

Theology and Culture in Newman's Defense of the Immaculate Conception: An Essay in Commemoration of the Canonization of Saint John Henry Newman

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Introduction

FOLLOWING THE ANNOUNCEMENT of the date for Newman's canonization this fall, the Cardinal Archbishop of England and Wales, Vincent Nichols, commented that, "for me the truly remarkable nature of this moment is that this is an English parish priest being declared a saint."¹ It is not just Newman as an English priest which is worthy of comment, but also Newman as an English theologian. This warrants attention, because Newman himself was concerned with establishing a sense of what a distinctively "English" theology might involve. This is most apparent during the Oxford Movement period, of course, when he sought to foster "a religious attitude in a highly cultured society."² In a letter to Samuel Rickards from as early as 1826, he suggests that Rickards writes a book on the Caroline Divines, to discover which distinctive doctrine holds them all together. He hopes this will provide some basis for outlining what is distinctive about English Christianity. These divines must be approached, he says, as "a corpus theologicum et

¹ "Cardinal Hopes Every Parish Priest Will 'Hold His Head High Today Knowing Cardinal Newman is a Saint,'" <https://www.birminghamdiocese.org.uk/news/cardinal-hopes-every-parish-priest-will-hold-his-head-high-today-knowing-cardinal-newman-is-declared-a-saint>.

² J. H. Walgrave, O.P., *Newman the Theologian* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 42.

ecclesiasticum, *the* English Church.”³

The same impulse re-emerges after his conversion too, for “among his Catholic co-religionists, the same problem of harmonizing religion and culture appeared with a different emphasis.”⁴ Obvious examples here include the differences in “style” between the London and Birmingham Oratories, with the former being associated with Ultramontane convictions. At Birmingham, however, Newman “deliberately assumed the position of leader of the moderate and conciliatory section of Catholic theologians in countering the Ultramontanism of the Manning-Ward group.”⁵ The well-known flashpoint of this tension surrounds papal infallibility, toward which the general English disposition is well summarized by comments by Prime Minister William Gladstone, that now “no one can . . . convert without renouncing his moral and mental freedom, and placing his civil loyalty and duty at the mercy of another.”⁶ As another commentator notes, Victorian writings “often contrasted servile Roman Catholics with ‘free born Englishmen.’”⁷ Newman’s concern was to defend infallibility in this climate, with his conviction that “to influence public opinion at all strongly,” the new Catholics “would have to rise to the level of national culture and make contact with the intellectual currents of the time.”⁸ This was important, because in the centuries following the Reformation the national culture had become more-or-less indistinguishable from what Thackeray called “the decorous pieties of Church-of-Englandism.”⁹ The vilification of Newman in the English popular press shows how deeply the conviction that Catholicism is “profoundly un-English”¹⁰ had taken root in the decades before his conversion.

The common pejorative flung at Catholic texts and their devotees during this period is “Italianate.”¹¹ There was thought to be an overly emotional,

³ John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 309.

⁴ Walgrave, *Theologian*, 42.

⁵ Walgrave, *Theologian*, 41.

⁶ Article from 1874, quoted by Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 679.

⁷ Carol Engelhardt Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 136.

⁸ Walgrave, *Theologian*, 42.

⁹ Quoted in Edward Short, *Newman and His Contemporaries* (London and New York: T & T Clark and Continuum), 181.

¹⁰ Quoted in Short, *Newman and His Contemporaries*, 11.

¹¹ Gregory Winterton, “Newman—The Father of Vatican II,” talk at Birmingham Observatory, Neman Association conference “Lead Kindly Light,” June 12, 2010, newman.org.uk/upload/Father of the Vatican.pdf; see also Ker, *Biography*, 584.

naively affective character to Catholic devotionism, combined (paradoxically) with an overbearingly totalitarian scholasticism which bound the faithful to precise statements of belief often evincing little relation to Scripture and/or early tradition. In the nineteenth century, this is most apparent in matters pertaining to Marian devotion and dogma. The devotional writer most frequently dismissed as "Italianate" in this period is St Alphonsus de Ligouri, whose devotional writings Newman said were "suitable for Italy, but . . . not suitable for England."¹² In terms of dogmatic theology, this was the era following the promulgation of *Ineffabilis Deus*, which many in the Oxford Movement had felt was the final nail on the coffin of any claim to Rome as a center of authentically developing Christianity. After all, the formal statement put a distance between Catholicism and the East, not just the Protestantism of the West.

But notwithstanding Newman's avowed concern to bring Catholic devotion and theology into some sort of appropriately "English" form, and his position as "leader of the moderate and conciliatory section of Catholic theologians" in the Second Spring, he himself practiced a marked personal devotion to the Mary as immaculately conceived. He was convinced of this dogma prior to his conversion in 1845, and had the Birmingham Oratory dedicated to it in 1851. He then made the Oratory's "principle liturgical celebration" the same feast, and gained an early permission to "have the word *immaculata* inserted in the preface . . . after the word *conceptione*."¹³ The tension at play in Newman's vocation to rediscover an English Catholicism combined with his devotional proclivities arguably gets its most explicit treatment following the publication of Eduard Bouverie Pusey's *Eirenicon* in 1865, to which Newman published his famous response the following year.¹⁴

In his response, Newman takes issue with the former's reservations about Marian devotion and dogma, which were those typical of nineteenth-century English decorum in piety and theology. On Pusey's dismissal of "Marian excesses" in popular devotion, Newman draws an analogy with the way people converse lovingly with each other in life. He writes: "What mother, what husband or wife, what youth or maiden in

¹² John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 176–77.

¹³ John Henry Newman, *Mary: The Virgin Mary in the Writings of John Henry Newman*, ed. Philip Boyce (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), 60.

