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**More  
Nineteenth-  
Century  
Studies**

***Basil Willey***

**A Group of Honest  
Doubters**

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# More Nineteenth Century Studies

A GROUP OF HONEST DOUBTERS

*By*

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## Preface

IN the Preface to *Nineteenth Century Studies* (1949) I said that I hoped to write a sequel which might 'fill in some of the gaps and bring the story down to the end of the century'. The present volume is only a partial fulfilment of that hope. Its central theme is 'the loss of faith', or (as it might often be called) the re-interpretation of current orthodoxy in the light of nineteenth century canons of historical and scientific criticism. I have not attempted to be exhaustive, nor have I harped incessantly on the central topic. Instead, I have tried, in six fairly detailed chapters, and using a method partly biographical and partly critical, to illustrate some phases of Victorian liberal thought from a group including historians, theologians and men of letters.

I hope to have presented these writers as more than a mere set of 'worm-eaten' period pieces. If faith today has recovered tone and confidence, it owes this largely to the work of these pioneers who compelled it to abandon many impossible positions. Even now this debt is not always properly acknowledged, and some of the 'liberal' or 'agnostic' criticisms are conveniently forgotten rather than properly faced. It may be that the liberal tradition—not in its older form, but chastened by twentieth century experience—is due for a revival.

My acknowledgments are due, and are gratefully given, to the Principal and Fellows of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and Miss Margaret Deneke, for permission to include (in Chapter II) parts of my Deneke Lecture (1952) on Tennyson; to the Oxford University Press and Dr R. Hale-White for permission to quote from the works of William Hale White and Mrs Dorothy V. White; to Messrs Macmillan and Sir Charles Tennyson for permission to quote from the works of Viscount Morley and from Sir Charles Tennyson's *Alfred Tennyson*; and to the Stanford University Press for permission to quote from Wilfred Stone's *Religion and Art of Mark Rutherford* (1954). I should like to record here also (as

## PREFACE

I have done in the text and footnotes of Chapter V) my gratitude to Mr Stone for his book, which is not only the best yet written about Mark Rutherford but is also a first-rate contribution to the spiritual history of the period.

B. W.

PEMBROKE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

1956

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To  
Z. M. W.

## CHAPTER I

### FRANCIS W. NEWMAN

(1805-1897)

#### 1. *Phases of Faith*

IN the history of nineteenth century English thought there is no story more striking, or more full of moral significance, than that of the divergent courses of the brothers Newman. It is as if two rivers, taking their rise in the same dividing range, should yet be deflected by some minute original irregularity of level, so that one pours its waters into the Mediterranean, the other into the German Ocean. The *Morning Leader* newspaper, shortly after the death of Francis (1897), called John 'a spiritual Tory' and Francis 'a spiritual radical'. Long before this—even five years before his own conversion to Rome—John took his younger brother as an omen of the dangers of Protestantism: 'Whether or not Anglicanism leads to Rome,' he wrote to his sister Jemima, 'so far is clear as day, that Protestantism leads to infidelity.' The career of Francis, indeed, seemed to him the clearest and most painful illustration of one of his own deepest beliefs, that there is no logical standing-point between Romanism and Atheism. One of my main objects in what follows will be to suggest that this antithesis represents a dangerous half-truth. The foundations of nineteenth century Protestantism were indeed insecure, and out of this insecurity there was bound to emerge, and did emerge, a drift on the one hand towards Rome and on the other towards unbelief. The brothers John and Francis Newman had a great deal in common; far more than might at first sight be supposed. They had not only drunk the same milk of evangelical doctrine in their childhood, but they both had subtle and dissolvent intellects, and the instinctive scepticism which questions received assumptions. But scepticism, as history has repeatedly shown, may be the basis of orthodoxy as well as of heresy; according to the proportion it bears to

