**Newman and the British Monarchy**

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Abstract

The funeral of Queen Elizabeth II and the coronation of King Charles were events as acclaimed in Catholic circles as in Protestant/Anglican circles, indicating that tensions between Catholics and the British Crown have been consigned to history. From a theological perspective the rationale for this harmonious state of affairs is grounded in a commitment to religious freedom being shared and indeed celebrated by both parties. This article scrutinises this rationale, employing the thought of St John Henry Newman, a convert to Rome from Anglicanism, who is considered central in the development of Catholic integration into British public and cultural life. Newman’s writing suggests however that it is the Christian character of the British monarchy which his central to its harmonious relationship with British Catholics, rather than a shared commitment to generic religious freedom, and, moreover, Newman offers epistemological insights which can inform contemporary discussions about the existence of the monarchy itself.

Keywords

Reformation / Political Theology / Church and State / Epistemology / Theology and culture / John Henry Newman

Introduction

The funeral of Queen Elizabeth II and the coronation of King Charles were as acclaimed in Catholic circles as in Protestant/Anglican circles, indicating that historical tensions rooted in the Reformation have been consigned to history. The notion that being Roman Catholic could necessitate misgivings about the British Crown is now an antiquated view with little or no purchase in contemporary Britain. The situation was of course dramatically different following the English Reformation, and one figure considered centrally important in changing attitudes among Catholics since then is John Henry Newman, who was canonised in 2019, thereby becoming the first English saint who lived after the Reformation to be formally recognised by Rome. For many, the speech by the then-Prince Charles, delivered in Rome on the eve of the canonisation, was emblematic of the deeply harmonious relationship between the Papal See and the House of Windsor. Newman’s role in enabling this was acknowledged in that speech, which stated that Newman’s ‘leadership’ had led to a situation whereby ‘Catholics became fully part of the wider society, which itself thereby became all the richer as a community of communities’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To call Britain ‘a community of communities’ highlights its religiously plural nature. This relates to the most obvious theoretical ground for how it came to be that such a contentious and bloody history could evaporate so entirely. Religious freedom is a Catholic theological principle fully codified in the document *Dignitatis Humanae*, as involving what Pope St John XXIII describes as a fundamental human right: that each human person must be ‘able to worship God in accordance’ with the ‘right dictates’ of his or her ‘own conscience’ and to profess his or her ‘religion both in private and in public’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The commitment to this basic principle is equally shared by the British Constitution, and thus both defended and celebrated by the Crown – being guaranteed under international law within the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) since 1966, and Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, which states that ‘everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Given this obvious shared concern, it is understandable that the commentator Catherine Pepinster has argued that Catholic participation in the life of the British monarchy would be further extended by lessening the more overtly Protestant elements of the institution, which would in turn, says Pepinster, enable a fuller participation for other non-Protestant communities of faith, be they Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or indeed Catholic.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Criticisms of the monarchy are therefore today very unlikely to be religiously motivated, but are rather closely allied to the ideology of secularism. Such criticisms argue that monarchy itself is woefully antiquated, that hereditary succession is unjust and unmeritorious, that the institution enjoys unacceptable material and political privilege, and exhibits a highly questionable history when it comes to British colonialism. Proponents of such views hold that the long-term outlook for the monarchy is (or should be) therefore highly uncertain. The Anglicanism of the monarchy is often central to such critiques, arguing that it is inappropriate to have a state institution with a religious/denominational allegiance in a religiously plural society.

In what follows, I will argue that Newman’s contribution toward reconciling Pope and Crown in the popular mind should not be understood in terms of the shared commitment to religious freedom, because his own writing on the matter relies heavily on the Christian character of the British monarchy itself. When it comes to the broader challenges facing the monarchy in the 21st century, however, Newman also offers resources for justifying its continued existence in the years to come, from his epistemological writings.

1: Monarchy and Christianity

During the outpouring of grief that attended the death of Queen Elizabeth II, and the celebration of King Charles’ coronation the following year, the Catholic response was almost unanimously positive. We need not go all the way back to the Reformation to encounter historical tensions, however, for such tensions remained intense during the life of John Henry Newman (1801-1890). The tensions were not just historical, but also theological. In the mid-19th century, Newman was not alone in tackling questions surrounding the theological weight of what we would today call ‘national culture’ against the background of a 19th century Catholic scene which left little room for local variation in political systems. For example, the 1843 translation of the Catholic theologian Johann Adam Möhler’s *Symbolik* includes the following passage:

‘Each nation is endowed with a peculiar character, stamped on the deepest, most hidden parts of its being, which distinguishes it from all other nations, and manifests its peculiarity in public and domestic life, in art and science; in short, in every relation.’