¹⁴ E. B. Pusey, *The Church of England a Portion of Christ's One Holy Catholic Church, and a Means of Restoring Visible Unity: An Eirenicon, in a Letter to the Author of "The Christian Year"* (London, Oxford, and Cambridge: John Henry and James Parker, and Rivingtons, 1865).

love, but says a thousand foolish things, in the way of endearment, which the speaker would be sorry for strangers to hear?"; and, "what might even be graceful, when it was fresh from the heart . . . presents but a melancholy exhibition when served-up cold for the public eye?"¹⁵ Newman thus points out that effusive language is ever-present in loving relationships, so to criticize it is dismissive of the love which is central to faith. This is related to a second response of Newman's, centred on the promulgation of *Ineffabilis Deus*. For Newman, the codification of elements of tradition into formal dogma is of course necessary to safeguard against error, but the resulting statement must be distinguished from the reality at stake. That is, *Ineffabilis Deus* is necessary to set out the terms by which Mary is to be understood as immaculately conceived, but as a formal statement, it merely establishes the boundaries by which the faithful might approach this mystery. It is not the mystery itself, and the semantics of dogmatic formulations are instructive as much for what they do not say as for what they do say. For this reason, Newman can hold that the second typically English reservation—of a totalizing scholasticism belonging to Rome—is also misguided. This is because "theology both uses logic and baffles it." It is necessary, to "trim the balance of truth [as] at Antioch or Nicaea," but the process by which this balancing act takes place "is circuitous and elaborate; and is conducted by means of minute subtleties which will give the appearance of a game of skill in matters too grave and practical to deserve a mere scholastic treatment."¹⁶

While these are typically Newmanian responses to a contemporary theological controversy, there is a great deal of background to his statements, and this background is related to his lifelong intention to rediscover and re-envision English Catholicism afresh. My contention here is that this background is centered particularly on the early development of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This development was something Newman would be concerned to mark with an English "stamp," not least because it was realized partly through a trajectory of events in England itself. In what follows, Newman's recourse to affective modes of speech in answer to criticisms of excessive Marian devotions will be shown to have important precedents in the development of the Immaculate Conception, as indeed will the exercise of scholastic logic in the long course which led to its eventual codification. Following Newman's lead, the Immaculate Conception can emerge as something with particular importance

¹⁵ John Henry Newman, "A Letter to the Revd E. B. Pusey, D. D. on his Recent Eirenicon" (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1866).

¹⁶ Newman, *Virgin Mary*, 276.

for English theology, and indeed the English cultural experience more broadly. Yves Congar, attending a meal during a visit to Cambridge, took issue with John Robinson's disparaging comments about this dogma. He famously retorted by saying this doctrine "is the gift of your England to the catholicity."¹⁷ For Congar, this was the particularly English contribution to the universal *depositum fidei*.¹⁸ Newman's remarks to Pusey point us to various ways in which we can explicate Congar's conviction extensively.

Theology and Culture

Before entering into the detail of why Newman's responses to Pusey are so instructive, it is necessary first to respond to those who might question the rectitude of highlighting cultural affinities for particular junctures in Catholic faith, and then give some further detail on why this issue is important for interpreting Newman. On the first point, any attempt to connect cultural identities with particular Christian doctrines seems at first glance a foolhardy undertaking. Doctrines must, to some extent, surpass the limits of time and place, because teachings are passed from one generation and locality to another. This is of course particularly pronounced with "formally defined dogma." The Catechism states clearly enough that the "Church's Magisterium exercises the authority it holds . . . to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas," for these oblige all "the Christian people to an irrevocable adherence of faith."¹⁹ As put by Vincent of Lerins, one and the same dogma must always and everywhere be interpreted "with the same sense and the same understanding."²⁰ It is therefore jarring to think articulations with such universal provenance as dogmas could be seen as proximate to a particular cultural context—as if the people inhabiting the

¹⁷ Aidan Nichols, O.P., *There is No Rose: The Mariology of the Catholic Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 58.

¹⁸ Moreover, as seems to happen often with Our Lady, giving attention to things which seem peculiar oddities at first glance soon unlocks all manner of things which then prove themselves centrally important. This has been the case ever since the bishop Nestorius found the title *Theotokos* theologically clumsy, and could be seen, curiously, as related to the Pusey's admission of the perception that Catholic Mariology is actually burdensome: "That vast system as to the Blessed Virgin Mary . . . to all of us has been the special crux of the Roman system" (Pusey, *Church of England*, 101). That is, Pusey—and Newman, originally—saw from the outside that Marian doctrines seemed to be a cross one had to bear, but the latter increasingly found that they were revealed as things which stood at the "crux" of whatever matter they pertained to, and were therefore also "special."

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §88 ("The Dogmas of the Faith"), 2nd ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), 26.

²⁰ Quoted in *Ineffabilis Deus*.

places once called Chalcedon or Nicaea could claim that Definition and that Creed as being related to their own distinctive cultural tendencies.

But while dogma is universal by definition, the development of doctrine which leads up to a formal definition is of course always culturally situated. The source from whence the Vincent of Lerins quote comes originally acknowledges this, for he states: "It is necessary . . . that understanding, knowledge, and wisdom should grow [*crescat*] and progress [*proficiat*] strongly . . . [through] the course of ages and centuries."²¹ Understanding, knowledge, and wisdom develop, and if this development is important, so is its contextual situation. The challenge for theologians is to acknowledge this fact without undermining the endurance of the "same sense and the same understanding" of the matter at hand. So it would not be quite so jarring if one were to speak of the Hellenism of the Chalcedonian definition. For Hellenic philosophy and culture of course did deeply inform the way it was formulated, and for that reason they are inseparable from understanding it properly.²²

Moreover, Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, highlights Marian devotion as something which witnesses to the deep interpenetration of cultures with Church teachings, saying: "Through her many titles, often linked to her shrines, Mary shares the history of each people which has received the Gospel and she becomes a part of their historic identity."²³ Newman's response to Pusey stands in a marked proximity to this second emphasis of the relation between theology and culture. Taken with Pope Francis's words, we can appreciate why it was so important for him to show that—contrary to contemporary presuppositions—there must be ways in which Mary "shares the history" of the English people and has become "part of their historic identity." We can also appreciate why this by no means downplays or undermines the universality of the *depositum fidei*, but rather constitutes one example of its rightful appropriation in diverse settings.

