

CLASH OF RELIGIOUS TITANS:
KINGSLEY vs. NEWMAN

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The mid-nineteenth century brought tides of social reconstruction, secularized reform, and religious skepticism in unprecedented proportions to Great Britain, and the debate that ensued between Charles Kingsley, the robust advocate and intellectual paladin of the Church of England, and Dr. John Henry Newman, the eloquent and outspoken proponent of dogmatic Christianity whose religious dilemma led him to Rome, exemplified the culmination of Christian discord grounded in Marian times.¹ Kingsley was a heralded poet, novelist, and theologian, whose Anglican upbringing and education set him towards a life of service to his Church. In his Church's view, the insurrection and the poignant sacrilege of the Oxford Movement, which attempted to redefine the Anglican Church, compounded with growing civil dissonance, needed to be, at once, placed to rest. Kingsley first aimed his attack at Edward Pusey, and then as the Oxford Movement disseminated into various factions and its most prominent leader, John Henry Newman, "went over to Rome," Kingsley

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moved to condemn the Roman Catholic Church through its newest convert. In a “mood of jaunty euphoria, the Protestant professor quite gratuitously flung a careless and ill-researched jeer at Dr. Newman.”² Newman, who had been living in seclusion since his dismissal from Oxford over controversial writings and his eventual conversion in 1845, was at once placed in the public view to defend himself.³ Soon after his attack had been submitted, Kingsley was shown to have made an erroneous criticism, but Dr. Newman, who was known to accept the most difficult of challenges, would not accept an apology and engaged in a written war for the justification of his faith. In the heated exchange of pamphlets, Kingsley was soundly defeated by Newman’s wit and conviction. What had begun as Kingsley’s slip of the pen invigorated Newman to write his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, or the Defense of His Life, which has become one of the nineteenth century’s most influential works of religious faith. The debate had the reverse effect that Kingsley intended, for it, in actuality, benefited the Catholic cause in England: Newman’s *Apologia* “did more than any other single book to change the Englishman’s image of the Roman Catholic Church.”⁴ As Kingsley effectively destroyed his own career, Newman gained public exposure which led to his cardinalship in 1879. His dedication to Catholic dogma was so strong that he is now considered the “Father of the Second Vatican Council.”⁵ The Council, which met in the early 1960s, modernized the position of the Church and its relationship with non-Catholic and non-Christian faiths. Newman’s defense is even now being recognized; a movement led by Father Dessain is attempting to have John Henry Cardinal Newman canonized. Newman’s success in his own defense and rebuttal is a testament to his skill as one of “...the world’s greatest Christian thinkers...and great prose stylists of the English language.”⁶

A shy undergraduate, John Henry Newman studied at Trinity College from 1817 to 1820. Loathing the raucous and immoral behavior of his fellows, Newman spent most of his time in his room playing the violin. Although he was a clever student, he failed in both math and the classics. These failures, he thought, would ruin his chances of becoming a Fellow of Oriel College,

where all the intellectuals of the day assembled. In spite of his failure in school, Newman “managed to do justice to himself in the papers”⁷ and was elected into the Oriel College on April 12, 1822. Oriel College at the time was also the site of a great debate between the liberal latitudinarians who tolerated Non-conformist Christians, and the conservatives, led by poet John Keble. Also among the ranks of the conservatives were Hebraists Edward Pusey and Hurrell Froude, who would later play an integral part in the Oxford Movement. The liberals, Thomas Arnold and Richard Whately, argued that if Christianity were to survive, “it must accommodate itself to the findings of modern thinking and scholarship.”⁸ The conservatives responded that if one took that position, then every doctrine would be stripped from Christianity and there would be no religion at all.⁹ Newman later took a similarly conservative position when he argued that Christianity itself was Catholic, because, although it had been corrupted by the medieval Church, it had been instituted by Christ Himself. Newman, like his contemporaries, read deeply in the works of such Romantics as Sir Walter Scott, and Newman reveled at the vision of the past created in the *Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *The Lady of the Lake*. Newman befriended Hurrell Fronde, a religious extremist known to chastise himself with whips, and the two visited Rome together. Newman was awed by the glory and majesty of Rome, and he grew fond of the lives led by monks and seminarists.

