

Trust, Interpretation, and Authority

Who Do You Trust, for the Truth?

Recently, I read an article prompted by the Pope's visit to Britain, and his beatification of John Henry Newman (September 2010). The article (I seem to have lost it, now) was by a Protestant/Evangelical, and was expressing dismay at the fact that Newman – in his view – had exchanged a trust in ideas, theology, and the beliefs attested in the Bible, for a trust in the Church, that is, the Roman Catholic Church, which Newman had considered (at his conversion from Anglicanism) to be the only recipient of Christian truth. From thence, it had only been necessary for Newman to accept the ideas of the Catholic Church, not to search the scriptures, and reason long and hard about beliefs and ideas (as this writer saw it).

The article prompted me to think deeply about what or who we trust, and about the whole matter of gaining truth from the scriptures (which that writer, as a Protestant, was recommending), ie. interpretation. The writer relayed the – familiar – idea that the great value of Catholicism, for masses of people not versed in theology or equipped by education to weigh arguments, was that it effectively had already done that *for* them, and they were not required to do it for themselves (being unable to it). The obverse of this was that the laity were deterred from reading the scriptures for themselves, and so not able (in this view) to discover that so many Catholic doctrines were not to be found in the Bible at all (a fact which the Reformers, with their emphasis on vernacular translation and personal Bible reading, had sought to put right).

One problem raised here concerns *interpretation*. As I have said elsewhere, any use of, or reading of any book (eg. the Bible) involves the use of reason and interpretation, and the problem with the *sola scriptura* idea (as even Calvin, it is said, was aware) is that inevitably-differing readings and interpretations quickly lead to separate religious groupings, and thence to potentially-infinite fragmentation. It may indeed be that Holy Scripture (as the Church of England Article of Religion VI has it) “containeth all things necessary to salvation”, but it still needs *interpretation*. I remember, when just a teenager, a Catholic Anglican monk reminding me that such a thing was vitally necessary, but that a specially-ordained body – the Church – was the appropriate place for this, and hence it had become the determinant of truth.

The problem with *this* view – the idea of the Church as the only necessary source of truth – is that no believer can entirely cease to reason or interpret, indeed, committing oneself to the Church, and being a Christian believer in the first place (since no organisation can believe on one's behalf, you have to do it for yourself) is an individual act of reason, choice, and trust. One's trust, ultimately, is not in the scriptures 'or' the Church, but in Jesus, and one's relationship with him. It is that personal relationship of trust which causes one to trust both the scriptures *and* the Church, since they are all bound up together (to argue, as many have, as to which came first, the scriptures or the Church, is wrong-headed, since Jesus existentially preceded both the scriptures and the Church; both the scriptures and the Church are His). The old school-boy distinction between Roman Catholics and Protestants ('for Catholics, the relationship with the Church determines their relationship with God; for Protestants, their relationship with God determines their relationship with the Church') is not violated by the kind of trust referred to here, because of the inevitable primacy – already stated – of the individual's initial personal choice and commitment to the Christian faith. So would Newman have lacked or abandoned a primary, essential, trust in Jesus? I think not.

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