Secondly, it is important to state that underlying Newman's Mariological battle with Pusey are theological loci which lie at the heart of Newman's *oeuvre*. Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* had outlined one criterion of authentic development as what he

²¹ Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, in *Corpus Christianorum*, vol. 64, ed. Rolandus Demeulenaere (Turnholti: Brepols, 1985), 177–78 (my translation).

²² On the inextricability of Hellenic philosophy from Nicaea, see Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 88, and *Introduction to Christianity* (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), 165.

²³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), §286.

called the "the Assimilating Power of Dogmatic Truth." This is a power by which the Church, "finding in the non-Christian world all kinds of opinions and other expressions of mind, as well as customs and rites, . . . incorporates them, altering their significance in so doing."²⁴ In Newman's own words: "Christianity grew in its proportions, gaining ailment and medicine from all that it came near, yet preserving its original type, from its perception and its love of what had been revealed once for all and was no private imagination."²⁵ As a criterion of authentic development, it is necessary for Newman that the Church takes hold of her differing contexts, and that "the truest idea must be the most comprehensive, and one that will be able to assimilate, without losing its identity, all the others in virtue of the truth and value they contain."²⁶ The issue for Newman, then, is that there is danger in simply imparting and transposing theological concerns and forms of devotion from contexts alien to the England he seeks to reconvert. Simply to practice some version of Christianity in a temporal or spatial vacuum immune from contextual interpenetrations is something he associates with heresy.

Indeed, the claim of Catholicism to be authentic Christianity itself depends, for Newman, on its ability to take shape and reconfigure elements of the contexts in which it finds itself. Newman's most influential contribution to theology with the *Development* essay, then, is working away behind his remarks to Pusey, and this is something interpretation of Newman would benefit from a greater awareness of. Moreover, unpacking the detail behind these remarks promises to indicate ways by which his theory can be put to work today in understanding the complex relation between theology and culture more broadly. In short, Newman's defense of effusive affectation toward Mary and the two-sidedness of his position on the necessity of logic in theological undertakings present themselves as aspects of an English cultural sensibility which have been taken hold of and re-shaped to unlock nascent riches implicit within the tradition.

History of the Immaculate Conception.

It is well-known that there are at least allusions to Mary's sinlessness very early on, perhaps most famously St. Augustine's comment that we are all born mired in sin "with the exception of the holy Virgin Mary," in regard to whom, he says, "I do not propose to have a single question raised on

²⁴ Walgrave, *Theologian*, 268n4.

²⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman and Green, 1890), 359.

²⁶ Walgrave, *Theologian*, 269.

the subject of [her] sin.”²⁷ In late Greek patristic texts, we find a group of writers known as the *Philotheotokoi*, lovers of the *Theotokos*, or God-bearer. As Aidan Nichols has pointed out, the title *Theotokos* being awarded Our Lady by the faithful “implies . . . an incomparable degree of holiness,”²⁸ and poetic exuberance for this unsurpassably holy woman led the *Philotheotokoi* to adopt turns of phrase which would suggest that, for Mary, there is “a pre-moral” or “supra-moral holiness which *finds expression*” in that moral perfection which Augustine conceded to Pelagius. Let us consult Germanus of Constantinople, for example, who speaks to God of “she whom you have chosen as a lily among the thorns of our unworthiness,”²⁹ and Sophronius of Jerusalem, who says to Mary, “no one has been purified in advance as you have been.”³⁰ Such statements were to be expected around this period in the East, because there was there a celebration of a feast analogous to that celebrated today, called “the conception of St. Anne.”

There is already an impression to take from this: the mode of speech here is poetic. It is therefore looser and more suggestive than formal theology. As poetry, it belongs at bottom to the realm of aesthetics, more concerned with beauty than truth, and less concerned with a rigorous consistency so much as a moving and inspiring of the heart. This is connected with ceremonial and liturgical celebration, the mention of which causes England to enter the scene. What historians consider “the first clear evidence” of this feast being celebrated in the West comes from Anglo-Saxon England before the Norman Conquest, where it is documented as having been celebrated at “established ecclesiastical Anglo-Saxon centres as Winchester, Worcester, Exeter, and Canterbury.”³¹ Seamus Mulholland claims that the “first definitive and reliable knowledge of the feast in the West comes from England, and precisely Winchester, where it was established by the monks there before 1066.”³² Brian Biggs points to early evidence going back to 1030—and some cite a calendar Winchester from 1035, and a pontifical of Exeter which refers to it from around 1046.³³

²⁷ St. Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 36[42] (in *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* [Vienna: Kirchengväterkommission, 1865–], 60:263; trans. Luigi Gambero in *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999], 226).

²⁸ Nichols, *No Rose*, 47.

²⁹ Nichols, *No Rose*, 49n7.

³⁰ Nichols, *No Rose*, 49n5.

³¹ Nichols, *No Rose*, 53.

³² Seamus Mulholland, O.F.M., *A Gasp of Love: Duns Scotus, Franciscan Theologian and Mystic* (Canterbury: Franciscan International Study Centre, 2011), 240.

³³ Biggs as quoted by Mulholland, *Gasp of Love*, 240n2.