In 1831, Britain was in social upheaval. As a boy of twelve, Charles Kingsley had traveled around England as necessitated by his father’s job as an Anglican minister, and in what was to be Kingsley’s first year of school, the family moved to Clifton. In October, the Bristol riots erupted after the House of Lords refused to pass the Great Reform Bill. The riots had a great impact on the impressionable child, for never before had he seen “such a ghastly row, not of corpses, but of corpse fragments,”¹⁰ and contempt for the lower classes grew within him: “What I had seen made me the veriest of aristocrats....it required many years to explain [to himself] the true meaning of what I saw in October.”¹¹ The Bristol Riots greatly influenced Kingsley’s view of the Anglican Church’s relation with the congregation, and this contempt for the com-

moner sharply contradicted Newman's view that the power of the Church remained with the educated laity.¹²

While Newman remained on the continent appreciating the sanctity and vitality of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England was being shaken to its foundation by Newman's Oxford associates. In a sermon to the University Church, John Keble demanded that the country recall itself from national apostasy. The sermon received little attention until it was published a week later under the title *National Apostasy*, and the horrified reaction of the Anglican Church gave impetus to the Oxford Movement. On his way home to join the debate, Newman fell ill and his ship was becalmed in the Straits of Bonifacio, and it was there that he wrote his most famous lyric "Lead, Kindly Light." On his return, he was appointed vicar of St. Mary's, and he became the leader of the Oxfordians as they began to publish their *Tracts for the Times*, which specifically criticized the dependence of the Church of England on the government. The historical precedents the conservatives had used against the latitudinarians became the *Tracts* subjects. They fell under early disapproval, although the *Tracts* were on such esoteric topics as "Fasting in the Early Church" and the need for a new translation of the Psalter.¹³ In 1837, Hurrell Froude, Newman's dearest friend and most avid supporter, died. In his memory, Newman published Froude's papers and diaries and collectively called them his *Remains*. Phrases on how Protestantism "sticks in people's gizzards" and "the Reformation was a limb badly set—it must be broken again in order to be righted"¹⁴ opened the Tractarians to immediate condemnation as crypto-Roman Catholics.

In 1841, Newman published his last and most controversial *Tract*, the ninetieth, in which he attempted to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Thirty-Nine Articles did not differ greatly from that of the Catholic Church. He asserted that because the Articles were written before the official decrees of the Council of Trent, they did not apply to Catholic doctrine pertaining to purgatory, pardons, relics, and the sacrifice of mass. In addition, Newman argued, the Articles were directed at components of the

Catholic Church that had been misconstrued and did not coincide with true Catholic dogma. Any unauthorized superstition or corruption criticized by the Articles would likely be condemned by most Roman theologians as well.¹⁵ However, the English people did not agree with Newman's assertion, and the Heads of Houses in Oxford met on March 12, 1841 to formally condemn Tract No. 90. Realizing he had gone too far, Newman remarked: "I fear I am clean dished."¹⁶ Newman lost his standing at Oxford, and he retreated to his rural parish at Littlemore. At Littlemore, Newman surrounded himself with fellow intellectuals and the families and children whom he had catechized. Two years later, addressing a tear-stricken congregation, John Henry Newman delivered his last sermon in St. Mary's, entitled: "The Parting of Friends." On a rainy night in October 1845, Father Dominic Barberi received his confession, and the next morning Newman was baptized a Catholic.

As Newman retreated from St. Mary's, Kingsley became the curate at the Eversley Church, in Eversley, Hampshire. The congregation had been neglected by its former patron, Sir John Cope, who was more concerned with the state of his foxhounds than he was with the state of his parish.¹⁷ After reconstructing the church and its grounds by hand, Kingsley published *The Saint's Tragedy* in 1848, which was a biography of the life of St. Elizabeth of Hungary and aimed to "deter at least one young man... from the example... of whimpering meagre praises of celibacy."¹⁸ While the *Saint's Tragedy* was awaiting print, Kingsley continued his attack against the Catholic Church with an article entitled "Why Should We Fear the Romish Priests?" in *Fraser's Magazine*. Kingsley met John Ludlow and participated in the Christian Socialist Movement. Together, they tried to avert a Chartist riot by "assuring the workers that the clergy recognized the wrongs working men were suffering... the Charter was not bad, but was incapable of curing basic ills."¹⁹ In 1855, Kingsley entered the political forum by writing *Brave Words for Brave Soldiers* in an attempt to boost British morale during the Crimean War. Charles Kingsley continued his writing career, for which he was becoming famous, with the print of *Hypatia* (1853), which exemplified Kingsley's philosophy that

