

A Short Study of the Select Works of John Henry Newman with Reference to the Victorian Conflict

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Abstract: In this article, I have attempted to view some select works of John Henry Newman with reference to the Victorian Conflict. The works are studied in the light of the Victorians' experiences of religious doubts, materialism, loss of faith, liberalism, agnosticism and utilitarianism. I have endeavoured to show the different kinds of conflicts encountered in each work; how John Henry Newman confronted these conflicts, and the solutions he decidedly proposes.

Keywords: Conflict, belief, religion, truth, Christianity.

John Henry Newman as a star of a unique calibre illuminated the intellectual and spiritual environment of his age. He carved himself a niche as an intellectual giant and a champion of faith, and stood among the great men of thought and spirit. He was a prolific and versatile writer and embraced various genres in his literary works. Therefore, it is not easy to insert him into any class of writers. He combined idealism, sensitivity, urgency, urbanity, delicacy and wit in his writings (Wright 7). There is the genius of a writer in him, whose thoughts defined and illuminated problems, which beset even our own times. He “wrote rather for posterity than for his contemporaries” (Cameron 7). Newman possessed a great literary power, manifested in a style of such singular grace and charm. A poet and an artist always, he would have been a powerful literary figure if he had cared to devote himself to literature (Hutton 10).

The following discussion on his novels, prose pieces and poems is an attempt to discover and analyse those elements that indicated the Victorian Conflict. They are studied in the light of the Victorians' experiences of religious doubt, materialism, and loss of faith, liberalism and utilitarianism.

a. *Loss and Gain*

The novel was a reply to another novel *From Oxford to Rome* by Miss Harris, which was having a great success in England (Dessain 94). The little novel was written in retrospect shortly after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, and is considered essentially as his own story, and a more readable revelation of his struggles to overcome prejudices and to grasp the truth. The novel is full of the human interest of everyday kind and reflects Newman's life with all its struggles (Moody 145). The book includes arguments about faith, conversion and the Church, which are

made lively by humour and irony (Dessain 94).

In the novel, there is much attention given to the discussions on the contentions of the Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Willis is the strong exponent of Catholicism to Reding. The conflict between them is synonymous to the conflict between Catholic and Anglican. Charles Reding after a conversation and discussion with Willis says to himself; "What if, after all, the Roman Catholic Church is the true church? I wish I knew what to believe; I am so left to myself" (*Loss* 52-3). It was an expression of conflict within. The heart was directing him to Rome, but the intellect was not ready to give assent. He wanted both the emotion and the reason to move together. Reding responded to the conflicting ideas and thought, by his assent to the truth. He chose truth even though it cost him; family and friends, security and name.

b. *Callista*

Callista written in 1855 is a historical romance, portraying Christianity in the third century, specifically for a Catholic audience. The novel explores the conflict between belief and unbelief, between a Christian believer and unbeliever. In the novel we come across different categories of people; the ardent Christians, nominal Christians, pagans, witches and seekers of truth. There is conflict between all these, especially between Christianity and paganism. *Callista* mirrors the perennial struggle with the Antichrist in the Church Militant (Ward 14). *Callista* echoes in Juba the Victorian denial of God and the stifling of the conscience in pursuit of material wellbeing and unrestrained knowledge. He denies belief in God, but in fact believes in anything. Agellius is a Christian in conflict, who realises that; "There was no repose out of doors, and no relief within" (*Callista* 15). He is a soul, which cries out "No one cares for me" (16), but a stoic believer who says, "Many are my sins, but unbelief is not one of them" (20). However, later Agellius strangles his conscience to compromise about marriage. He deceives himself as he relies less on the superhuman assistance, and consequently feels less able. Ultimately, he faces the truth in *Callista*, who rejects his proposal for marriage. *Callista* reprimands Aegillius for being a cold Christian, and rejects him because he does not have sufficient love of God. Aegillius realises his lapses and repents.

c. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*

The *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* of 1864 is an answer to a conflict that arose between Newman and Charles Kingsley. Kingsley had written a review for J. A. Froude's *History of England*, in Macmillan's Magazine of January, 1864. A portion of the review read; "Truth for its own sake has never been a virtue with the Roman clergy. Father Newman informs us that it need not be, and on the whole ought not to be" (Moody 214). *Apologia* as a revelation of a soul's history, and as a model of pure, simple, unaffected English, deserves a high place in the English prose literature (Long 556). According to P. J. FitzPatrick; "The *Apologia* displays what life has cost a man and what it has taught him; it displays a man, and a great one; it can

fascinate readers of any religious belief or of none at all” (28). It fascinates readers “because it exhibits, among so much else, so many tensions: the personal and the civic; the individual and the communal; the private and the observable” (36). In the *Apologia*, Newman pours out in the “grandest style the permanent sincerity of his belief in the Catholic Church as the supreme contrast to that world, the godlessness of which tore him with distress” (Sencourt 189). The *Apologia* is a story of a soul's pilgrimage, and a spiritual autobiography. It is intensely human in its interests, and masterly in its expression (Dark 80). It is the defence of truth, as Kingsley had charged Newman of Untruthfulness. He wrote; “But I do not like to be called to my face a liar and a knave” (*Apologia* 95). The *Apologia* narrates the progress of his religious beliefs and the internal conflicts he endured up to 1845.

d. *The Idea of the University*

The book written in 1852 consists of two independent works; *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (1852); and *Lectures and Essays on University Subjects* (1859). This work provides a magnificent defence of a liberal education, which simply is the cultivation of the intellect; as such, its object is nothing but intellectual excellence. Some of the pertinent Victorian's dilemma and predicaments are treated in this work. In the wake of secularism when the Church's importance and role was undervalued, Newman could state that the Church is needed for the integrity of the University; for the Church steadies the University's office of intellectual education (*Idea* xxxvii). The purpose of a University is “to teach universal knowledge: Theology is surely a branch of knowledge” (14-5). Hence, if an institution, which professes to teach all knowledge, fails to teach about the Supreme Being, it fails in its objective.

