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## J.H. NEWMAN'S *LECTURES ON JUSTIFICATION*: A FORGOTTEN CLASSIC

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*Justification is one of the great central topics of Christian theology. Unfortunately, as the title of this essay indicates, Cardinal Newman's Lectures on Justification have been ignored by many contemporary theologians. Dr. Penaskovic defends these lectures as a "relative theological classic." We wholeheartedly agree and in the hope of furthering interest in what we trust will eventually be recognized as a "timeless classic", we happily present this article.*



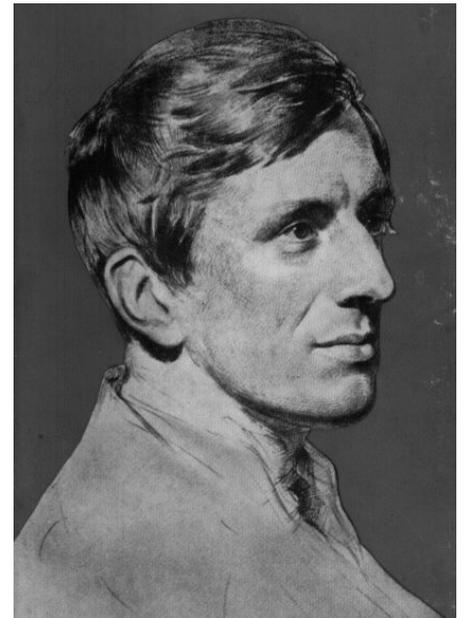
HIS ESSAY CONSISTS OF THREE DISTINCT BUT OVERLAPPING SECTIONS. PART I contains a reflection on the meaning of a classic. It draws its inspiration from the works of Frank Kermode, Hans G. Gadamer and, indirectly, David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination*. It is suggested that the term, "classic" still has its usefulness today and may be applied to the area of theology analogously. Furthermore, it is suggested that a classic has two dimensions, a normative and a historical one, a timeless dimension and a time-bound one.

Part II situates the *Lectures on Justification* in its historical context. It has particular relevance to the historical dimension of a classic. This section points up Newman's failure to understand Luther's justification *sola fide*. It is argued that the *Lectures* are a polemical work directed against the Evangelicals in the Anglican Church. Failure to understand this fact results in a misunderstanding of the *Lectures*.

Part III deals with the normative dimension of a classic, its enduring, trans-historical value. Various arguments are offered to make the point that the *Lectures* are a relative theological classic: First, because they treat a central theological concern, justification. Second, the *Lectures* are seen to be a powerful new synthesis of St. Paul and the Greek Fathers, especially St. Athanasius. Third, it is suggested that the *Lectures* were composed by a master of style. The essay concludes by putting into a syllogism the main argument against the thesis that the *Lectures* are a relative theological classic.

### I. THE MEANING OF A CLASSIC

In early Rome those citizens who had an income of a certain fixed sum were called *classici*. However, those who had a smaller income were called *infra classem*, that is, below the pre-eminent class. In the second century Aulus Gellius uses the term, "classic", figuratively and applies it to writers. A writer of note,



*Newman*

says Gellius, has real property and maintains his identity in the vulgar crowd.<sup>1</sup>

The first Dictionary of the Academy (1694) defines a classical author as an approved ancient writer who may be regarded as an authority in a particular area. However, the Dictionary of the academy in 1835 constricts the earlier definition asserting that classical authors are those who have become models in any language. A similar definition comes from the pen of the great nineteenth century French critic, C.A. Sainte-Beuve (1804-69) who says that a classic is an old author canonized by admiration and an authority in his particular style.<sup>2</sup>

In his essay, "Tradition in Literature," Sainte-Beuve remarks that the classic consists of literatures in complete harmony with their age and their social frame. They are extremely time-bound. This thought seems to go against the grain of what is meant by a classic. Today one thinks of a classic as somehow persisting in time. Sainte-Beuve would agree. He writes that parts of recent tradition thought to be well-founded crumble and fall, so that the rock, the indestructible marble, only stands out the more in its solidity.<sup>3</sup>

