Thinking faith
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What does faithfulness involve?

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As we continue our journey through the Year of Faith, we explore the meaning of faithfulness through the ideas of Blessed John Henry Newman. Newman considered that the two aspects of faithfulness, our moral decisions and our religious beliefs, are formed in very similar ways. In a lecture delivered earlier this year at St Aloysius' College in Glasgow, philosopher Gerard J. Hughes SJ asked how Newman's Aristotelian approach might speak to our concept and practice of faith.

I suppose that the simplest, and yet in the end the most important, answer to the question. 'What does faithfulness involve?' is that faithfulness must be faithfulness to God. All earthly expressions of fidelity, such as acceptance of the Creed or loyalty to the pope, are no more than attempts to respond to the call of God in our lives and to ask what it might involve in practice. It also seems to me that faithfulness is not something that can be defined statically; it is something more akin to a pilgrimage.


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To explain what I mean by this I am going to draw on the ideas of Cardinal John Henry Newman. His personal pilgrimage was long and complex, from the theological disputes in the University of Oxford in the 1830s to his conversion to Catholicism in 1846; his subsequent attempts to help his fellow Catholics to respond appropriately to the First Vatican Council; and finally his presence at the time of the Modernist crisis which broke upon the Church just before his death. The world was changing quickly, and many of the teachings of traditional Christianity came suddenly under threat. Perhaps our times are not so very different, and for that reason I think his pilgrimage provides a model which might be an inspiration to us all.

Two aspects of fidelity

Our fidelity to God, in Newman's view, was to be displayed in two ways: the first, perhaps the more obvious, is in our *actions*. We must try to live as God asks us to live. The second is, as it were, in our *thoughts* – we must accept in faith the truths which God has revealed to us, and which, of course, underpin our conscientious behaviour as well as our thoughts.

We might be inclined to think of the two kinds of fidelity – in thought and in action – as being very different. Newman would not separate them so distinctly, because of the way in which he understands 'conscience'. He takes our human conscience to be the voice of God, and he means this seriously, not just as a pious phrase. Perhaps this idea seems more familiar to us when we think of God guiding our action. But, more surprisingly, Newman also holds that God speaks to us also by guiding our beliefs, our theology as it were, and not just our ethics.

Newman was a true student of Oxford, and that meant having a fair acquaintance with the views of Aristotle. Newman derives his notion of the 'parallelism' between conscience and theology from Aristotle's account of how we decide – how we decide about anything, what we should believe as well as about how we should behave. Aristotle holds that in forming our theological beliefs and in making our moral decisions in the light of those beliefs we are living the life of God as far as it is possible for us mortals.

Conscience as the voice of God

Newman is very scathing about what he takes to be the vulgar, though prominent, idea that, 'my conscience is just whatever I happen to think about what I

should do, and nobody else can tell me what to do'. In response to this, and to the fashionable academic claim that we live in a world of blind processes and inevitable outcomes, he writes:

> We are told that conscience is but a twist in primitive and untutored man; that its dictate is an imagination; that the very notion of guiltiness, which that dictate enforces, is simply irrational, for how can there possibly be freedom of will, how can there be consequent responsibility, in that infinite eternal network of cause and effect, in which we helplessly lie? And what retribution have we to fear, when we have had no real choice to do good or evil?[1]

Newman follows Aristotle in taking a much richer and more nuanced view. If our emotional responses to situations have been properly trained since childhood, they will provide us with a spontaneous 'take' on the moral demands of any situation – that it calls for kindness, or sympathy, or firmness, or anger, for example. These responses will settle what we should aim at; and our experience of life will give us the know-how to achieve those ends.

Newman emphasises the importance of conscience as an authoritative voice which seems independent of us:

> ... the voice of God in the nature and heart of man, as distinct from the voice of Revelation [is]... a principle planted within us before we have had any training, although training and experience are necessary for its strength, growth, and due formation ... a constituent element of the mind, as our perception of other ideas may be, as our powers of reasoning, as our sense of order and the beautiful, and our other intellectual endowments.[2]