In the lecture on “A Form of Infidelity of the Day,” he anticipated the notion of 'modernism' that seeks the separation of Science and Religion. The general tendency of the time was to divorce Religion from Science and consequently give rise to unbelief. He wrote that the Sciences “look out for the day when they shall have put down Religion, not by shutting its schools, but by emptying them; not by disputing its tenets, but by the superior worth and persuasiveness of their own” (*Idea* 303). He protested against the needless antagonism between the advocates of Religion and Sciences in his lecture on “Christianity and Scientific Investigation.” (*Idea* 350).

e. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*

The nature of belief and assent to faith was a theme constantly reflected by Newman. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) lays down the fundamental principles underlying belief and justifies belief in God, in Natural Religion and in Revealed Religion, that is, Christianity (D'Cruz 498). Newman wrote; “We find in Scripture our Lord and His Apostles always treating Christianity as the completion and supplement of Natural Religion, and of previous revelations” (*Grammar* 389). It is a fine analysis of the mental processes involved in apprehension, inference, assent, and certitude. The attractive style and excellent illustrations give

the work considerable merit as literature (Bowyer, and John 201). In this work, Newman develops his teaching on the relation between knowledge and belief in a systematic way.

The main object of the *Grammar of Assent* was to refute the fallacies of the prevalent philosophical argument of the day, which contended that we cannot believe what we cannot understand, and that nothing can be known in certainty about the unseen world. At the same time, he intended to show that there are modes of proof which the Creator gives for gaining religious truth, by which the mind is successively led on to the belief in God, in Christianity (D'Cruz 501). Newman opined; "By Religion I mean the knowledge of God, of His Will, and of our duties towards Him; and here are three main channels which Nature furnishes for our acquiring this knowledge, viz. Our own minds, the voice of mankind, and the course of the world, that is, of human life and human affairs" (*Grammar* 390).

f. "Lead Kindly Light"

Newman had a number of religious verses composed in his Mediterranean voyage, which were later published in the *Lyra Apostolica*. On his return journey, his boat was becalmed and in the weary waiting, inspired by the story of the Israelites who were led in the wilderness, a cloud by day and a fire by night, he wrote the poem, "The Pillar of the Cloud." Later it came to be popularly known as "Lead Kindly Light," and sung as a hymn (Sugg 13). The poem is born from a situation of crisis and change. In his illness at Sicily, he came to realise that everything in life would be well, if men would not trust false lights created by their pride and self-will. He had learnt to be humble and gained confidence in it (Sugg, *Snapdragon* 61). The news of the liberal forces assaulting the Church at home pained and confused him, leaving him bewildered as how to fight the liberalistic tendencies of the day and save the Church (George, *Vibrations* 29). Therefore, he summed up all his experiences, doubts, anxieties, fears and failures in this poem. The "encircling gloom," is the condition of the Newman as well as his compatriots. The Victorians in as much as their faith was concerned, were in the dark night of the soul "far from home." In contrast to the liberalising tendency and the refusal of scientific quest to admit God's existence, Newman's prayer is "Lead Thou me on." He reposes faith in God when he says; "So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still/Will lead me on."

g. "The Dream of Gerontius"

The poem was not the best of Newman, but it had strange power. It was the product of his meditations on death and life after death and the experiences of the deaths of his loved ones. It is a poem on Christian's death, and shows his sense of the reality of the other world, a sense of reality, which made it possible for him to relate the two worlds through miracles (Bowyer, and John 202). The poem is more than a poem on death. It gives us more impressions of the true core of the faith and life of Newman. It touches all the beliefs and hopes of his life. In the face of

death Gerontius affirms his faith; "Firmly I believe and truly / God is three, and God is one" (Connolly 452). This poem is thus Newman's profession of a strong faith in the midst of religious decadence, scepticism, agnosticism and atheism that have engulfed the Victorian life. To conclude, it can be said that as a writer, Newman had assumed the role of a poet, an essayist, a novelist, a teacher, and a mystic. There was the singleness of purpose, a profound intellect, deep convictions and strong decisions in his writings. His emotions were always subordinate to his intellect. He has emerged as a litterateur and a saint among the nineteenth century men of ideas and literature (George, *Vibrations* 18). His writings were accompanied by an active faith, and a desire to do some genuine works in life. In his writings, he was able to appreciate the paralysing doubt and offer proofs for belief. He was active to the criticisms of the agnostics and unbelievers, who belittle religion, and demonstrated a powerful and deep faith in his life and writings (Rickett 580). Newman had addressed effectively, the conflict of faith and reason, science and religion. His life is one from which we can still learn. In our age, when secularising tendencies, materialistic cult and idolatry of the body continue unabated, persons of the calibre and charisma of Newman, would still find relevance. Hence, Newman would continue to challenge postmodern sensibilities and call on people of our time to religious experience and adherence to the principle of truth with his prayer, "Lead Kindly Light".

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Horizon

Sony Dalia

From South to North
Great march
Aspirations on the rise
Avenues open anew
Thirst unquenchable
Quest unfathomable.

Life has many hues
Man too many dues
Morals, morsel clash
Need and greed far apart
Undulations unending.

Droplets trickle
Tireless travel,
Brooks, rivulets blend
Lend majesty, magnitude
River of emotions flows
Delirious dance to embrace the sea.

Men and matter
Earth and sky
Merger of components
Fusion on horizon
Solar disc submerges, emerges
Breathing life in dark alleys!

