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"Nowhere else to go?" a review of John Henry Newman : the challenge to evangelical religion by Frank M. Turner

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NOWHERE ELSE TO GO?

John Henry Newman
The Challenge to Evangelical
Religion
Frank M. Turner
Yale University Press, \$35, 740 pp.

Jeffrey von Arx

Few major intellectual figures have been so fortunate in controlling the way posterity viewed them as John Henry Newman. Newman was able to set the terms of the interpretation of his life in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, much as Augustine did in the *Confessions*. Love him or hate him—and, of course, most people today love him—you must view Newman, especially the young Newman on the road to conversion, through the prism of the *Apologia*: that is, until Frank M. Turner's *John Henry Newman: The Challenge to Evangelical Religion*.

The *Apologia* was written in 1864 in response to an attack on Newman's veracity by the hapless Charles Kingsley. Perhaps never before in literary history was such overwhelming rhetorical firepower directed against such a puny target. Yet the events described in the *Apologia* happened twenty to thirty years before Newman wrote about them, and anyone who has tried a hand at memoir will know the distorting lens through which the passage of time—to say nothing of the agenda of the moment (in Newman's case, the need to justify himself to his coreligionists)—casts our memories. Yet, it is precisely the compelling prose of the *Apologia*—anything so powerfully written must be true!—that has led Newman scholars, as well as a host of admiring readers, to accept it as the truth.

Frank Turner reads Newman as if the *Apologia* had never been written. That is to say, he reads the Newman of the

tracts and the controversial writings of the thirties and forties, and he reads the letters. The Newman who appears here is a much less attractive although perhaps a much more human figure than the omniscient and irenic figure of the *Apologia* and afterwards. Unfortunately, this will be the main point of reaction to this book. It will not help "the cause," and those who think that Newman must always have been a saint will resent it. But that will be to miss the point of the book entirely. (In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that Frank Turner is a former teacher of mine, with whom I have discussed this book—ten years in the making!—on a number of occasions, for which he has kindly thanked me in the acknowledgements. I had, however, not read any part of it prior to this review, and so have come to it with fresh, and, as I hope the review demonstrates, objective judgment.)

Turner's great contribution is to see the young Newman in context. That context was of party strife within the Church of England that was the sectarian equivalent of a blood sport. The triumph of evangelicalism both within and without the church in the first decades of the nineteenth century was bound to raise a reaction, and Newman and his friends—John Keble, E. B. Pusey, and Hurrell Froude—provided it. They came to hate evangelicalism as a heresy and a sham that sent souls to hell for failure in obe-

dience to divine law, because evangelicalism confused fervor with holiness. They attacked spokesmen for evangelical theology at Oxford, like R. D. Hampden, in ways that remind one of Joe McCarthy. Newman and his friends themselves formed a party within the church, but one that appealed to Catholic tradition against Protestant private judgment and to apostolic succession against the dissenting notion of the invisible church.

Turner makes the further point that Newman's attacks on private judgment and the belief that the meaning of Scripture was self-evident placed him in company with Victorian doubters and skeptics, like his own brother, Frank, and others whose questioning of Protestant verities led them into agnosticism. Indeed, at the time, Newman was condemned by the right-thinking for his skepticism as well as for his Catholicism.

The most controversial and most problematic aspect of Turner's portrait of Newman is certainly his psychological conjectures about his subject. The failed, bankrupt father; the rebellious younger brothers who rejected the authority of their elder; the lifelong quest to establish himself as the leader of a community of younger celibate males; the virginal but doomed younger sister idolized by her brother; his misogyny; the rejection of followers who dared to marry: there is, it cannot be doubted, rich material here for psychologizing. The patient is beyond analysis, though, and Turner's hand is less sure here than it is in his situating of Newman within the context of party controversy, where he is an unerring guide. In any case, it is not clear that Turner needs the psychohistory to make the central, radical, compelling point of the book: that Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism had little to do with the intellectual and spiritual process described in the *Apologia*. Rather, it was the consequence of his failure to rally a party within or outside the church to stand against evangelicalism and for Catholic Christianity as Newman understood it. The young Newman's vision of Catholic Christianity was *never* Roman Catholicism, and was, in some ways, as individualistic as the



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oddest and most idiosyncratic break-away sect. Newman became a Roman Catholic because his project of establishing a party within the church or a sect outside of it could not succeed. His followers either drew back or preceded him to Rome, and when Newman himself submitted to Father Dominic Barberi on October 9, 1845, it was because he was alone and had literally nowhere else to turn.

If there is an aspect of Newman's experience in the Church of England of which Turner might have taken greater account, it is this. Advocacy of Catholic belief or practice within the church was qualitatively different from advocacy of any other theological or devotional position. Hatred of Catholicism—and, of course, Newman's contemporaries made no fine distinctions between Roman and non-Roman varieties thereof—was deeper and more powerful than we in a more ecumenical age can easily credit. Anglican bishops and Oxford D.D.s, as well as the average Protestant within or outside the church, considered Catholics idolaters—not really Christians at all. Whether they lived before or after the Reformation, Catholics were apostates and their church the antichrist. Practitioners of their religion were either sunk in superstition or hypocrites and impostors. There was a dynamic at work within English Protestant Christianity of this time in which even to begin to advocate a Catholic position was to invite rejection. From this point of view, there seems almost an inevitability to Newman's recourse to Roman Catholicism. He may never have intended, may not have wanted, to become a Roman Catholic. But once he dared to raise the standard of Catholicism as a challenge to evangelical religion and would not draw back, his contemporaries drove him beyond the pale of English Christianity. Indeed, the question is, did he have any choice but to enter the Church of Rome? □

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