Today we are inclined to think of the classics in terms of the ancient Greek and Roman classics. In this sense the classics are to be equated with the humanities. The old humanistic training was embodied in literary texts. However, its center of gravity was not in *belles lettres* as such, but in moral and political issues.<sup>4</sup> The founding fathers of the United States knew that the primary bent of the classical/humanist tradition was moral/political and thus made reference to such writers as Aristotle, Polybius, Cicero *et al.* Politics and morality went hand in glove for the founding fathers of our country who could not conceive of a political order apart from morality.<sup>5</sup>

The term, classic, applies secondarily to literature. In his *Essay on the Genius and Poetry of Pope*, Warton makes a distinction between an absolute and a relative classic as applied to English literature. Warton puts only three English authors in the first class, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton.<sup>5</sup> Today we would call Chaucer and not Spenser an absolute classic. Examples of relative classics would be Spenser, Wordsworth, Pope, Dickens and T.S. Eliot. This distinction between an absolute and a relative classic applies to the theme of this essay inasmuch as later on I argue that Newman's *Lectures on Justification* are a relative theological classic.

The rest of this section contains a reflection on the meaning of a classic in terms of the work of first Frank Kermode and then of Hans Georg Gadamer. In reflecting on the nature of a classic the basic question revolves around the nature of the relationship between permanence and change. Kermode argues that a classic should allow us to think of its age and our own together. Why so? Kermode would agree with Saint-Beuve and T.S. Eliot who view history as a unity despite the appearance of change. In this view the modern is not absolutely new, but the renovation of a classic which the action of time has eclipsed and which now reappears in a new relationship with the modern.<sup>7</sup>

The old books, the classics, are repeatedly accommodated to the sense of readers different in both language and culture. One observes the following paradox. The classics do have an identity, but one that changes. The *Confessions* of St. Augustine, for example, subsist in change and prevail by being patient of various interpretations. On the one hand, the classics possess intrinsic qualities that endure and lend them a certain identity. On the other hand, the classics have an openness to accommodation which insures their vitality and aliveness.

There are, says Kermode, two ways of maintaining a classic and establishing its access today. One may ask what the classic meant to its author and his/her best readers, and may still mean to those who have the prerequisite knowledge and skill. Addison, for instance, believes that one should, ideally speaking, read the classics as contemporaries did. This view sees the classic as a closed book that learning can partly open. Philology and historiography are the sciences used to unlock the meaning of the classic.

One may also utilize the method of accommodation in examining the classic. This has reference to any method by which the old document may be induced to signify what it states implicitly rather than explicitly. In this view the classic may be called an open text from which new readings, new senses, may be generated. For example, the works of Hawthorne and T.S. Eliot may be called classics in that they invite a creative coproduction on the reader's part.<sup>8</sup>

A distinction may be drawn between the old classic and the modern classic. The old classic was expected to give answers, was there in full before the reader and, observes Kermode, holds fast to the timetranscending

idea of Empire. The modern classic, however, does not give a definite account of itself, asks a virtually infinite set of questions, tolerating both change and a plurality of meanings.<sup>9</sup>

A classic, then, may be regarded as a book read a long time after it was composed. Classics are those books which are complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our own interpretations. One may say that the generation of meaning arises from the repair of indeterminacy. On this view the text always has within itself a surplus of meaning after meeting any particular restricted meaning. Hence the text may be seen as the permanent locus of change. A classic is open-ended in its meaning because it transcends the horizon of any one reader or even any one generation of readers.<sup>10</sup>

Hans Georg Gadamer, the Heidelberg philosopher, offers another view of the classic. Gadamer makes use of a distinction, first made by Herder, according to which a classic has two dimensions to it, a normative and a historical one. Today we understand a “classic” as signifying a period of time, as opposed to a trans-historical value, says Gadamer. However, the normative side of the term has not completely disappeared. “Classic” refers to a distinctive way (*ausgezeichnete Weise*) of being historical (*Geschichtlichkeit*), the historical process of preservation. For Gadamer, the classic stands the test of historical criticism because its historical dominion precedes all historical reflection and endures despite it.<sup>11</sup>

Gadamer speaks, then, of the normative aspect of a classic. To use the language of Sainte-Beuve, a classic is that indestructible marble which stands strong amid the shifting sea of time and changing taste. It is a consciousness of some substrate remaining, whose significance transcends the limits of time. A classic has a timeless presence which speaks to every age.