one should develop a strong body as well as a pious spirit. Two years later, he published *Westward Ho!*, which reflected the heroism of the Elizabethans as they defeated Spain. He followed with *Two Years Ago*, in which Kingsley expressed his abolitionist views of the American system of slavery. In 1863, Kingsley wrote *Water Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby*, which Kingsley dedicated to his four-year-old son. The book combined a message of spiritual renewal with Kingsley's wide knowledge in biology, geology, and evolution. Kingsley, who regarded himself as an amateur scientist, was fascinated by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Kingsley's writing was bringing him national fame; his *Saint's Tragedy* and *Two Years Ago* had become personal favorites of Prince Albert. Kingsley had felt it was his obligation to come to the aid of his friend, F.D. Maurice, who had been engaged in public debates with Dr. Pusey. At the time, Maurice and Pusey were engaged in an argument "over Maurice's championship of Benjamin Jowett's contribution to *Essays and Reviews*."²⁰ The *Times* was the forum for the debate, and Kingsley wrote a letter in support of Maurice, a gesture Pusey was sure not to miss. The debate concluded, and Maurice was recognized as the unofficial winner.

When the Prince of Wales visited Oxford, he nominated Kingsley for a D.C.L. scholarship. Dr. Pusey, the Professor of Hebrew at Oxford, took the opportunity to settle the "dispute" with Kingsley, for he thought that by defeating Kingsley, he would serve a powerful blow to Maurice, as both were so well associated with each other. Pusey cited *Hypatia*, which he claimed was immoral and grounds for revocation of the nomination. Kingsley withdrew from the nomination, for he realized Pusey would make it impossible to achieve the degree. He did not do so without regret, and he was angered by Pusey's attack, which was "just one more instance of the underhanded tactics used by the pro-Catholic group against its opponents."²¹ Pusey's attack was not Kingsley's sole reason for detesting the Papacy, for he hated the Catholic assertion that celibacy brought one into a purer spiritual state than normal sexual relations. Kingsley also held the Papacy responsible for blocking the democratic intentions of Mazzini and Garibaldi,

who were Kingsley's personal heroes. These prejudices, combined, were erroneously aimed at Newman, who in Kingsley's mind had come to represent "all that was fascinating, elegant, perverse, and spurious in Roman Catholicism."²²

When Kingsley was reviewing *The History of England*, by his friend James Froude (brother of Hurrell Froude) for *MacMillan's Magazine*, he took a direct aim at Newman, who had remained relatively free of public scrutiny for almost twenty years, when he let the *bon mot* slip:

Truth, for its own sake, had never been a virtue with the Roman clergy. Father Newman informs us that it need not, and on the whole, ought not to be: that cunning is the weapon which heaven has given to the saints wherewith to withstand the brute male force of the wicked world which marries and is given in marriage.²³

An anonymous friend sent Newman a copy of the manuscript, and he immediately responded on December 30, 1863 in a letter to *MacMillan's* objecting to the slander. On January 4, 1864, Charles Kingsley said that his criticism had referred to John Henry Newman's "Wisdom and Innocence" lecture which had been part of his *Sermons on the Subjects of the Day* (1844). The text of "Wisdom and Innocence" reads: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves."²⁴ Newman said that he was describing some weak animals who compensated by fleetness or by "some natural cunning" and that such methods were not available to man. Brenda Colloms, in her biography of Charles Kingsley, believes that "Nowhere in the sermon could there be found a passage which would be construed as having the meaning which Kingsley so casually suggested."²⁵

Kingsley soon realized that his accusation had been unfounded and vindictive, and he proposed to "retract my accusation as publicly as I have made it."²⁶ However, Newman was not one who took insult well, and he was known for his vengefulness. One such incident involved a young man who had the misfortune of offending Newman on the first night of his stay at Newman's Oratory; the two lived in the same house for the next twenty years without ever speaking a word to each other again. In addition to