Again, the sources point to the aesthetic realm of liturgical celebration, not scholastic exactitude. Indeed, Nichols comments that "a Latin observer might have deemed the feast a piece of unthinking, piously over-enthusiastic Byzantine *Philotheotokoi*-ism."³⁴ Note the word "unthinking." One might well ask if expressions in the aesthetic sphere are actually unthinking, as such, or just employ different means and manners for expressing thought than formalized discourse. The same applies to speaking of "pious over-enthusiasm." In *The Tempest*, Ariel comments to Prospero that, "Hell is empty, and all the devils are here!" That statement would not bear theological scrutiny,³⁵ but it is certainly not without meaning, but rather something illustrative and important in its own suggestive and hyperbolic idiom.

Either way, it is necessary to acknowledge the vexed question of how it came to be that Anglo-Saxon monks celebrated a feast only otherwise celebrated in the lands of the East. There are different accounts, and it is not easy to discern a clear consensus, although most commentators point to a route of exchange via the Byzantine monasteries in southern Italy.³⁶ However, it should be mentioned that the feast is said to have been celebrated a century earlier in Ireland, so some have suggested it had only crossed the Irish sea. The difficulty with this, is that the earliest Irish martyrology lists it as taking place on May 3, not December 9, which was the date of the Eastern celebration.³⁷

³⁴ Nichols, *Rose*, 54.

³⁵ Act 1, scene 2.

³⁶ Nichols, *No Rose*, 53.

³⁷ How it came to the Celts is not known with certainty, but this touches on a subsidiary issue surrounding the genealogy of English Christianity in nineteenth-century interpretation. Various moments in English self-understanding have sought (for obvious reasons) to link English Christianity less tightly to Rome than others, and would say that St. Augustine of Canterbury's arrival on the shores of Kent is relatively insignificant given the richness of Christian traditions already extant here, which have some genealogy connected the Middle East and not coming via Rome. Some of the anti-papal wing of the Anglo-Catholic tradition of the Church of England, for example, make much of this, particularly in connection with the legends surrounding Glastonbury. Now there is evidence that the Somerset levels were connected via trading routes between the ancient Near East and beyond, certainly. But that said, the question of "And did those feet, in ancient times, walk upon England's mountains green" can confidently be answered "no." But the framing of the question itself in early nineteenth-century England—and maybe the founding legend behind it—does point to a sense that English Christianity has some direct link to the source, which is why a theme of English Christian exceptionalism appears frequently in art and poetry during this time.

On balance, the most likely position is that the Anglo-Saxon celebration did not come to England via Ireland, because of this difference in the dates. Remembering the importance of this background for Newman, it is worth mentioning in passing how the possibility of an Irish connection adds a further layer of complexity to the tensions at play in the nineteenth century. While the pejorative “Italianate” is typical of nineteenth-century Englishmen, a more controversial supposition surrounds the inextricability of Irish identity and Catholicism. One of the early controversies of the Oxford Movement surrounded the Irish. Newman was full of admiration for the Irish Catholic experience after his conversion, but he maintained that the faith would have to take shape in a different way on English shores. The complexities at stake here typify his struggles as rector of the Catholic University of Ireland in Dublin (now University College, Dublin) between 1854 and 1858, when he referred to himself as a “Catholic Saxon in Ireland.” It is important to bear in mind that there is no trace of the tone of English superiority frequently found in nineteenth-century texts, but there is a strong sense of fundamental differences between the sensibilities of each people on account of their differing histories. As he commented to Gerald Manly Hopkins, the “the Irish character and traits are very different to the English.”³⁸

The question of the transmission of the Saxon celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception is thus shown to be potentially vexatious in a nineteenth-century context. This volatility endures well into the twentieth century too, as is shown by an essay in a volume from 1959, edited by Irishman, where the author, H. Francis Davis, slips surprisingly into the second- and first-person voice:

You would naturally like to think that we English got [the celebration] from you. But you must be satisfied with having recognized the conception liturgically at a notably earlier date. For, if we had taken it from you, we would hardly have kept it five months from the Irish date on 8th December, only one day removed from the date of the feast in the Eastern Church.³⁹

³⁸ Newman as quoted in Gerald Manly Hopkins, *Further Letters of Gerald Manly Hopkins*, ed. C. C. Abbott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 413–14.

³⁹ H. Francis Davies, “Immaculate Conception,” in *Mother of the Redeemer: Aspects of Doctrine and Devotion*, ed. Kevin McNamara (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1959), 84–102 at 95.

Either way, it is clear that the Anglo-Saxons celebrated the feast on the 8th, but that it soon met with difficulties after the Norman Conquest. The providential guiding of the development of Christian doctrine is a fascinating thing indeed, and Nichols claims it was "providential" that the West was so deeply marked by Augustine's responses to the Pelagian crisis, for it meant that, when "the high immaculatist theology of the Greek church began to percolate through [to the West] it was suitably challenged."⁴⁰ And, similarly, H. Francis Davis claims that it is an "historically fortunate accident that the Normans suppressed the feast when they invaded England." His reasoning is that, when the feast was gradually re-introduced, the newly arrived Normans had to find ways of justifying it, or, as he puts it, "those who re-introduced it had to defend their action."⁴¹ So post-conquest letters from Osbert of Clare, later prior of Winchester, and Anselm the Younger, abbot of Bury in Suffolk, show that the "propriety" of the feast had been "contested" by the Normans, but resurfaced and spread out across England and Northern France against a background of increasingly sophisticated theological discussion.⁴²

With the interchange between Saxon affection and Norman theology, we see the meeting of two different sentiments or tendencies growing to greater understanding through living in close proximity. This is something mentioned in passing in theological books, of course, but will prove important shortly. For what solid theological discussions of the formulation of the doctrine tend to do, quite rightly, is work from allusions in Scripture, to the Protoevangelium, then the famous Augustine quote afore-mentioned, before moving on to important steps made by the Anglo-Norman St. Anselm of Canterbury, followed by, perhaps, Eadmer of Canterbury, William of Ware, and climaxing in Bl. John Duns Scotus.

