. 110-111). The Catholic Church had passed through the full cycle of changes and shown its independence of them all. It had conquered Rome and the Barbarians, had made trial of East and West, monarchy and democracy, peace and war, imperial and feudal tyranny, times of darkness or barbarousness, of philosophy or luxury, of slaves and freemen, of old countries and new, and alone of all institutions was independent of time and place (*Discourses to Mixed Congregations* (Mix.), pp. 245-52. *Difficulties of Anglicans* (Diff.), I, pp. 175-80, 325-9).

The Church was the pure and spotless image of Christ, the spouse of Christ, the mystical body of Christ, the continuation of Christ's mission. It was a kingdom like the four ungodly kingdoms of Daniel's

vision to which it was first subjected and which it then succeeded. This kingdom, however, was in the world, not of it, was maintained by heavenly not carnal weapons, differing from other kingdoms in being a Church, a kingdom of truth and righteousness (P.P.S., II, p. 91; S.D., pp. 237-8). But,

the Church so far from being literally, and in fact, separate from the wicked world, is within it. The Church is a body, gathered together in the world, and in a process of separation from it. The world's power, alas! is over the Church, because the Church has gone forth into the world to save the world. All Christians are in the world, and of the world, so far as sin still has dominion over them; and not even the best of us is clean every whit from sin. Though then, in our idea of the two, and in their principles, and in their future prospects, the Church is one thing, and the world is another, yet in present matter of fact, the Church is of the world, not separate from it; for the grace of God has but partial possession even of religious men, and the best that can be said of us is, that we have two sides, a light side and a dark, and that the dark happens to be the outermost. Thus we form part of the world to each other, though we be not of the world. Even supposing there were a society of men influenced individually by Christian motives, still this society, viewed as a whole, would be a worldly one; I mean a society holding and maintaining many errors, and countenancing many bad practices (P.P.S. VII, p 36. *Stray Essays*, pp. 79-80).

'The Kingdom of the Saints' was the fulfilment of the prophecy in Daniel. The four idol kingdoms were gone but the Kingdom of Christ which was made without human hands remained. Many kingdoms before or after the coming of Christ had been set up or extended by the sword, conquest or tyranny, usually attended with guilty deeds, hard hearts and unscrupulous consciences. The propagation of the Gospel was an internal development of one and the same principle in various countries at once, it could therefore suitably be called invisible and not of this world. The wonderful conquest of the Kingdom of Rome by that of Christ was followed by another wonder, the singular history of Christianity, its continued existence beyond the normal life span of other kingdoms. The Church was a singular phenomenon in human affairs; in the extent it occupied in history, the harmony of its system, the consistency of its design, its opposition or contrariety to the existing course of things and in its success in spite of that opposition. A new Kingdom which disclaimed the use of force was in the world but not of it, yet still conquered and remained (P.P.S., II, pp. 232-54).

There never was a kingdom except Christ's which was not conceived, born, nurtured or educated in sin. All monarchies began in usurpation, all revolutions were accompanied with violence, hypocrisy and self-will. Popular government was subject to every wind as if it had no conscience or responsibilities while the dominion

of the few was selfish and unscrupulous. Passion for war accompanied military strength, and love of money, all trade. Christ's kingdom looked like any other because of its wealth or power and many of its subjects sought these things. Other kingdoms had their strength or life in bold deeds and bad principles whereas the life of the Church was in suffering, patience, simplicity, innocence, concession and resignation. When its members sinned, its original principle was abandoned and its life imperilled (S.D., pp. 242-3).

Newman was very conscious that the union of the Church with the State had only prospered when the Church was also in union with hermitage and the cell (P.P.S., VII, pp. 69-70). The great disease and greatest corruption of the Church in all ages was that of serving God for the sake of mammon, loving religion from loving the world.

How many supporters of Christ's Holy Catholic Church do you think would be left among us, if her cause were found to be, not the cause of order, as it happens to be now, but the cause of disorder, as it was when Christ came and His Apostles preached.

The mass of persons who supported the Church's legal privileges did so because they thought the downfall of civil institutions was involved in the downfall of the Church.

I do not say that they have *no* love for the Church, but they have a greater love for worldly prosperity. They have just so much more love for the world than for the Church, as would lead them, were the peace of the world and the welfare of the Church at variance with each other, to side with the world against the Church.

The Gospel was on the side of good order, tended to make contented and obedient subjects, kept the lower orders from outbreaks, took a firm stand against rebellion, sedition and riot, and was the best guarantee for the security of private property. These *were* benefits of Christ's Kingdom but the true and proper gifts were the unseen spiritual blessings. The strength of the Church did not lie in earthly law or human countenance or civil station but in those gifts which Christ pronounced to be beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the thirsters after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted (S.D. pp. 272-4).

The sovereignty of mind was higher than the arm of force, and the strong or noble quailed before it. Ultimately the men who changed the face of society and extended the range of knowledge were the philosophers who were also defective in comparison with Christ, too often speaking or professing without acting or doing, teaching the truth but living in vice, knowing without loving, and lacking the sacerdotal or regal characteristics. Such was the imperfection of the world. Christ came to make a new world, to regenerate it in himself, to make a new beginning, to combine what what was dissipated and recast in himself what was shattered. Christ, his Apostles and later followers were kings without pomp, soldiers

who shed no blood but their own, and teachers acting out their own precepts (S.D., pp. 56-62).

A popular contemporary notion was that the life of a race and an individual could be divided into three stages each with its own ruling principle and characteristic. Youth started in life with hope and fancy, beginning with illusions and imagination. The first mental revolution occurred when man discarded the life of aspiration or affection which had disappointed him, the dreams of which he was the sport or victim, to embrace a life of logic, acting on a plan, thinking by a system, trusting nothing but what took a scientific form. The third stage came when he had made a full trial of life, when theories broke down under the weight of facts and experience falsified his most promising calculations. The old man finally recognized as trustworthy what he could taste, touch or handle and nothing beyond it. Thus man ran through the three stages of Imagination, Reason, and Sense, before coming to his end—a most impotent and melancholy conclusion.

A Catholic had no sympathy with such a heartless view of life although it contained a truth which gave it plausibility and seemed to fit in with what Newman himself said about the three great Patriarchs of Christian teaching—Benedict, Dominic and Ignatius, moving from poetry through science to prudence. The Church, however, never lost what was once possessed, nor passed from one stage to another but carried youth and middle age into the latest time. It did not change but accumulated possessions, while things incompatible in nature coexisted in the Church (H.S., II, pp. 367-9. *The Liberal Anglican Idea of History*, pp. 21-2, 54-7, 83).

Like St Augustine, Newman based his interpretation of history on biblical revelation and not on philosophical reasoning. Both men were able to criticize political pretensions because they viewed history standing under the righteous judgment of God. For both, the value of the individual was connected with the significance of history, and each age was equally near to God. History was the place where the members of the City of God and the earthly society were intermingled. History derived its meaning not from secular progress but from the fact that it was the sphere in which the love of God for each individual soul was ceaselessly exercised for man's salvation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See *History, Sacred and Profane*, pp. 61-4, 287. T. Kenny, *Political Thought of John Henry Newman*, especially pp. 63-74.