

Mong Ih-Ren Ambrose

The Liberal Spirit and Anti-Liberal Discourse of John Henry Newman

The book is a modest attempt to cast light on this liberal aspect of Newman and his anti-liberal rhetoric, and involves examining his works and analysing a number of secondary sources from a historical perspective. In reviewing Newman's position on liberalism in Chapter 1 by various scholars, who tend to see him as either liberal or conservative, I will argue that his stand was varied and multi-dimensional because he possessed an open mind. Newman was anti-liberal only when the church and the society at large were threatened by a certain secularising spirit. My overall conclusion is that he possessed a balanced view of things.

Chapter 2 covers Newman's upbringing and the influence of Oxford, focusing on his experience at Oriel College. The Oxford Movement in which Newman played a leading role and the prevailing liberalism then is explored with a view to understanding what aspects of the 'intellectual party' Newman was rejecting.

Chapter 3 investigates Newman's criticism of liberalism and his defence of the dogmatic principle in religion. It covers essentially the anti-liberal polemics in his works.

Chapter 4 deals with his liberal legacy to demonstrate that he had more in common with liberal Catholicism than might have been perceived.

Chapter 5 explores his understanding of Christianity, its relation to other faiths, and the issue of religious pluralism. I see this as the culmination of Newman's liberal spirit – his acknowledgement of universal revelation, the guidance of tradition and conscience, and finally, Christianity's ability to assimilate what is good from pagan religions. In view of this, I argue that Newman may perhaps be a pioneer in understanding the significance of religious plurality.

The conclusion examines echoes of Newman in Pope Benedict XVI's writings and addresses. Benedict warned us against aggressive secularism and the dictatorship of relativism in Western society. Newman had characterized this phenomenon as a 'world simply irreligious' and 'that spirit of infidelity'.