Möhler goes on,

‘In every general act of a people, the national spirit is infallibly expressed; and should contests […] occur, the element destructive to the vital principle of the whole will most certainly be detached in them’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This understanding of a ‘vital principle’ or ‘peculiar character’ pertaining to a nation is markedly similar to the ‘vital principle’ which Newman considers pertains to Christianity itself. In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, he describes one characteristic of an authentic development in Christian doctrine as ‘the power of assimilation’. He argues that, as Christianity develops, the original ‘vital principle’ of Christianity grows ‘by taking into its substance external materials’ – which will include those rooted in ‘national culture’ - while it also rejects ‘external materials’ which are ‘destructive’ to the original idea – for destructive elements cannot be ‘subjected to a new sovereign’, which is ultimately, Jesus Christ.2  The difficulty here is, of course, that the universal faith which Newman concluded is ever-safeguarded by Rome, as well as each particular nation, both have their own ‘vital principle’. Yet, for Newman, the development of the purportedly universal Catholic faith takes shape by drawing on its cultural setting - especially where, he says, there is an ‘antecedent affinity’ between Christian teaching and the ‘peculiar character’ of that setting.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Considered practically, to convert to Catholicism in Newman’s day was to make oneself vulnerable to serious allegations of national disloyalty. Frank Turner famously said ‘the Tractarian pursuit of the Catholic led as much to *cultural* as to *religious* apostasy’, and if that pursuit ended in the waters of the Tiber, the apostasy was frequently taken to be political too.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nearly twenty years after Newman converted, he was subjected to a full-blown character assassination by Charles Kingsley, which skated as close as possible to an accusation of treason. Kingsley alleged that Newman had insinuated that ‘Queen Victoria’s government was to the Church of England what Nero’s or Diocletian’s was to the Church of Rome’. Moreover, Kingsley did not hold back about his ‘strong distrust of certain Catholics’, by which he means converts from Anglicanism, for they are said always to ‘round upon their mother Church, (I had almost said their mother country) with contumely and slander’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Against this background, the movement within Catholicism which called for a formal definition of Papal Infallibility, in the run-up to the First Vatican Council of 1869-70, seemed particularly sinister. How could one be loyal to two parties if one of those parties is taken to be an infallible oracle? Newman defended the definition to the Duke of Norfolk, and the letter containing his defence is rightly taken as an important milestone toward the contemporary rapprochement between Roman Catholics and the British crown to this day. Newman stated something which can now just be assumed: ‘I see no inconsistency in my being at once a good Catholic and a good Englishman’.[[9]](#footnote-9) His argument is that the formal definition of Papal Infallibility does not extend to political issues, but rather to instances where the Pope speaks *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals.[[10]](#footnote-10) Infallibility is therefore not about political allegiance; hence, one can assume it is near impossible that a supposedly infallible oracle would contradict a local sovereign. Indeed, it is precisely the historical failure to disambiguate these two domains of concern which is the primary issue for Newman. He points to the Irish example to claim that ‘Ireland is not the only country in which politics, or patriotism’ has ‘been so closely associated with religion in the nation’ that it is difficult to say which is which.[[11]](#footnote-11) Such sentiments can be interpreted as suggesting a greater separation between religion and politics *tout court* would be beneficial for the Catholic cause.

Newman’s letter might seem to settle the matter, and indeed many assume it does. However, given a 19th century context riven with ‘No Popery’ and much popular anti-Catholic prejudice, not to mention the slander against him from Kingsley, we might ask whether Newman strategically downplays some of the underlying issues at stake. That is, at the time of writing his *Letter*, there was no formal doctrinal reprieve from the counter Reformation-era understanding of political sovereignty. Such an understanding can be seen in St Robert Bellarmine, for whom the pope gives ‘legitimacy to the power of princes’, and kings rule ‘only indirectly by divine right’. Hence, ‘the sovereign pontiff’ holds ‘indirect power over temporal matters’ when such matters risk ‘compromising the eternal salvation of the faithful’.[[12]](#footnote-12) The supernatural (or direct) divine right, depends on the bond between ‘the monarch and the Church’, as defined by Pope Gregory VII. The pope’s divine right ‘is superior to that of kings and emporers’, says Bellarmine, which means he can excommunicate, and even release ‘subjects from their oath of allegiance by virtue of their ruler’s disobedience of the Catholic faith’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