Given these dispositions, Newman says,

> What it is to be virtuous, how we are to gain the just and right idea and standard of virtue, how we are to approximate in practice to our own standard, what is right and wrong in a particular case, for the answers in fullness and accuracy to these and similar questions, the philosopher refers us to no code of laws, to no moral treatise, because no science of life, applicable to the case of an individual, has been or can be written. Such is Aristotle's doctrine, and it is undoubtedly true ... The authoritative oracle, which is to decide our path, is something more searching and manifold than such jejune generalisations as treatises can give, which are most distinct and clear when we least need them.[3]

We might well sympathise with that last remark. We all know that we should be loving, should not kill or steal or tell untruths; but does this primary school clarity suffice for the making of moral decisions in adult life? The Commandments themselves do not tell me whether switching off this machine amounts to killing someone, or whether this particular piece of smart accountancy amounts to stealing, or whether a couple in a canonically invalid marriage are committing adultery. Think about how you actually consider complex moral issues where the pros and cons are not so obvious. Newman gives a thumbnail sketch of how this often works in practice:

> I should decide according to the particular case, *which is beyond all rule, and must be decided on its own merits*. I should look to see what theologians could do for me, what the Bishops and clergy around me, what my confessor; what friends whom I revered: and if, after all, I could not take their view of the matter, then I must rule myself by my own judgement and my own conscience.[4]

His final conclusion is:

> You may tell me that this dictate is a mere law of my nature, as is to joy or to grieve. I cannot understand this. No, it is the echo of a person speaking to me. Nothing shall persuade me that it does not ultimately proceed from a person external to me. It carries with it the proof of its divine origin. My nature feels towards it as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness – just like that I feel in pleasing or offending some revered friend... The echo implies a voice, the voice a speaker. That speaker I love and fear.[5]

St Ignatius said much the same thing when speaking of what he terms 'confirmation' and the discernment of Spirits. Ideally, the person making an important decision will consider all the pros and cons, presenting each possible course of action to God in prayer; and they will experience God as more present and supportive when they think of acting in one particular way rather than in some other.[6] Such is fidelity to the voice of God in our daily practice.

The parallels between fidelity in our ethical practice and fidelity in forming our religious beliefs

Surprisingly Newman holds that there are many parallels between being faithful to God in making our moral decisions and being faithful to God in deciding what we should believe.

In his *Grammar of Assent,* Newman develops a very general theory about all our beliefs, and how we come to believe things. According to his account, formal logic plays only a small part in forming our beliefs about the ordinary world, as distinct from the realm of pure mathematics. Newman takes the realm of formal logic and mathematics to be neat and conclusive in a way in which our attempts to handle the real world seldom, if ever, can be. But pure logic does not help very much in dealing with a complex world.

At the root of all our beliefs is the fact that we have all developed a very general and wide-ranging pattern of thinking and talking. Wittgenstein describes this as 'a form of life' – a whole pattern of beliefs which form the framework against which we test particular claims, and which experience teaches us is usually reliable. So, according to Newman's suggestion, we never in fact try to *prove* that Britain is an island. Firstly because anything we might adduce as proof – satellite photos, or a voyage – is itself open to challenge**,** for how do we know the satellite photos were not computer-generated, or our circumnavigation misdirected? But more importantly we have learned how to settle such questions just by having learned from our multiform experiences. Newman would have approved of Wittgenstein's observation that we do not need to test whether the table exists even when we are not experiencing it. We have all developed a framework of beliefs about the world which would not in any normal circumstances be challenged, and which guide our thought in complex situations.

Such a situation may be that of a juror who has to make up her mind about the guilt or innocence of the person charged with an offence. She does not in any strict sense 'deduce' her verdict from the evidence. She has learned to 'read' the evidence. The reliable juror will rely on her experience of life, and she will be emotionally well-balanced in her attitude to the evidence and the persons who provided it. These prerequisites for having reliable beliefs are just the ones we need in order to make good moral decisions. They are not at all like proofs in pure logic. Newman insists that pure logic is useless when we come to deal with the real world.

So in the end, deciding what to believe is not so much the outcome of a deduction (*pace* Sherlock Holmes); it is not in any strict sense a *logical* conclusion, though it is a *rational* conclusion. It is a perception, a 'seeing' how the facts are to be read. If we are well-informed, open minded and intellectually honest, we can trust our judgements. This is not to say that we can never be mistaken, but rather that there is nothing more reliable to which we can turn.