Furthermore, Gadamer maintains that classical authors are regarded as the representatives of particular literary genres. They are looked upon as the perfect fulfillment and embodiment of these literary genres. If one attends carefully to the history of these literary genres, then the classic may be thought of as the acme, one that articulates the history of the genre in terms of before and after.

To sum up, one must therefore be cognizant of the two sides of a classic, the normative and the histori-

cal. The relationship between the two may best be described as paradoxical. A classic is timeless (normative side), but this timelessness is a mode of historical being (historical side).<sup>12</sup>

The following points summarize this section in terms of their relevance to the theme of this essay:

1. Despite its rag-bag look, the word, “classic”, is convenient. It refers to an author or book still read and admired today and an authority in his/her particular style.

2. The term, “classic”, applies to the discipline of theology analogously.

3. One may, in theology, distinguish between an absolute classic, e.g., Augustine’s *City of God* and a relative classic, Augustine’s *De Spiritu et Littera*.

4. A classic has two dimensions, a normative and historical one. The relationship between the two may be called paradoxical. A classic refers to a distinctive way of being historical, yet a classic resists historical criticism because it endures despite it.



## II. THE CONTEXT OF THE LECTURES ON JUSTIFICATION (1838)

This section deals with the historical dimension of a classic, whereas the final section explores the normative dimension of a classic. The present section points out the fact that the *Lectures on Justification* were limited in regard to the historical dimension insofar as Newman was greatly influenced by Froude’s negative view of Luther and the Reformation.

To properly understand a question such as justification, one ought to look at the place it occupies in the total teaching of a particular church tradition. Limitations of space prevent a full discussion of this topic in this essay. However, a few observations are in order. In the Church of England the doctrine of justification functions as a *via media* between the Lutheran view of justification and the Roman Catholic view. Whereas the

Lutherans at the time of the Reformation and in the nineteenth century placed a good deal of emphasis on the doctrine of justification, Roman Catholics were rather indifferent to the topic and spoke of justification only in dialogue with Lutherans and other forms of sola fide Christianity, as James McCue notes.<sup>13</sup>

One of the reasons Newman wrote the *Lectures* is to show precisely how the Anglican view of justification does function as a *via media* between the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic view. The *Lectures* were written to deal with the fact that many Evangelicals in the Church of England were holding fast to the notion of justification *sola fide* and, correspondingly, rejecting the Romanist view. The *Lectures* were designed to counteract the Lutheran view which saw justification by faith as the fundamental doctrine of Christianity, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the *Lectures* are a polemical work. P.D.L. Avis has overlooked this fact and has made some harsh judgments about the *Lectures*.<sup>15</sup> Just as the *Via Media* I arose out of Newman's correspondence with Abbe Jager, so too did his views on justification arise out of his controversy with an Evangelical publication, the *Christian Observer*.