There is no need to rehash 16th and 17th century arguments here. The point is that Newman avoids mentioning this point, perhaps to avoid another allegation of national disloyalty. Put in overly pedestrian language, one cannot always separate the realm of ‘faith and morals’ from the realm of ‘secular discourse’, political decisions can, in extreme circumstances, have consequences which bear on the possibility of ‘salvation as such’. In those circumstances, the faithful Catholic would no longer be able to be a good citizen of the realm *and* a good Catholic. There is at least an abstract or principled inconsistency between the two, although there has been no need for it to activated in recent years.[[14]](#footnote-14)

An important implication arises from Newman’s omission, however. The *de jure* tension does not have *de facto* traction, because the specific character of the British monarchy does not threaten to undermine basic fundamentals of faith and morals. The Letter to the Duke of Norfolk is a *concordat*, but not a conflation, of the British Constitution with the Catholic faith.[[15]](#footnote-15) The implicit terms of this concordat are that each monarch stays on the right path as regards Christian faith, and Christian morality. Indeed, the concordat is only possible insofar as temporal power is being wielded in broad alignment with Christian teaching. Otherwise the separation between ‘faith and morals’ and the political sphere breaks down, and the concordat falters. Contrary to popular conceptions, then, Catholic loyalty to the monarchy is not, for Newman, based on a shared commitment to religious freedom. It is won by the fact that the British monarch’s public influence will not lead to serious deviations from Christian teaching.

2: Monarchy and Epistemology

It might seem from the above section that Newman’s writing is less important for approaching the relationship between Rome and the British Monarchy than is often assumed. When it comes to the broader challenges facing this institution, however, Newman offers some helpful resources. This can be seen by making recourse to Newman’s epistemology, as described in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. In order to show how his epistemics apply to justifications of monarchy, it is necessary to consider a recent attempt to find a rational justification for monarchy from the perspective of political Liberalism, by Detlef von Daniels. What von Daniels work has shown, is that – from the perspective of what we can term Liberal principles – it is more than a little difficult to justify the institution of monarchy. Rather than dismiss monarchy as unacceptably illiberal, however, von Daniels suggests that our range of justification needs to be much deeper and richer than mere theory. Interestingly, the extended range of justification which von Detlef offers is markedly similar to the epistemological terrain which Newman not only marked out in the *Grammar*, but did so while commenting on how deeply English such an approach reasoning is.

von Daniels claims Liberalism proper operates under three primary slogans. The first is ‘Reasonable Justification’ – meaning there must be an underlying rationale for political institutions that is transparent to reason and grounded in reason. He roots this right back in John Locke’s criticism of Robert Filmer, but we see it more recently in John Rawls *Theory of Justice*, which argues that neither divine revelation nor contingent historical facts ‘can be accepted as sufficient justification of political institutions.[[16]](#footnote-16) If there is no transparent rational ground for an institution, then, it is not legitimate – and there goes heredity continuity, primogeniture, the coronation oath and much more besides. The second slogan is what von Daniels calls ‘the Idea of Equality’. This is the basic point that people ‘have to be treated by public authorities as equals’, and ‘arbitrary differences’ such as ‘birth, sex, religion or race, must not play a role in the determination of the choices one has in society’. The third is ‘General Approval’. A Liberal society is one which ‘consists for the most part of people holding some kind of liberal convictions or beliefs’ which are transparent to all – there is no privileged insight for a particular group or individual. This can be connected with a later variant of similar impulses in Jurgen Habermas, whose ‘constitutional patriotism’ ‘postulates that each and everyone can establish a bond’ to ‘reasonably justified constitutional features’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Most discussions of the British monarchy, at least in the mainstream of political comment, seek to ensure the Monarchy passes the bar of such Liberal slogans. Let us take ‘reasonable justification’ – here, people can and do respond by saying that the monarch has a largely ‘representative’ or ‘symbolic’ function, and only ‘real power’ has to be subjected to reasonable justification. Or, and this was very common after Queen Elizabeth’s death, they argue that an exceptional intensification of *noblesse oblige* applies to the monarch. For, in answer to ‘the idea of equality’, people claim that ‘monarchs nowadays…have fewer rights than other people’, and indeed ‘destiny is imposed on them by the public with little means to reject the public’s demands’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

