

# THE CARDINAL AND THE MONK: LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL CONVERGENCES IN NEWMAN & MERTON

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Thomas Merton and John Henry Newman have a lot in common. A glib comparison could disclose the following shared qualities and experiences: an English education; an Anglican sensibility; considerable literary talent; a deep intellectual restlessness; religious genius. Both men were ardent correspondents and judicious diarists and both men understood the heavy costs of conversion to the Church of Rome. Both men enjoyed public approbation and suffered public censure. They were celebrities, though they didn't much like it. Both men could readily acknowledge the truth of Père Clerissac's observation to his friend Jacques Maritain that although it is difficult to suffer persecution for the church it is more difficult still to, suffer persecution at the hands of the church.

Although there are several references to Newman in Merton's writings, at no time does he constitute the subject of a critical essay, theological exposition, or extended commentary. He appears scattered throughout the Merton *opus*—particularly in the published diaries—and we can trace a growth in sympathy and understanding. But Newman is never, in the early period, immediate; he is always remote, studied and respected at a distance. He is a reserved species.

Merton remarks in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* on how two great men

impress themselves more and more upon my heart. I revere them deeply, though formerly I ignored and misunderstood them. They are Newman and Fénelon.

What moves me is their greatness, the polish of "finished" men, masterpieces, who because they are perfect beyond the ordinary seem to have reached a stasis, a condition that is not of time. They are not of their time, or ahead of it, or behind it. They are outside of it. Indeed, they reach this condition by suffering a kind of rejection which liberates them into a realm of a final perfection, a uniqueness, a humility, a wisdom, a silence that is definitive and contains all that they have ever said. So that, even when they quietly continue to speak and to write, perhaps for a few people only or for no one at all, they are saying things for everyone of all time who can grow to understand this peculiar type of greatness. They seem "old", and belong to the past, yet they survive indefinitely. Newman is always young; and yet his contemporary and *bête noire*, Faber . . . compared with the fine-grained Newman . . . the popular and effective Faber is coarse and shallow.

Fénelon and Newman look alike, in their portraits. They often speak alike. They must have had the same gestures, the same way of looking at you, with a respect you could not imagine you had suddenly deserved. Both had, above all, style. And this, a fact which contradicts identification of banality with modesty, is necessary for perfection.<sup>1</sup>

Merton is generous in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*; in a way, he has made his peace with Newman, an intimidating figure, master stylist, and prolific Victorian whom he could not help but find daunting. In his May 26, 1947 entry in *The Sign Of Jonas* Merton makes very clear his uncomfortableness with Newman:

. . . I have absolutely nothing in common with Cardinal Newman except for the fact that we are both converts and both wrote autobiographies. He writes beautiful prose, I write slang. . . But above all, I feel utterly remote from Newman's society. One look into his life makes me feel like a savage. He is completely foreign to me: speech, attitude, everything. I have none of his

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968), pp. 24-5. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

refinement. In fact I have always scrupulously avoided refinement.<sup>2</sup>

*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, as in other things, adjusts the judgements of *The Sign of Jonas*. The young man who spurned the lushness of Cambridge for the sootiness of Columbia is not likely to prefer the refinement of the privileged classes to uncompromising New York egalitarianism. But there is reverse snobbery in all of this, an arrogance that despises breeding and perceived affectation, that confuses banality with perfection.

If the young Merton found Newman remote—the supreme stylist, measured and perfect—and a reminder of the world he fled, he was also aware of his own deficiencies of style (a point brought home to him with magisterial definitiveness by Evelyn Waugh). Newman was not for him, yet.

It is interesting to note that Merton had little taste for England's Catholic convert writers; he preferred the French. G. K. Chesterton is a case in point. There are precious few references to GKC in the Merton canon—and given his early prominence as an apologist, the absence is perplexing. His clearest statement is an indictment:

With Chesterton everything is "of course", "quite obviously", etc., etc. And everything turns out to be "just plain common sense after all." And people have the stomach to listen, and even to like it! How can we be so mad? Of course, Chesterton is badly dated: his voice comes out of the fog between the last two wars. But to think that there are still people—Catholics—who can talk like that and imagine they know the answers.<sup>3</sup>

One could see that the dogmatism of Chesterton could be off putting for Merton, although what Merton produced during his triumphalist phase was equal to Chesterton's cocksure polemics. Still, Newman was in a class of his own, a rarefied specimen of a learned and distant lineage. In time Merton came to value Newman, something

2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1956), p.57.

3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1984). p. 602. Hereafter referred to as *SMTM*.

which was not true, to my knowledge, of GKC and the English convert writers like Robert Hugh Benson, Hilaire Belloc, Frederick William Rolfe, etc. Newman and Merton were both, in their manner and in their time, theological pioneers.