other elements in a man's make-up it may lead him either towards dogma or denial. The all-corroding intellect, if allied with a mystical temper and a deep reverence for tradition, may itself suggest—as it did to John Henry Newman—the need for certainties beyond the reach of mere intellect, given and attested by supernatural authority. John's scepticism carried him as far as the exposure of the Anglican dilemma; the Church of England, Romish in its liturgy, Protestant in its articles, Erastian in its government, and committed to an untenable bibliolatry, could not without a drastic overhaul stand up to the nineteenth century. His scepticism went no further; or rather, it induced him to take the one step further, amid the encircling gloom, which led towards the kindly light of Rome. If the Church of England was wrong, Rome must have been right all along. In Francis Newman this corrosive mind was unchecked by any respect for the powers that be, and accordingly it carried him far beyond the rejection of his own youthful evangelicalism to a radical critique of the whole structure of dogmatic Christianity. The spiritual history of Francis was in no way exceptional, as John's was; what happened to him happened to so many in the nineteenth century that his life-story may be said to conform to the standard pattern. Yet to say this would be to overlook the most interesting point: Francis was Newman enough never to end up in the agnosticism of a Leslie Stephen, a Huxley or a John Morley. After peeling off layer after layer of the doctrinal husk, he was left—not with nothing, but with a solid core of certainty: a certainty not buttressed by Church or dogma, but by reasons of the heart and spirit. In the rejuvenated Church of today he might have found a place as a modernist of the mystical type; in his own time he could only exist outside its pale.

The Newman household at Ealing in the early days seems to have been harmonious enough. The prevailing influence, that of intense evangelical piety, came mainly from the mother, but it was strongly reinforced by Walter Mayers, a master at the Rev. George Nicholas's school to which both John and Francis went. Mr Newman, the father, a banker and man of the world, admired Franklin and Jefferson and

had 'learned his morality more from Shakespeare than from the Bible'.<sup>1</sup> He was therefore, from the standpoint of the 'twice-born' Francis, not a Christian, and it is interesting to find that the son, who claimed in later life to be 'anti-everything', showed his first intransigence in resisting the paternal authority—resisting it, however, in the interests not of emancipation but of greater strictness. On September 30, 1821, when the lad was sixteen, J. H. Newman wrote in his diary: 'After dinner today I was suddenly called downstairs to give an opinion whether I thought it a sin to write a letter on a Sunday. I found dear F[rank] had refused to copy one. A scene ensued more painful than any I have experienced.'<sup>2</sup> In his youth, as his mother lamented later, 'Frank was adamant', but he afterwards changed his mind about his father, growing to admire him as 'an unpretending, firm-minded Englishman, who . . . rejected base doctrine from whatever quarter'. Later experience taught him to rate honest humanity higher than fanatical saintliness, and he saw his father and brother as types of that antithesis. At the time of the scandal over Queen Caroline and George IV, John, whose 'zeal for authority, as in itself *sacred*, was the main tendency perverting his common-sense', supported the Ministry and the King against the Queen, because they were 'the Government'. "'Go on!'" said Newman senior: "'Persevere! Always stand up for men in power, and in time you will get promotion.'"<sup>3</sup>

I have been quoting some phrases from a work of Francis Newman's old age, the *Contributions Chiefly to the Early History of the Late Cardinal Newman, with Comments* (1891), written shortly after the Cardinal's death. It is a book which even the sincerest admirers of Francis find difficult to forgive, for it breathes a spirit of bitterness, jealousy and wilful incomprehension hard to reconcile with the writer's known character. To many it seemed like an act of treachery, or at least brotherly disloyalty, against the memory of a great saint whom the whole world, Protestant, Catholic and infidel

<sup>1</sup> F. W. N., *Early History of the Late Cardinal Newman* (2nd ed., 1891), pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Maisie Ward, *Young Mr Newman* (1948), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> F. W. N., *loc. cit.*, pp. 9-11.

alike, had learnt to reverence. The book was, in fact, the discharge of a lifetime's accumulation of embittered feelings against a brother whose views he abhorred, whose treatment of himself he had resented, and of whose character he saw the least ideal aspects. Why did he write it? Not only to vent his spite, but because he cared for truth above all else, and sincerely feared that the Cardinal's true image would be falsified by obituary piety. The present generation, he said, sees him through a mist, but he belongs to English history and so should be rightly seen. 'The splendour of his funeral makes certain that his early life will be written; it must be expected that the more *mythical* the narrative the better it will sell.' In reading the book, therefore, we have to make allowances for this strain of feeling. Yet read it we must, for it contains valuable reminiscences and is indispensable to an understanding of the two brothers. Nor is it wanting in generous acknowledgment of all that John had done for him in youth:

'In my rising manhood I received inestimable benefits from this (my eldest) brother. I was able to repay his money, but that could not cancel my debt, for he supported me not out of his abundance, but when he knew not whence weekly and daily funds were to come. I have felt grateful up to his last day, and have tried to cherish for him a sort of *filial* sentiment.'<sup>1</sup>

Such deliberate gratitude, such calculated transference of filial feelings on to a very superior and somewhat coldly arrogant elder brother, was not likely to generate anything but painful repressions. But what ruined the relationship was the religious difference: 'the Church was to him everything, while the Church (as viewed by him from the day of his ordination) was to me, NOTHING. Hence we seemed never to have an interest nor a wish in common.' And so 'a most painful breach, through mere religious creed, broke in on me in my nineteenth year, and was *unhealable*'.