However, von Daniels maintains that these counter-arguments are not successful in fitting ‘monarchy as a form of state’ into ‘liberalism’s framework’. One could say the British monarch does have ‘real power’ – insofar as he or she has a level of access that none others can be constitutionally guaranteed to have. Also, while there are certainly contingent practices which mean monarchical office involves huge sacrifices of personal freedom, to pretend it doesn’t also involve huge privileges not granted to normal citizens is hardly convincing. For reasons such as this, von Daniels concludes that, theoretically, we cannot square the circle. Yet, in terms of concrete history, he maintains that we don’t need to. He argues that, by not propounding ‘theories’ but rather observing ‘embedded practices’, it is licit to maintain a belief in Monarchy during a liberal age – because even liberalism itself ‘rests on historical memories’, and the sort of liberal purism that actually achieves functional neutrality is almost impossible to envisage. Liberal slogans are always heard in ‘particular’ contexts, related to particular circumstances and their traditions and their particular histories. A comprehensive historical understanding of the institution of the Monarchy requires that we accept a measure of what von Daniels calls ‘narration’ over against ‘theoretical justification’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Newman comes back into view here because his own epistemology shares much common ground with this terrain marked out by von Daniels. He emphasizes things similar to what von Daniels calls ‘embedded practices’, ‘historical narration’, and ‘particular languages’ – over against dogmatic ideology and over-weaning theory. I have in mind here, of course, what he terms the ‘illative sense’. Newman seeks to expound human reasoning as it actually proceeds in ‘the experience of human life, as it is daily brought before us’.[[20]](#footnote-20) He considers ‘formal logic’ vastly overrepresented, leading to a view of human decision making as mere ‘abstraction’ and not effectively ‘carried into the realities of life’.[[21]](#footnote-21) The ‘illative sense’ is the sense we have for a matter at hand as we engage in concrete decision making in daily life. ‘Illative’ is drawn from the noun illation, related to the past-participle of the Latin for ‘to infer’, *inferre*, which is *illatus*. Literally, the illative sense is, then, an ‘inferred’ sense - judgements about a matter at hand, about which a multitude of judgements have already occurred as the matter is brought to consciousness, ‘reasoning after the fact’, if you will. Preliminary judgements are not inferences in the formal sense, they are not broken down into components then constructed into premises. They are described by Newman as *in*-formal ‘inferences’. These are ‘too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circuitous to be convertible into syllogisms, too numerous and various for such conversion, even were they convertible’.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In short, the positions people take on things in daily life can only rarely be distilled into abstract, theoretical premises – they arise from a complex multitude of assumptions, embedded contexts, narrative experiences, local particularities, and so on. This does not mean the positions taken are irrational, says Newman, it is just the human ratiocination is much broader and deeper and richer than 19th century rationalist philosophers assumed. von Daniel’s discussion of Monarchy thus lands on exactly the sort of justification that Newman felt underlies most humanly significant things, including religious assents. Justifications for Christianity cannot be solely grounded in formal logic insofar as they include assents to divine revelation. Thus, for Newman, our judgements about historically contingent facts and divine revelation are structurally analogous, in epistemological terms at least. Neither are grounded by formal logic – both require a web of prior-judgements, ‘too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circuitous to be convertible into syllogisms, [and] too numerous and various *for* such conversion’.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Interestingly, then, Newman’s epistemology could, by extension, shield the institution of Monarchy from demands for a purist theoretical grounding, insofar as its endurance is precisely the sort of concrete fact Newman considers central to human experience. This epistemological resonance between von Daniels and Newman is also fruitful because the same terrain has much lineage in British and English cultural self-understanding. Fuseli commented on the English that their ‘tastes and feelings all go to realities’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Stefan Collini speaks of an English ‘disdain for theory’, and E.P. Thompson of the English ‘empirical idiom’ that maintains that ‘[m]inds that thirst for tidy platonism soon become impatient with actual history’.[[25]](#footnote-25) We have in this connection also what Matthew Arnold contends about an English ‘empirical genius’, and the tendency of English prose always to avoid ‘abstract learning’ as exemplified in Thomas Browne’s eschewing of any ‘ontology or metaphysic’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Indeed, Peter Ackroyd connects this with English religion, specifically, claiming it explains why there ‘has never been in England a tradition of theological speculation in the manner of an Augustine or an Aquinas’.[[27]](#footnote-27)

All this is worth pondering, I suggest, not only because it shows how justifications of the monarchy closely relate to the cultural self-understanding of Britain, but also because it relates back to Christianity itself, again. One might even extend Newman’s reasoning to argue that this-worldliness of the English idiom offers an ‘antecedent affinity’ with the this-worldliness of Christianity, a Christianity of Incarnation, of Church, and of Sacrament, particularly. Insofar as the justification of monarchy then proceeds in a this-worldly way, the contemporary Catholic appreciation of the monarchy need not look to a restrained view of monarchical governance like those liberal justifications that von Daniels shows are ultimately unsuccessful, but toward a Monarchy that is explicit on the question of its Christian faith.

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