Of all the Roman Catholic theologians of the nineteenth century there was none more liberated from the shackles of decadent Scholasticism than Newman. As an Anglican divine, he had little exposure to the work of the Schoolmen, and as a leading figure of the Oxford Movement, was intimately involved in reclaiming the apostolic and catholic roots for the "ecclesia anglicana." He was enamoured of the Early Church, a sharp student of the Fathers and the diverse heresies that imperilled orthodoxy, and an ecclesiologist who preferred the Primitive Sources to the manuals. Newman was the herald of that *resourcement* celebrated at the Second Vatican Council.

Similarly, Merton's own creative and critical efforts to recover the sources of western monasticism—the Desert Fathers, eastern monasticism, the First and Second Generation Cistercians, the seventeenth century reform—were all by way of assisting at the reform and renewal of his own order in his own time. To that end, he edited, translated, annotated, provided commentaries, and popularized. Like Newman, he was a "radical" theologian—he sought out the primitive sources. And, like Newman, he had a particular fondness for Clement of Alexandria, of whom he wrote in his *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from the Protreptikos* that he was a "pioneer in Christian education, Christian humanism and even Christian mysticism."<sup>4</sup>

Newman's efforts to ground Anglican identity in the apostolic church—to root the tradition, as it were—were similar in kind to Merton's latter day efforts to reacquaint the modern monk with his ancestors. Like Newman, Merton refused to trifle with history. The apriorism of the Scholastics appealed to neither, though Merton's close association with such distinguished Thomists as Jacques Maritain and his own preference for Thomism over the "process" schools might seem to suggest a more nuanced approach than we are accustomed to see with Merton and his fervid existential energies.

Both Newman and Merton turned to the Fathers, electing monastic and historical theology over philosophical and systematic. They were men for the sources, and with their historical perspective they were able to distinguish the peripheral from the essential in both church doctrine and in ecclesial self-understanding.

4. Thomas Merton, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections From the Protreptikos* (New York, New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 5-6.

In his *Letter to Pusey on Occasion of His Eirenicon*, Newman makes clear his reliance on the Fathers:

... I am not ashamed still to take my stand upon the Fathers, and do not mean to budge. The history of their times is not yet an old almanac to me. . . . The Fathers made me a Catholic, and I am not going to kick down the ladder by which I ascended into the Church. It is a ladder quite as serviceable for that purpose now, as it was twenty years ago.<sup>5</sup>

Merton, too, depended on the Fathers—the Monastic Fathers, specifically—to orient his own life and spirituality. Both men were drawn to the fertile and creative world of the Middle Ages, rejecting a Pre-Raphaelite or golden era view of the time. They admired the cut and thrust of theological debate and the very intellectual passion to be found in the writings of the major thinkers, a passion seldom found in the dry formularies and enervating manuals of the schools.

Newman's "via media" theory, his historically-conditioned view of the ecclesiastical magisterium, his notion of the development of Christian doctrine, his vigorous defense of the unique vocation of the laity in the light of the "sensus fidelium," his bold and brilliant celebration of the centrality of personal conscience, on all these matters and on others as well, Newman, the ever cautious and obedient churchman, steered the Barque of Peter through uncharted or forgotten seas. His writings and personal influence were far too great to ignore. He was a name, a presence, a national treasure. His enemies, in particular, knew of his influence, fully measured it, and feared it.

Newman's distaste for those who delate others to Rome—he suffered from such an affliction throughout most of the pontificate of Pius IX himself—and his distaste for Rome's penchant for premature involvement in ecclesial-theological debates, prompted the observation recorded in his *Letters and Diaries* during the long aftermath of the "Rambler affair":

Why was it that the Medieval Schools were so vigorous? because they were allowed free and fair play—because the disputants were not made to feel the bit in their mouths at

5. Ian Kerr, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 583. Hereafter referred to in the text as JHN.

every other spoke, but could move their limbs freely and expatiate at will (*JHN*, pp. 522-523).

Newman was not one to despise authority or its rightful exercise. He had, after all, defended the authority of Rome against its numerous detractors, by examining its apostolic record, its critical role during the doctrinal crises of the patristic period, its claim of continuity with the primitive church. So his credentials as pro-Roman could not be denied, save by the Ultramontanists and the ignorant.