The Evangelicals were the third party in the Anglican Church. They emerged as a challenge to the Low Church in the eighteenth century. The Evangelicals stressed the primacy of revelation, (which they understood to mean that Scripture contains all the things necessary for salvation), the need for conversion, the initiative of grace and trusting in the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

At the start of the Oxford Movement in 1833 the Evangelicals and the Tractarians were, on some issues, kindred spirits. The latitudinarianism of Whatelyan Oxford and a Whig government which wanted to promote secular interests in opposition to the Anglican Church united the Evangelicals and the Tractarians against a common enemy, Liberalism. Thus both groups were against the appointment of Hampden as Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford because he did not believe in all the articles of the Creed. However, the publication of Froude's *Remains* posthumously in 1838 by Newman and Keble dashed on the rocks any hope for a lasting accord between the Evangelicals and the Tractarians. Since that time the Evangelicals suspected the Tractarians of secret proselytism on behalf of the Roman Church.<sup>17</sup>

How did the Evangelicals and the Tractarians stand in regard to the question of justification? After 1838 they became divided on this question. The Evangelicals maintained the primacy of justification by faith. They saw justification as an objective act of God declaring the sinner just in Christ. As Peter Toon observes, regeneration, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believing sinner, is the subjective work of God. On the other hand, the Tractarians believed that justification and sanctification are united in baptism where God sends the Holy Spirit into the heart of the sinner. God, then, justifies the sinner who looks to God in loving trust in the sacrament of baptism.<sup>18</sup>

The Evangelicals felt that Newman's *Lectures* were not a real *via media* between the Lutheran and the Romanist views on justification since Newman came down too strongly behind the Romanist view. It seems to me that the Evangelicals were correct. There are two reasons for saying so.

First, Newman had a low opinion of Luther and Lutheran theologians. He says in a letter on January 17, 1838, "For really the Lutherans, etc., as divines, are so shallow and inconsequent, that I can hardly believe my own impressions about them."<sup>19</sup> It seems that Newman was so concerned about refuting the Evangelicals that he did not give a fair assessment of Luther's views on justification.<sup>20</sup>

Second, in the 1830's Newman believed that it was important to stress the importance of good works in contradistinction to faith. In a letter to Samuel Wilberforce on February 4, 1835 Newman writes, "We want rousing—we want the chains of duty and the details of obedience set before us strongly. And this is what has led us to enlarge on our part of the work not on the Spirit's."<sup>21</sup> According to S. Wilberforce, true to his Evangelical heritage, felt that Newman's stress on sanctification was not sufficiently rooted in Scripture.<sup>22</sup>

What relationship exists between justification and sanctification in Newman? The *Lectures* are concerned with the regenerated state, that is, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human person as in a temple. To this end Newman analyzes the relevant Pauline texts since St. Paul was concerned with this particular question. On the other hand, the *Parochial And Plain Sermons* deal with the question of sanctification, the living out in daily life the fact that one has become justified in Christ and has

received the spirit of adoption. Newman has two chief points to make in these sermons: a) to show the weakness of the Lutheran notion of *sola fide* and b) to point out the necessity for the Christian to work at achieving sanctity.<sup>23</sup>

Hence the Evangelicals, such as S. Wilberforce, were upset not only with the *Lectures* in themselves, but also because they continued a line of thought already found in the first three volumes of the Parochial And Plain Sermons. With this introduction to the *Lectures* we are now in a position to attend to the *Lectures* in terms of their value as a classic in theology.

### III. THE LECTURES ON JUSTIFICATION: A THEOLOGICAL CLASSIC

In this section I argue the thesis that the *Lectures* are a relative theological classic. They are not an absolute theological classic for at least two reasons. First, they are not widely known by those who are literate, theologically speaking, and second, they are too close to us, historically speaking, to merit the designation an absolute classic in theology. The following arguments are intended to show that the *Lectures* deserve the title, a relative theological classic.

First, the *Lectures* have a central theological concern as their subject matter, as opposed to a peripheral issue in theology. Justification has been a key, and even divisive, issue in theology since the time of St. Paul, Augustine, Pelagius, Aquinas and the medieval Augustinians, Luther and the Reformers, Seripando and Gregory at Padua at Trent, Bishop Bull, Richard Hooker, F.D. Maurice, Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Hans Kiing.<sup>24</sup>

Second, there have been attempts in the Anglican Church to find a doctrine of justification which mediated between the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic view before the time of John Henry Newman. One need only look at the work of Jeremy Taylor and George Bull.