This article is not concerned with the nitty-gritty of all of that theological argumentation, but with showing how this particular interchange provides important background both for Newman's defense of affective Marian devotionism and the scholastic tenor of *Ineffabilis Deus*. Early defenders of the feast, like Eadmer of Canterbury or Osbert of Clare, are engaged in putting something essentially aesthetic into a more cognitive or ratiocinative mode. That is, moving from the suggestive, non-literal, heart-moving, or intuitive manner of expressing divine truths, into the rigorously consistent and fully coherent mode of formal theology. This is interesting, because the passing mentions one does encounter in

⁴⁰ Nichols, *No Rose*, 52.

⁴¹ Davies, "Immaculate Conception," 95.

⁴² Nichols, *No Rose*, 53.

theological books invariably consider that the impulse to ground the pre-existent devotion through reasoned understanding was something distinctively continental, usually Norman.⁴³ The free-flowing exuberance which preceded it, some say, was particularly Saxon, or Celtic.

We see an apposite demonstration of this in the opening words to Eadmer of Canterbury's treatise on the matter, describing how the Saxon celebration was met by the Normal arrival:

[In] former times [the Feast of the Conception of St Mary, the Mother of God,] was . . . widely celebrated, . . . by those in whom a pure simplicity and humble devotion to God was strong. But afterwards greater knowledge and a more searching examination of things had puffed up the minds of some, so that the simplicity of the poor was despised, and the celebration of the Feast was done away and utterly abolished as being contrary to reason.⁴⁴

Insofar as the language of faith *is* often more rhapsodic than ratiocinative, what we see in these early years is an exemplary example of St. Anselm's most famous phrase: faith seeking understanding. That is, these early discussions of the doctrine witness to the first-order, spontaneous expression of faith being hammered out in reflective second-order formal thought.

Discussions of an English Cultural Sensibility

Having shown that Newman's remarks to Pusey stand on complex historical ground, some attention should now be given to how the juncture in the history of the Immaculate Conception to which Newman seems to allude can also be judged as important according to discussions of "Englishness" in non-theological literature. This excursus will unlock dimensions of Newman's "Power of Assimilation" which are often neglected by theological scholarship. If, as Newman holds, the Church, "finding in the non-Christian world all kinds of opinions and other expressions of mind, as well as customs and rites, . . . incorporates them, altering their significance in so doing,"⁴⁵ the study of those "expressions of mind" has importance for theologians too. Moreover, outlining exactly what cultural identities *are* is one of the most vexed questions of our age. This, in turn, has

⁴³ E.g., Brian Biggs, "The Life and Works of Osbert of Clare" (PhD thesis, University of St. Andrews), 139 (core.ac.uk/download/pdf/20051698.pdf); Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976), 241.

⁴⁴ Translation in Biggs, "Life and Works of Osbert of Clare," 139.

⁴⁵ Walgrave, *Theologian*, 268n4.

bearing on the ecclesial sphere. To give just one example, Joseph Ratzinger met with considerable resistance for his writings on the interpenetration of European cultures and identities with Christianity, and, ironically, these controversies live on through their perpetuation in the writings of Cardinal Robert Sarah. But according to Newman and Ratzinger this is an unavoidable reality. For the former, "the truest idea must be the most comprehensive, and one that will be able to assimilate, without losing its identity, all the others in virtue of the truth and value they contain."⁴⁶ For the latter, insofar as cultures are directed to attaining truth, or better, "touched by truth," they can transcend their own particularity,⁴⁷ and by doing so, they offer gifts to the universality of the faith. The question here is how the tension between affective sentiments and scholastic exactitude in eleventh-century England, then, participates in what results in what Congar called a "gift of your England to the Catholicity."

The dominant approach to understanding cultural identities in the 1960s came from writers like Raymond Williams. Williams charts the complex trajectory of what he calls an "English" tradition of cultural expression, which he thinks began "in the last decades of the 18th Century." This tradition, for Williams, is a response to the "great historical changes" of industrialization and the widespread social upheaval it brought with it.⁴⁸ A similar approach is taken more recently by Paul Langford, who speaks of a developing notion of "Englishness" originating in the 1800s. He says the word originates in 1805, and was well-known by the middle of the nineteenth century. Englishness, in Langford's work, means "those distinctive aspects of national life that strike either outsiders or insiders . . . as characteristic," something that came "increasingly [to be] described as a national character."⁴⁹

These discussions have become more complex, for many now cite enduring characteristics of English cultural expression arising long before industrialization and empire. Peter Ackroyd is important here, for he charts the development of what he calls "the English imagination," or "English sensibility," right back to the earliest instantiations of native literature.⁵⁰ He

⁴⁶ Walgrave, *Theologian*, 269.

⁴⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures" (1993), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/incontri/rc_con_cfaith_19930303_hong-kong-ratzinger_en.html).

⁴⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1963), xiii–xvi.

⁴⁹ Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

⁵⁰ Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Vintage, 2004).

writes, "a native spirit persists though time and circumstance, all the more powerful for being generally unacknowledged."⁵¹ A similar position has recently been arrived at by Robert Winder, for whom enduring characteristics are rooted particularly in the agricultural developments of the Middle Ages. These are not the first to locate Englishness as more than a by-product of social and economic factors. J. B. Priestley, for example, used "depth psychology" in 1973 "to arrive as close as possible to the essential Englishness of the English."⁵² A canonical work of this type is Nicholas Pevsner's *The Englishness of English Art*, which lists certain characteristics of this art as enduring, relatively stable, and deeply related with the way people living here approach the world (he was himself an German emigre).