Newman argued for the vital and free interplay of intellect and authority, of freedom and discipline in a way that assured the necessity of both—poised in tension—but ever struggling to apprehend the deepest truth. In a famous passage in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* he provides the Roman Catholic of the post-conciliar era with a model of such exquisite balance and utter reasonableness that one cannot but be pained by our contemporary atmosphere of mistrust:

It is necessary for the very life of religion . . . that the warfare [between the claims of reason and of the teaching authority of the church] should be incessantly carried on. Every exercise of Infallibility is brought out into act by an intense and varied operation of the Reason, both as its ally and as its opponent, and provokes again, when it has done its work, a re-action of Reason against it; and, as in a civil polity the State exists and endures by means of the rivalry and collision, the encroachments and defeats of its constituent parts, so in like manner Catholic Christendom is no simple exhibition of religious absolutism, but presents a continuous picture of Authority and Private Judgment alternately advancing and retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide—it is a vast assemblage of human beings with wilful intellects and wild passions, brought together into one by the beauty and the Majesty of a Superhuman Power,—into what may be called a large reformatory or training-school, not as if into a hospital or prison, not in order to be sent to bed, not to be buried alive, but (if I may change my metaphor) brought together as if into some moral factory, for the melting, refining, and

moulding, by an incessant noisy process, of the raw material, so excellent, so dangerous, so capable of divine purposes.<sup>6</sup>

Newman's pioneering work has achieved a degree of fruition as a result of the Second Vatican Council. Merton's pioneering work—on the nature of monkhood and the contemplative life, on the vital reintegration of "pure seeing" into the world of technological wizardry and dominance, on the eschatological consequences in the political and social order of an authentic incarnationalism—is work that will see fruition in decades to come.

Theological pioneers are theological critics of the system. They are neither Pollyannas nor doomsayers; they are thinkers with a keen sense of the human continuum, traditionalists with a taste for iconoclasm, prophets who bear witness to antiquity's unfolding, and heralds of "archaic wisdom".

But pioneers know first hand a troubled existence. Newman and Merton were both charged with being dissidents, renegades, sowers of doubt, Romans of qualified loyalty. Officialdom, the status quo, and the whole army of publicists and polemicists who have as their purpose unthinking servitude to the tradition, would have no truck with the likes of the convert innovators, John Henry Newman and Thomas Merton.

For Merton, required to endure the worst excesses of hierarchical timidity and abbatial stubbornness, the heroic Newman served as an exemplar. Smarting from the censors on the matter of his peace writings, Merton noted in his letter of June 15, 1962 to fellow poet and activist Daniel Berrigan:

My peace writings have reached an abrupt halt. Told not to do any more on that subject. Dangerous, subversive, perilous, offensive to pious ears, and confusing to good Catholics who are all at peace in the nice idea that we ought to wipe out Russia..<sup>7</sup>

6. John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, edited Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford University Press, pp. 224-6).

7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, edited by William H. Shannon, (New York, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), p. 74. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

Disgusted by the incapacity of his superiors and brother monks—the majority, at least—to appreciate the radical dimensions of their vocation of monastic-desert protest, Merton reminds a sympathetic Berrigan on June 25, 1963: “it is all right for the monk to break his ass putting out packages of cheese and making a pile of money for the old monastery, but as to doing anything that is really fruitful for the church, that is another matter altogether)” (*HGL*, p.79).

Newman, at least for the later Merton, embodied the model churchman, neither suffering fools gladly nor repudiating legitimate authority, even if myopic and flawed in its exercise. Merton observes in two separate journal entries in *A Vow of Conversation* that

My admiration for Newman grows constantly, the more I know the details of his life and all the nonsense he had to suffer from almost everyone and especially from the hierarchy of the church. With what good sense and patience he took it after all! (May 30, 1965).

. . . What about the life of Newman, which still goes on in the refectory? [He is referring here to the Meriol Trevor biography] It is so inexhaustibly important and full of meaning for me. Look what the hierarchy did to him! The whole thing is there existentially, not explicit, but it is there for the grasping. The reality is in his kind of obedience to the Church and complete, albeit humble, refusal of the pride and chicanery of churchmen. (July 9, 1965)<sup>8</sup>

Newman had direct experience of the fear and folly of constricted authority, and knew the pain one must suffer when one runs counter to the conventional norms of understanding. Merton could appreciate, in his maturing years, the personal cost and integrity demanded of Newman's especial witness. Michael Mott writes perceptively of Merton's evolving co-sympathy with the English theologian, the greatest since Julian of Norwich:

It was Newman's patience, especially in his conflict with authority, that appealed to Merton. For too long he himself had confused good manners in debate with the debating style

8. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, (New York, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), p. 186; p. 199.

he remembered at English schools and universities. His reaction to this had led to too much impatient, if not violent, language. He acknowledged that Newman's had been the better way. . . . (*SMTM*, p. 413).