Newman's emotional response, he felt he needed the opportunity to finally share with his countrymen his reasons for his conversion. Kingsley wanted a chivalrous end to the debate and did not quite understand why Newman rejected his written apology on January 16. Finally, Newman accepted an apology from which several paragraphs had been omitted. The recantation was published in the February *MacMillan's*: "Dr. Newman has by letter expressed, in the strongest of terms, his denial of the meaning which I have put upon his words. It only remains, therefore, for me to express my hearty regret at having so seriously mistaken him."²⁷ To Newman, the apology seemed ambiguous and he began the second phase of the debate when he published *Mr. Kingsley and Dr. Newman: A Correspondence on the Question Whether Dr. Newman Teaches that Truth Is No Virtue?*, in which Newman created a sarcastic fictional dialogue between himself and Kingsley. Kingsley, who realized that an ensuing debate was inevitable, published *What Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?* In his pamphlet, Kingsley criticized Newman for having lived a dishonest life. At that point, friends rushed to both sides of the debate. R.H. Hutton, the editor of *The Spectator*, gave Newman a forum in which to publish his responses. Although he was a staunch Protestant, Hutton thought Newman would not get a fair opportunity to defend himself. Reverend Frederick Meyrick replied to the debate, siding with Kingsley when he published *But Is Not Kingsley Right, After All?* The furious writing of responses tired both Kingsley and Newman, but the debate would have continued had not James Froude talked Kingsley into accompanying him on a trip to the Continent.²⁸

When Kingsley returned home, his career was badly damaged. He dabbled in science, and then tried in vain to become a professor of history. E.A. Freeman, of the *Saturday Review*, criticized Kingsley's lectures as "pages and pages of simply rant and nonsense...history in short, brought down to the lowest level of the sensational novelist."²⁹ Kingsley was the only professor to side with the South during the American Civil War. The final blow to his career came when his plans to have American professors from Harvard University teach American history in England fell under

attack. When Kingsley died in 1875, Newman is said to have had a mass for his soul.³⁰

Newman's career did not end as disgracefully, and following Kingsley's trip to Europe, Newman began his most famous work, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, spending on some days twenty-two hours working on the manuscript. In the introduction, Newman tells of the motives behind its writing: "I must give the true key to my whole life; I must show what I am that it may be seen what I am not...I will draw out, as far as may be, the history of my mind."³¹ A year after writing it, Newman omitted all passages from the *Apologia* dealing with the Kingsley debate. His *Apologia* has been compared to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for its gentle and emotional portrayal of its author. Newman's autobiography also dispelled English misconceptions of the Catholic Church in England. The *Apologia* was the first Christian document to define the role of the laity in the Church. In 1879, at the age of seventy-eight, Newman received a cardinalship for his defense of the Catholic faith. One of his major last works was the *Grammar of Assent*, which deals with man's hidden convictions of the heart.

Today, Newman's ideas, promulgated as a result of Kingsley's fateful debate, continue to live. Newman was the most highly quoted theologian and was referred to as the "Absent Father" during the Second Vatican Council that was convened by Pope John XXIII in the early 1960s. The Council made sixteen declarations—pertaining to the use of the vernacular at mass, the apostolate of the laity in the Church, and the relationship of the Church with other denominations. Pope Paul VI said that Newman was "guided solely by the love of truth and a fidelity to Christ."³² In 1991, Pope John Paul II gave Newman the title of Venerable. Newman's *Apologia*, although written as a rebuttal to an erroneous charge, "is a classic expression of a nineteenth century mind. The *Apologia*, though some of its themes belong to a dead past, will live as long as great literature itself has any survival value."³³

- ¹ Basil Willey, "Introduction," in John Henry Cardinal Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) p. vi
- ² Brenda Colloms, Charles Kingsley (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975) p. 268
- ³ John R. Page, What Will Dr. Newman Do? (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1994) p. 16
- ⁴ Basil Willey in Newman, p. v
- ⁵ Ian Ker, Newman On Being a Christian (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990) p. x
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. x
- ⁷ A.N. Wilson, Eminent Victorians (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989) p. 138
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140
- ¹⁰ Guy Kendall, Charles Kingsley and His Ideas (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1973) p. 19
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18
- ¹² Rev. Vincent Giese, John Henry Newman: Heart to Heart (New York: New York City Press, 1993) p. 8
- ¹³ Wilson, p. 137
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145
- ¹⁵ G.R. Balleine, The Layman's History of the Church of England (London: Church Book Room Press, Ltd., 1954) p. 203
- ¹⁶ Wilson, p. 147
- ¹⁷ Larry K. Uffelman, Charles Kingsley (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979) p. 16
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19
- ²⁰ Colloms, p. 261
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 261
- ²² Uffelman, p. 26
- ²³ Colloms, p. 269
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 269
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 269
- ²⁶ Uffelman, p. 27
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29
- ²⁹ Colloms, p. 203
- ³⁰ Uffelman, p. 29
- ³¹ Newman, p. x
- ³² Giese, p. 14
- ³³ Basil Willey in Newman, p. v

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