A presupposition that there is a certain English sensibility at play in national life is prevalent in Newman's writings. Throughout his work, he makes reference to something which today would be related to culture, but the word was not used as such in his own time. This can be seen in Ronald Knox's comments with which Newman would have been sympathetic, that Anglicanism "has come down to us [i.e., the English] . . . as the religion of a nation, adapted to its temper."⁵³ He relates questions of temperament or "sentiment" to identity, what he calls in the Oxford sermons a "temper of mind" and a "manner of life."⁵⁴ After all, how else is one to understand Newman's comments in the *Apologia* about Thomas Scott and Hurrell Froude, one being "a true Englishman," and the other "an Englishman to the backbone,"⁵⁵ or his afore-mentioned comment to Hopkins, that "the Irish character and traits are very different to the English."⁵⁶

What is of particular interest here, I suggest, is that writers on "Englishness" from spheres other than theology frequently understand the term with dynamics that can be related to the aesthetic and intuitive celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception making a difficult transition into formal and consistent theology as a result of the Norman Conquest. Brian Biggs has commented on Eadmer's opening words to his treatise as follows:

There are no surviving theological tracts from the Anglo-Saxon period concerning the Conception of Mary, and there probably

⁵¹ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 176.

⁵² J. B. Priestley, *The English* (London: Penguin, 1975), 11.

⁵³ Roland Knox, quoted by Short, *Newman and His Contemporaries*, 55.

⁵⁴ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), throughout.

⁵⁵ Newman, *Apologia*, 5, 26.

⁵⁶ Newman as quoted in Hopkins, *Further Letters*, 413–14.

were none written. In Anglo-Saxon England the celebration of Mary's conception was a purely spiritual event, without concern over the theological implications of saying that her conception was holy. With the Norman Conquest and the coming of early scholasticism, this approach to religion could no longer be accepted.⁵⁷

Biggs goes on to claim that "Eadmer regretted that he even had to write his treatise. Although he saw simple piety as superior, he recognized that the religious environment of Anglo-Norman England required that piety be supported by academic theological arguments."⁵⁸ A certain reticence toward what Eadmer calls simply "reason," and Biggs "academic theological arguments," is not unique to this treatise. Some of the theorists of Englishness afore-mentioned, consider it a recurring trope of what can be termed the English imagination. Ackroyd considers Thomas Browne's writings from the 1600s as emblematic of a tendency for which "there is no ontology, or metaphysic[s]" but a "delight in demonstration" and a "vast expenditure of energy into words."⁵⁹ He speaks of Geoffrey of Monmouth's annals as taking "Celtic source material and Celtic longings" and rendering them "subdued" by "Latin prose."⁶⁰ In the translation of French Arthurian legends in the early twelfth century, he claims the narrative alterations bespeak that "fierce reticence of the Saxons" by removing "the web of psychological generalizations and paradoxical ratiocination" of the plots.⁶¹

We see a similar recognition in Priestley, who claims to be convinced to have arrived at "the essence of Englishness" by saying,

The English depend more upon instinct and intuition than other West Europeans do. They are not unreasonable, but they are hardly ever strictly rational, and almost always they suspect the closed-in creations of pure rationality: they prefer the open-ended. It is essentially English not to allow the intellect to go its own way and decide everything; it must submit to some shaping and colouring by the instinctive and the intuitive.

⁵⁷ Biggs, "Life and Works of Osbert of Clare," 131.

⁵⁸ Biggs, "Life and Works of Osbert of Clare," 139.

⁵⁹ Biggs, "Life and Works of Osbert of Clare," 62.

⁶⁰ Biggs, "Life and Works of Osbert of Clare," 109.

⁶¹ Biggs, "Life and Works of Osbert of Clare," 147.

Such sentiments seem, at best, quaint to contemporary ears, at worst, unsustainable. But they crop up in settings which are very surprising. For example, the social historians of the New Left squabbled over just this English reticence in the 1960s, for there were those for whom Marxism was a typically continental, rational, totalizing system which had to be adapted and reinterpreted if was to take root in England. E. P. Thompson, for example, celebrated what he called an English “idiom” which favors empirical realities over philistine rationalism, used his own pejorative “Parisian” in reference to it, and claimed that “minds that thirst for tidy Platonism very soon become impatient with actual history.”⁶² It can also be seen in understandings of English Christianity. Ackroyd claims that a distinctively English Catholicism that precedes the Synod of Whitby and Norman Conquest endures in Julian of Norwich, for example, who “rejects the tight juridical procedures of scholastic moral theology,” mirroring the old “hermits and anchorites” of “Cornwall and Northumbria” who exhibited such a stubborn “distaste for regimentation.”⁶³ He goes on:

There has never been in England a tradition of theological speculation, in the manner of an Augustine or an Aquinas . . . ; the nearest equivalent to the great *Summa* . . . of European civilization are the short handbooks for English contemplatives or anchorites.⁶⁴

Ackroyd makes much of this point, and repeats the fact that “there is no English Aquinas.”⁶⁵ But there is certainly an early English affection for the Immaculate Conception, which the angelic doctor famously found so difficult to accept.

For Newman, an affection for reserve is closely linked to a tendency to focus on affective and empirical reality over against the grand idealist speculation of the Continental mainland. When one reads Newman’s discussions of the Immaculate Conception, his reasoning is nearly always more aesthetic than conceptual, or, one might say, more patristic than scholastic. For example, he usually sees the doctrine as an outworking of the divine maternity and Mary as second Eve, claiming that “an intuition of faith enables us to see how ‘convenient’ or appropriate it was that the Word made flesh should . . . preserve his Mother free from all sin.” This is of

⁶² E. P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” *The Socialist Register*, 1965, 311–62 (marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1965/english.htm).

⁶³ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 126–27.

⁶⁴ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 128.

⁶⁵ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 128.

course not convenience in the sense of functional benefit, but the mode of arguing from *convenientia*, or “fittingness,” a “method . . . used in theology, especially to confirm a point that is known from other sources.”⁶⁶ “Fittingness” is a key category for theorists of aesthetic philosophy—it defines why a certain word is required in a particular poetic utterance for example, why a certain hue is necessary for the feature of a particular painting. One can put such compelling requirements into formal academic discourse, but it is very difficult, and something is lost by doing so.