However, Newman's attempt to construct a theology of grace in the *Lectures* was a powerful new syn-

thesis based both on Scripture, particularly St. Paul, and on the Greek Fathers. It is significant that the *Lectures* have this strong Pauline thrust. One may think of the history of dogma as a history of the Pauline reactions in the Church. One would thereby touch on the main turning point of the history, from Marcion to Irenaeus, Augustine and Pelagius, the great Reformers of the Middle Ages from Agobard to Wessel, Luther, Trent, Jansenius, et al. Paul has proved to be the great ferment in *Dogmengeschichte*. It seems to be the case that many of those works which are the obvious candidates for being called theological classics have a strong biblical orientation,

such as Augustine's *Confessions*, Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, the *Corpus Lutheranium* etc. Hence Newman's Lectures with their strong Pauline flavor are in good company.<sup>25</sup>

Newman tried to produce a new understanding of justification by trying to take into account the major Pauline texts. He did, of course, have a polemical purpose in mind in referring so much to the *Corpus Paulinum*. He was attempting to fight the Evangelicals with their own weapon, Scripture, as was alluded to in the second part of this essay.

What does Newman understand by the term, justification? This is a large question, the outlines of which can only be indicated. Justification means the indwelling of the Trinity in the heart of the believer. Newman sees grace primarily as an encounter between persons, one divine, the other human. Such a view of grace does not seem very novel to us today. However, the Roman theologians of the nineteenth century looked upon grace as a quality infused into the soul, whereas the Lutherans believed in imputed righteousness. Newman, on the other hand, speaks of grace in highly personal categories.<sup>26</sup>

Newman came to see grace in personal categories because of his reading of Paul and of the Greek Fathers. Whereas Western theologians are inclined to think of grace more as a remedy for sin and as a quality of the soul, Eastern theologians see justification as a personal union with God, the result of our deification.<sup>27</sup>

Third, the *Lectures* are a relative theological classic

because of their style. This should come as no surprise since they were written by a master of style, who considered them to be one of his five best works (along with the *Essay on Development*, the *Oxford University Sermons*, the *Idea of a University* and the *Grammar of Assent*). It should also be pointed out that Newman is generally regarded as one of the four great prose writers of the nineteenth century, along with Carlyle, Ruskin and Matthew Arnold.

The main argument against my thesis may be put into syllogistic form. *Per definitionem* a classic is read a long time after it was written. The *Lectures* are not read very much today. Therefore, this work is not a classic. It seems to me that a particular classic may be neglected at a particular time. Very few English scholars today would disagree with the statement that Shakespeare is a classic. I would observe that at the time of Pope in the eighteenth century Shakespeare was not regarded as a classic. My point is that tastes in theology, art, science, music and literature change. The stars of some authors rise, while those of others fall. I would expect the *Lectures* to be read by the theologically literate a hundred years from now. At present they are a neglected classic.

I might observe in passing that in *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy seems to be asking too much of the theological classics when he asks that they be accorded a public status in the culture.<sup>28</sup> I say this for two reasons: 1) theological works, Tracy's own work included,

are too technical for the average reader; 2) there seems to be too little contact between writers and readers of opposite religious traditions today. Part of the difficulty has to do with the fact that there is so much written today in the area of religion and theology, so much so that even specialists have a hard time keeping up with their own field.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the *Lectures on Justification* are a relative theological classic. I wish now to apply the distinction Gadamer makes between the normative and the historical to the *Lectures*. The *Lectures* are limited in regard to the historical dimension. Newman was greatly influenced by Froude's negative view of Luther and the Reformation. He also let his polemics against the Evangelicals stand in the way of a fair evaluation of Luther's justification *sola fide*, as Part II of this essay has shown.

On the flip side of the coin, the normative side, the *Lectures* are a classic because they attempt a new synthesis of Paul and the Greek Fathers. Grace is seen in pre-eminently personal categories, a novum for Newman's contemporaries. I suggest, then, that the *Lectures* have a timeless dimension to them. Only time will tell whether or not I am on the mark with my thesis that the *Lectures* are a relative theological classic.