That is just what Newman believes holds true of our religious beliefs: we try to find out what we can, try to be open-minded and honest, and leave time and space for God to speak to us as we consider all these things, looking at them 'in the round', so to speak.

'Reading' tradition

Ideally, then, just as our moral beliefs become more refined and better informed as we go along, the same is true of our theological beliefs.

We need to see the history of the early Church as a pilgrimage. The very earliest Christians were Jews, strictly monotheist Jews. But in the light of Jesus's resurrection, the early Christians had to do several things: to re-learn the role of the Messiah; and to understand more deeply the sense in which Jesus was 'more than a prophet', claiming a quite astonishing level of authority. They had to embark on a radical re-evaluation of Jesus and his ministry in the light of their experience of the risen Christ. So what did they do?

They looked for texts in their tradition to find ways of formulating their belief; and they tried, difficult though it was, to reach a 'verdict' which respected all they now knew. Paul in a famous passage in Philippians says that Jesus, 'though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself' (Phil 2:6-8). And the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that, 'Having been made perfect, he became the source of salvation for all who obey him.' The writer promptly goes

on to admit that more has to be said, but it is hard to explain (Heb 5:7-14).

Indeed so, but it took more than two centuries before the Christians were able to reconcile – after a fashion – that Jesus had to be seen as divine, indeed as God; and yet that there was only one God. To use the term 'consubstantial' merely expresses the difficulty rather than resolves it. The difficulty was even worse because if there was one thing the early Christians were sure of, it was that Jesus had been a man, a human being like anyone else. How on earth can a human being be God? Can God be truly a man?

Another example of how we have to refine our faithfulness when it comes to religious belief is the way in which we have responded to the developments in the secular sciences. Take the doctrine of original sin, and the reading of Genesis upon which it was originally founded. We now know two things which our forefathers did not. We know that we humans did not start off in a paradise garden; we have evolved. We also know that at the time Genesis was written, there were many other religions that tried to explain the origins of the world and the mixture of good and evil which it contains. The beginning of Genesis fits into that culture perfectly, attacking the view that there must be two divinities, one good the other bad. There is but one God, and God saw that everything he had made was good. If there is evil in the world, it is because of the ambitions and shortcomings of human beings.

Our knowledge of the origins of the universe and of the religious traditions of our forefathers enables us now to inherit their beliefs as part of our own pilgrimage towards God. We may have to go yet further on our pilgrimage, by trying to integrate our Christian beliefs into the discovery of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. As our sense of wonder at the universe grows, so also does our understanding of the magnificence of God.

As Newman saw very clearly, 'tradition' or 'what the Church teaches' or 'has taught' is not fixed in detail, and there is no reason to suppose it will ever be. Just as the application of moral principles to individual cases is 'beyond all rule', so too is our understanding of doctrines. What we might expect is a gradual adaptation – to cultures, to the sciences, to our improved knowledge of biblical texts. Mistakes will have been made, from which we have to learn, and new challenges will have be faced, in the light of our discoveries in psychology, genetics, ecology and medicine. Our previous Christian moral experience does not automatically solve all such problems.

As *Gaudium et Spes* says, we must learn from the modern world in order to be able to teach the modern world. Ignatian discernment can help us to do just that. It requires us first of all to do our best to understand our desires – where they can lead us astray, but more importantly, how (if we are as honest with ourselves as we can manage to be) they will give us a 'feel' for what God is calling us to believe, or to do. We use our minds to try to formulate what God might be asking of us in our world – both in terms of how to make sense of God's creation, and how to find God in trying to respond to him in our world. As Newman would have put it, just as conscience at its best can be a listening to the voice of God, so our understanding of God and of the truth he reveals to us is a response to the best of our God-given minds. Ideally, both in morals and in faith, we will be able to say, 'So far so good'; in practice that is an ideal which, with understanding and prayer, we might try to achieve. It is to be hoped that we have developed such an intimacy with God that we are able to learn what fidelity means in our God-created world, whose complexities we are far from totally grasping.

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[1] Newman, John Henry, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching,* [hereafter *Diff.*] vol II (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1900), p. 249.
[2] *Diff.*, pp. 247– 248.
[3] Newman, John Henry, *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903), p. 354.
[4] *Diff.*, vol II, pp. 243–244.
[5] Newman, John Henry, *Callista* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903), pp. 314-315
[6] Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, §175-7, 183.