From boyhood up Francis saw his brother as cold, reserved, aloof, humourless, unsympathetic, holding inflexibly and fanatically his predetermined course. Like Cassius,

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. vi.

## FRANCIS W. NEWMAN

John never relaxed; he never played any games at Dr Nicholas's school, but founded instead a secret society with himself as Grand Master. In his temperament there was 'nothing boyish, popular or self-distrusting'. It is of course hard for brothers to agree when each represents to the other the very views he most detests and fears; to Francis, John was the embodiment of blind reaction, while to John, Francis was the personification of that poisonous liberalism against which his whole life was a crusade. Readers of the *Apologia* will not accept Francis's version of his brother; they will feel that the real man is revealed there, and in such a passage as this (from a letter John wrote soon after his mother's death in 1836):

'Of late years my mother has much misunderstood my religious views, and considered she differed from me; and she thought I was surrounded by admirers, and had everything my own way; and in consequence I, who am conscious to myself I never thought anything more precious than her sympathy and praise, had none of it . . . I think God intends me to be lonely . . . I think I am very cold and reserved to people, but I cannot ever realize to myself that anyone loves me.'<sup>1</sup>

At Oxford the brothers were at first much thrown together, John coaching Francis, and living with him in the same lodgings, for a year before the latter's matriculation (1822, at Worcester College). John was much impressed with the younger man's abilities, and reported that Francis was a better Greek scholar and a better mathematician than himself. The first open breach came two years later, when Francis, fitting up a new set of rooms on his own, discovered a picture of the Virgin Mary hanging on the wall there. He at once went to the print shop to have it removed, and learnt that his brother had ordered it. 'I am sure he thought me an ungrateful brother,' he comments. Francis had subscribed the Thirty-Nine Articles on admission, according to the rule of those days, but he soon began to have doctrinal qualms. In what sense were the sufferings of Christ applied to the sinner for salvation—and was his righteousness also

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Sieveking, *Memoir and Letters of F. W. Newman* (1909), p. 64.



imputed? How could Christ's body have ascended to heaven, when it is written that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God'? Were the Oriel heretics, who approved of Sunday cricket, perhaps right after all? Perhaps the Puritans and Evangelicals had been wrong in making the Old Testament a rule of life for Christians. And here, before I leave the subject of the fraternal relations, I must quote the most interesting of all Frank's references to his brother; it occurs in *his* 'Apologia', called *Phases of Faith* (1850), of which more later:

'One person there was at Oxford, who might have seemed my natural adviser: his name, character and religious peculiarities have been so made public property, that I need not shrink to name him:—I mean my elder brother, the Rev. John Henry Newman. As a warm-hearted and generous brother, who exercised towards me paternal cares, I esteemed him and felt a deep gratitude; as a man of various culture and peculiar genius, I admired and was proud of him; but my doctrinal religion impeded my loving him as much as he deserved, and even justified my feeling some distrust of him. He never showed any strong attraction towards those whom I regarded as spiritual persons: on the contrary I thought him stiff and cold towards them. Moreover, soon after his ordination, he had startled and distressed me by adopting the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration; and in rapid succession worked out views which I regarded as full-blown "Popery". I speak of the year 1823-6: it is strange to think that twenty years more had to pass before he learnt the place to which his doctrines belonged.'<sup>1</sup>

The world is now acquainted with that agony of twenty years; to Francis, John's whole Tractarian phase seemed, both at the time and still more later, to be a period of treachery to the Church and deception of others and himself. It is notable that the rift was caused, not by Frank's heresies, but by his Protestantism and his consequent suspicion of John's romanising trends. His main grievance against John always was that at this time he was 'pushing on the Romish line in the garb of an Anglican'; once he had become an avowed Papist the charge of dishonesty lapsed automatically.

<sup>1</sup> *Phases of Faith*, pp. 10-11.