For Newman this does not deny the importance of reason for understanding the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, nor is there any claim from him that the English tradition is irrational. The point is that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception arises from the meeting point of what philosophers call different faculties of the mind, or what are for scholars of intellectual history, differing emphases in cultural tendencies. The earliest attempts to systematize and give grounding rationales for the doctrine came about due to the meeting of the Saxon, Celtic, and Norman peoples in eleventh- and twelfth-century England. It is therefore interesting that theorists of an English sensibility tend to describe Englishness in terms of the meeting of different tendencies. The most obvious example here is Matthew Arnold, himself a younger contemporary of Newman's who was permanently marked by hearing him preach when an undergraduate at Oxford. As he wrote to his elder some decades later, “nothing can ever do away the effects you have produced in me, for it consists in a general disposition of mind rather than in a particular set of ideas.”

Arnold is, like many others, concerned with a tendency toward reserve or reticence, which he thinks pervades the English imagination. The important point, though, is that he considers this tendency to lie in the unique combination of deeply opposed tendencies, in this case, the Celtic and the German. He considers Celtic traditions to exemplify “a passionate, turbulent, indomitable reaction against the disposition of fact” and the Germanic to be “disciplinable” and “practical” and therefore “spreading its exertions within a bounded field, the field of plain sense.”⁶⁷ Considering the tension between Britain and Ireland in Arnold's lifetime, the specifics of this must be treated with care. But, that said, a contemporary Arnold scholar notes these sorts of conclusions “were generally accepted throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.”⁶⁸ It is difficult to imagine anyone saying today, “no people . . . are so shy, so self-conscious, so embarrassed as the

⁶⁶ Boyce, “Introduction,” in Newman, *Virgin Mary*, 58.

⁶⁷ Matthew Arnold as quoted in Ackroyd, *Albion*, 11.

⁶⁸ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 228.

English, because two natures are mixed in them, and natures which pull them in such different ways."⁶⁹ Ackroyd claims to find the same tradition of "awkwardness" that Arnold was trying to explain throughout the tradition from "Chaucer, to Auden" and even as far back as *Beowulf*.⁷⁰

The key point here is that it has long been considered a tendency of Englishness to combine and interweave different cultural influences. Even the study of the language of Middle English itself, as a tongue which combined and balanced two languages, has led to the conclusion that "it is in the nature of English language . . . to reside at [a] nodal point where two languages or perceptions meet."⁷¹ Such a quality has been associated with Shakespeare, as a master of "the play of oppositions."⁷² As Samuel Johnson noted, Shakespeare wrote plays which are strictly speaking neither "tragedies nor comedies . . . [but which mingle both] with endless variety of proportion."⁷³

Such thinking is important for Nicholas Pevsner, who works on the basis that a deduction of what Englishness is like will only "be successful—that is approach the truth—if it is conducted in terms of polarities, that is in pairs of apparently contradicting qualities."⁷⁴ And again, such approaches are found in matters pertaining to English Christianity. St. Anselm, for example, has been called "the last of the patristics, the first of the scholastics," meaning he stands at the point where the two met, and were transformed. This old adage has recently been discussed by R. W. Southern, who agrees that Anselm has "neither the richness of content and breadth of vision of the Fathers, nor the accumulation of materials into large organized bodies of thought . . . which characterize the scholastic centuries."⁷⁵ This combinational tendency has been described as "distinctive precisely because of its willingness to adapt and to adopt other influences," that "its uniqueness lies [not] in the sum of its differences, but [in] [a] process . . . of absorption and transformation where two hitherto incompatible influences . . . are somehow amalgamated and thereby embedded within a common sensibility."⁷⁶

Interestingly, this absorption and transformation of two hitherto

⁶⁹ Arnold quoted in Ackroyd, *Albion*, 228–29.

⁷⁰ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 11.

⁷¹ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 98–99.

⁷² Ackroyd, *Albion*, 228.

⁷³ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 226.

⁷⁴ Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, 24.

⁷⁵ R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 442.

⁷⁶ Ackroyd, *Albion*, 36.

incompatible influences can be applied to Newman's work *in toto*. He was hardly uncritical of English self-understanding, and was sharply critical of it as much as he exemplified it, if not more so. Newman's difficult relationship with the English sensibility is well described by Harold Weatherby, who charts a particular "common tradition" evinced by people like Edmund Spencer, Richard Hooker, Lancelot Andrewes, and John Donne, and then rebukes "Newman's departure from [what he terms] the old orthodoxy of England." He thus concludes that "'Newmanism' is . . . the name of a new sensibility in English theology . . . determined by two movements: that of loss and that of gain, of exile and homecoming."⁷⁷

A Perfect, Delicate Flower

There are definite points of contact between English cultural self-understanding and the development of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and these are mirrored in Newman's responses to Pusey. In the first place, considering the effusiveness of Marian devotional language as, at bottom, aesthetic, connects it with the early instantiations of the feast's celebration in Anglo-Saxon England. A reticence toward formal or systematizing modes of discussion is evinced throughout the broader tradition. Secondly, the development of this doctrine is particularly marked by the extensive scholastic discussion required for it to reach the stage of *Ineffabilis Deus*, and the meeting of different tendencies or habits of mind demonstrated by the Saxon-Norman encounter relates to a "combinational trope" found throughout the broader tradition too. To bring this discussion together, it remains to be shown how pointing to this background to Newman's responses to Pusey provides an oft-neglected but important insight for Newman interpretation, and to suggest why this finding is of relevance for understanding the relation of theology and culture more broadly.