Although both Newman and Merton were not theological dissidents in the way that George Tyrrell, Alfred Loisy, Ignaz Dollinger, Jacques Pohier or Hans Kung are dissidents, and although Newman and Merton could convincingly argue that their all-consuming interest in the *resourcement* necessary for effective renewal and reform is fully consonant with the best and perduring of the Tradition, not a few of their critics would accuse them of inopportuneness.

In a letter to his brother Trappist, Anthony Chassagne, Merton makes bold to liken his censorship problems with that of the English cardinal:

At the mere mention of censors I tend to see red, so I won't go on a tirade about them. But really this question of “opportunité” is absurd, at least in the completely arbitrary and irrational way in which it is handled. I see no serious objection to censorship on points of dogma and morals, and obviously the Order is interested in maintaining what is known as an image, if not an idol, of itself. But when some rather rattle-brained monks with no experience of the world, and still less of publishing, air their private fantasies about what constitutes an opportune publication, and can maintain it against the opposition of the entire publishing business, plus eminent and even intelligent persons of the laity and the hierarchy . . . . Oh well.

Years ago you recommended that I get to know Newman, and I did not see your point. I certainly do now, not that I can compare my griefs with his in this matter of censorship.<sup>9</sup>

If they were not in the strict sense dissidents, they were irritants to the establishment. Provocative, original, temerarious, and profoundly conservative, both Newman and Merton were community men. But only in part. Newman's long and acrimonious

9. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction* edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990) p. 181.

dispute with Faber and London's Broamptton Oratory, and Merton's ongoing struggle with Abbot James Fox, are clear illustrations of the mercurial personalities of both men. They could be unbending; they could be heard on their adversaries or on those they perceived, even if only temporarily, as adversaries.

Both men fought to restore their religious communities to the primitive ideal, an ideal Newman biographer Ian Ker argues is based on "an authentic Christian humanism, in which mere religiosity is as out of place as mere secularism" (*JHN*, p. 430).

Like Merton, Newman understood that true fidelity to the Tradition incorporates change and not slavish imitation. In Merton's eyes, Newman was quintessentially English and monastic in inclination, rejecting the revived but ultimately ineffectual baroque spirituality of Henry Edward Manning, Wilfrid Ward, and Frederick Faber and the antiquated medievalism of Augustus Welby Pugin and the Anglo-Catholic Ritualists. In his essay, "The English Mystics", Merton situates Newman, and coincidentally himself, firmly in the ancient and patristic tradition:

Cardinal Newman was too Catholic to be anything but an English Catholic. His Catholic instinct told him that universality did not demand renunciation of his English outlook and spiritual heritage. Hence, he did not follow the more romantic converts of his time. Or rather, though he was momentarily influenced by them, it was just long enough to discover with alarm that he could be untrue to himself and to his authentic sense of the English tradition. Having once wavered in the presence of the overcompensation practised by some of his colleagues, for whom nothing was sufficiently un-English, or too aggressively Roman, he drew back in salutary fear from the abyss of exotic and baroque clichés into which he saw himself about to fall headlong. He preserved the simplicity of his English devotion, and the clarity of the English spiritual idiom.<sup>10</sup>

The uncluttered spirituality of the later Merton—pristine, visionary, utterly simple—reminds us of the Trappist's resolve to realize for himself and his Order that pure monastic openness

10. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York, New York: Delta, 1967), p.129.

characteristic of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, to recover a primitive spirituality amidst the detritus of ecclesiastical history.

Like the Oratorian, Merton was a prolific correspondent and accomplished autobiographer. The letters and diaries of Newman number close to twenty volumes, and the letters and journals of Merton are Victorian in quantity.

Their letters and their diaries reveal, in an undisguised and arresting way, the startling self-honesty, brilliant insight, and penetrative spiritual wisdom which we find in their discursive essays, analytical and historical studies, and more overtly apologetical writings. Merton could fully appreciate Newman's quip that "if I had ideas to communicate, they have oozed out, unobserved, at the end of my fingers" (*JHN*, p. 713).

In my beginning is my end. Let's return to *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* for the final word:

There are people one meets in books or in life whom one does not merely observe, meet, or know. A deep resonance of one's entire being is immediately set up with the entire being of the other (Cor and Cor loquitur—heart speaks to heart in the wholeness of the language of music; true friendship is a kind of singing).

Yet for a long time I had no "resonance" with Newman (because I did not bother to listen for any; I think pictures of him scared me). I was suspicious of letting him in. . . . But now I want all the music. . . and am with difficulty restrained from taking too many books of Newman out of the library when I have more books than I need already (*CGB*, p. 188).

Merton let Newman in: "Cor ad cor loquitur."