## NOTES

1 Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, "What Is a Classic?" *Criticism: The Major Texts*. Ed. by Walter Jackson Bate, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1952), p. 492.

2 Ibid., p. 491.

3 C.A. Sainte-Beuve, "Tradition in Literature," *Criticism*, p. 497.

4 Gerald Else, "The Old and the New Humanities," *Daedalus* 98 (1969), p. 806.

5 Ibid., p. 807.

6 Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change*, (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 69.

7 Ibid., p. 21.

8 Ibid., p. 113.

9 Ibid., p. 140.

10 Ibid., p. 75.

11 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth And Method*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 255.

12 Ibid., p. 256.

13 James McCue, "Ecumenical Reflection On Justification," *The Ecumenist* 18 (1980), p. 49. Cf. Bernard M.G.

Reardon, *From Coleridge to Gore: A Century of Religious Thought*, (London: Longmans, 1971), p. 116.

14 Thomas L. Sheridan, S.J., *Newman on Justification*, (Staten Island: Alba House, 1967), p. 240. V.E. Loescher (1673-1749) was the first to call justification the articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae. Cf. Horst Georg Poehlmann, *Rechtfertigung. Die gegenwaertige kontroverstheologische Problematik der Rechtfertigungslehre zwischen der evangelisch-lutherischen und der roemisch-katholischen Kirche*, (Guetersloh: Mohn, 1971), p. 29, and Jan Milic Lochman, "The Doctrine of Justification In A Society Of Achievers," *Reformed World* 35 (1979), p. 205.

15 P.D.L. Avis, "The Shaking Of The Seven Hills," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32 (1979), pp. 439-455.

16 John C. de Satge, "Evangelical Traditions in Anglican Worship," *One in Christ* 4 (1968), p. 54.

17 David Newsome, "Justification And Sanctification: Newman And The Evangelicals," *Journal of Theological Studies* 15 (1964), p. 36. Cf. Horton Davies, *Worship And Theology In England. From Watts And Wesley To Maurice, 1690-1850*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 247-252.

18 Peter Toon, "Evangelicals and Tractarians: then and now," *The Churchman* 93 (1979), p. 32.

19 *Letters And Correspondence of John Henry Newman* II. Ed. by Anne Mozley, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903), p. 222.

20 William J. Baker, "Hurrell Froude and the Reformers," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 21 (1970), pp. 243-359. Cf. Richard Penaskovic, "Two Classical Western Theologians: Augustine and Newman," *Augustinian Studies* 12 (1981), forthcoming.

21 David Newsome, "Justification and Sanctification," p. 43. the entire thrust of the Oxford Movement focused on spiritual renewal. Cf. A.M. Allchin, "The Oxford Movement: Some New Perspectives," *One in Christ* I (1965), p. 45.

22 David Newsome, "Justification and Sanctification," p. 53.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

24 James McCue, p. 50. Cf. Gerhard O. Forde, "The Exodus from Virtue to Grace: Justification by Faith Today," *Interpretation* 34 (1980), p. 43.

25 John D. Godsey, "The Interpretation of Romans in the History of The Christian Faith," *Interpretation* 34 (1980), p. 4.

26 John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Justification*, (London: J.G. & F. Rivington, 1838), p. 164. Cf. Richard J. Penaskovic, *Open To The Spirit: The Notion Of The Laity In The Writings Of J.H. Newman*, (Munich: W. Blasaditsch, 1972), p. 24.

27 Charles Stephen Dessain, "Cardinal Newman and the Eastern Tradition," *Downside Review* 94 (1976), p. 95. Cf. Dessain, "The biblical basis of Newman's ecumenical theology," in *The Rediscovery of Newman: An Oxford Symposium*, ed. BY John Coulson and A.M. Allchin, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967), p. 104.

28 David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), p. 133.