To begin with interpretation of Newman, the key issue here surrounds Newman's complex reception history. On the one hand, he is undoubtedly one of the finest theologians of the modern era, of whom it is suggested the title of "Doctor of the Church" awaits.⁷⁸ On the other hand, he is also immensely important in nineteenth-century history, being a public controversialist too. The general upshot of this broad reach of Newman reception

⁷⁷ Harold L. Weatherby, *Cardinal Newman: His Place in English Theology and Literature* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1973), 10, 115.

⁷⁸ Ian Ker, "Newman Should Be the Next Doctor of the Church," *Catholic Herald*, February 21, 2019, catholicherald.co.uk/magazine/newman-should-be-the-next-doctor-of-the-church/.

is, arguably, a certain bifurcation in discussions of Newman, where historical and cultural concerns are frequently separated out from specialized theological analysis. It is my contention that Newman's responses to Pusey show one point where these two loci of Newman's reception meet: he engages in a public controversy, that is, an open letter to a representative of high-church Anglicanism who was once a fellow traveler, but this controversy constitutes an outworking of a key element of his theology proper, namely, the "Assimilative Power" from the *Development* essay.

The more historical/cultural strand of Newman interpretation is likely to focus on the examples Newman uses to make his points to Pusey. To argue against the latter's supposition that "Italianate" devotion seems a recent phenomenon with no patristic antecedents, Newman does not turn to theology, but to William Shakespeare: "The idea of Shakespeare as a great poet, has existed from a very early date in public opinion; and there were at least individuals then who understood him as well, and honoured him as much, as the English people can honour him now"—yet, he says—"there is I think a national devotion to him in this day such as never has been before." So, "Catholics have ever acknowledged [Mary]; and yet . . . their devotion to her may be scanty in one time and place, and overflowing in another." A similar apologetic move can be seen later in Newman's text. Rather than make recourse to a theological source, Newman invites Pusey to cast his mind back to the Coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837. He writes of "the strange emotion which took by surprise men and women, young and old, when . . . they gazed on the figure of one so like a child, so small, so tender, so shrinking, who had been exalted to so great an inheritance and so vast a rule, who was such a contrast in her own person to the solemn pageant which centered in her."⁷⁹

Yet, along with these culturally situated arguments, I suggest, Newman is also showing how the Immaculate Conception's development in England shows the "Assimilative Power" which indicates authentic development. This is how his comments on effusive language should be understood. He writes, "religion acts on the affections; who is to hinder these, when once roused, from gathering in their strength and running wild?" For "they hurry right on their object, and often in their case it is, the more haste, the worse speed."⁸⁰ Such comments could equally have been made by the Saxons who celebrated this feast when the Normans arrived. Moreover, he goes on to say that it is not "any safeguard against excesses in a religious

⁷⁹ John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching Considered* (London: Burns and Oates, 1876), 90.

⁸⁰ Newman, *Certain Difficulties*, 90.

system, that a religion is based upon reason and developes [*sic*] into a theology. Theology both uses logic and baffles it; and thus logic acts both for the protection and for the perversion of religion. Theology is concerned with supernatural matters, and is ever running into mysteries. . . . But logic blunders on, forcing its way as it can." Again, this reticence or reserve toward scholastic reasoning is quintessentially English, and can be considered something "assimilated" in a particular way through the development of the Immaculate Conception.

Finally, there are some points to be drawn from this about understanding the relation of theology and culture. Beneath this vexed relationship are questions surrounding particularity and universality. As mentioned above, tensions in the study of theology and culture frequently involve the danger of overplaying the relative domain of culture over against the absolute domain of revealed truth. With Newman, he undertakes a remarkable task, arguing for and demonstrating doctrine's appropriation in a specific cultural context as necessary and even desirable, while also maintaining doctrine itself as *corrective* to its cultural setting. His defense of the effusive language of popular piety, for example, commends the aesthetic sources of Marian devotion, but uses this to point to something worthy of correction in the English mindset. On the one hand, he agrees that "we owe it to the national good sense, that English Catholics have been protected from the extravagances which are elsewhere to be found," but on the other he admonishes Pusey that "it seems to me a simple purism, to insist upon minute accuracy of expression in devotional and popular writings." This can be connected with well-known comments of Newman's from his *Prophetic Office*, where he comments on the image of "a poor Neapolitan crone, who chatters to the crucifix," which would be a typical figure of English derision among common-sense Victorians. But he goes on, "I should be disposed to doubt whether that nation really had the faith, which is free in all its ranks and classes from all kinds and degrees of what is commonly considered superstition." In this way there is both loss and gain, again, insofar as English cultural sensibilities are critiqued as they are accommodated, being re-established, if you will, and put on their proper footing.

Transposing aesthetic or exuberant expressions into a cognitive or formalized mode should indeed be considered a delicate business. As Newman writes, "such a process . . . is conducted by means of minute subtleties which . . . give it the appearance of a game of skill in matters too grave and practical to deserve a mere scholastic treatment."⁸¹ Perhaps this

⁸¹ Newman, "Genuine Catholic Belief and Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary," in *Virgin Mary*, 271–82, at 276.

is why it fell ultimately to the subtle, not the angelic, doctor to perform the task. Nonetheless, the end result—after centuries of wrangling—is something which must be considered perfect: something which obliges *all* “the Christian people to an irrevocable adherence of faith.” In terms of how we understand doctrine and dogma, then, we cannot simply consider the formal articulation of innate or tacit truths something unnecessary or undesirable, any more than Catholic theology can present developments as immune to their spatio-temporal appropriations. To do either of these would be to stand closer to the Eastern than the Western tradition as regards great Marian dogmas. But at the same time, Newman enables the revealed status of Catholic dogma always to maintain its proper place—so this peculiarly English rose among thorns can emerge as both a “delicate” and a “perfect” flower, or, as put by William Wordsworth, as this “tainted nation’s solitary boast.” NV