

John Henry Newman on Private Judgment

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John Henry Newman wrote much on the role of private judgment in religion. He once asked, "Must private judgment in all cases be a good *per se*; or is it a good under circumstances, and with limitations?" [\[1\]](#) Is there an unlimited



right, or a responsibility, of Private Judgment? Newman bases his conclusions on the fact that God has given a Revelation of Divine Truth, and that "the very essence of religion is protection from error, for a revelation that could stultify itself would be no revelation at all ..." [\[2\]](#)

Here are eighteen quotations from Newman that, taken together, indicate his thinking on the subject:

Difficulty of forming a theory

There is this obvious, undeniable difficulty in the attempt to form a theory of Private Judgment, in the choice of a religion, that Private Judgment leads different minds in such different directions. If, indeed, there be no religious truth, or at least no sufficient means of arriving at it, then the difficulty vanishes: for where there is nothing to find, there can be no rules for seeking, and contradiction in the result is but a *reductio ad absurdum* of the attempt. But such a conclusion is intolerable to those who search, else they would not search; and therefore on them the obligation lies to explain, if they can, how it comes to pass, that Private Judgment is a duty, and an advantage, and a success, considering it leads the way not only to their own faith, whatever it may be, but to opinions which are diametrically opposite to it; considering it not only leads them right, but others wrong ... [\[3\]](#)

Questions for inquirers

There are three momentous questions, ...

1. Is there a God?
2. Has He spoken to us?
3. Through whom has He spoken? [\[4\]](#)

Private judgment in the time of the Apostles (question three)

If you had lived in the time of the Apostles, your ... question would have been, Do they come from God? and you would have determined this by private judgment—but, when you once believed, if they said to you 'The dead will one day rise,' you would not have said 'I am not so sure of that, I have not yet proved it—' or if you had, they would have answered, 'But we tell you they will—you have come to be *taught*—If you want to find it out for yourselves, do so—but then you should not come to *us*.' [5]

The deposit of faith

A body of doctrine had been delivered by the Apostles to their first successors, and by them in turn to the next generation, and then to the next ... "The things that thou hast heard from me through many witnesses," says St. Paul to Timothy, "the same commit thou to faithful men; who shall be able to teach others also." This body of truth was in consequence called the "depositum," as being a substantive teaching, not a mere accidental deduction from Scripture. Thus St. Paul says to his disciple and successor Timothy, "Keep the deposit," "hold fast the form of sound words," "guard the noble deposit." This important principle is forcibly insisted on by [Irenæus](#) and Tertullian before the Nicene era, and by Vincent after it. "O Timothy," says Vincent, "'guard the *depositum* ...' Who is Timothy today? Who but the universal Church, or, in particular, the whole body of prelates, whose duty it is both themselves to have the full knowledge of religion, and to instruct others in it. ... What is 'the deposit'? That which hath been entrusted to you, not that which thou hast discovered; what thou hast received, not what thou hast thought out; a matter, not of cleverness, but of teaching, not of private handling, but of public tradition." [6]

Protestant claim to the contrary

Protestants ... seem to say, "... Is it not possible that an error has got the place of the truth, and has destroyed all the evidence but what witnesses on its side? Is it not possible that all the Churches should everywhere have given up and stifled the scheme of doctrine they received from the Apostles, and have substituted another for it? Of course it is; it is plain to common sense it may be so. Well, we say, what *may be, is*; this is our great principle ... We uphold the pure unmutated Scripture; the Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants; the Bible and our own sense of the Bible ... We know, and we view it with consternation, that all Antiquity runs counter to our interpretation; and therefore, alas, the Church was corrupt from very

early times indeed. But mind, we hold all this in a truly Catholic spirit, not in bigotry. We allow in others the right of private judgment, and confess that we, as others, are fallible men ... Far be it from us to say that we are certainly right; we only say that the whole early Church was certainly wrong." [7]

Private judgment as commonly found

... nothing without faith as its foundation [[Heb. xi. 6](#); [Eph. ii. 8](#)]; faith implies an external message [[Rom. x. 14](#); [1 Thess. ii. 13](#)]. Yet, ... it is impossible to go into the world without seeing that the idea of taking one's doctrine from an external authority does not enter into their minds. It is always 'I think.' [8]

Scripture and private judgment

... consider, are not these two states or acts of mind quite distinct from each other; to believe simply what a living authority tells you, and to take a book, such as Scripture, and to use it as you please, to master it, that is, to make yourself the master of it, to interpret it for yourself, and to admit just what you choose to see in it, and nothing more? Are not these two procedures distinct in this, that in the former you submit, in the latter you judge? ... It is in vain to say that the man who judges from the Apostles' writings, does submit to those writings ... There is ... an essential difference between the act of submitting to a living oracle, and to his written words; in the former case there is no appeal from the speaker, in the latter the final decision remains with the reader. [9]

Private judgment for me but not for thee?

If a staunch Protestant's daughter turns Roman, and betakes herself to a convent, why does he not exult in the occurrence? Why does he not give a public breakfast, or hold a meeting, or erect a memorial, or write a pamphlet in honour of her, and of the great undying principle she has so gloriously vindicated? Why is he in this base, disloyal style muttering about priests, and Jesuits, and the horrors of nunneries, in solution of the phenomenon, when he has the fair and ample form of Private Judgment rising before his eyes, and pleading with him, and bidding him impute good motives, not bad, and in very charity ascribe to the influence of a high and holy principle, to a right and a duty of every member of the family of man, what his poor

human instincts are fain to set down as a folly or a sin. All this would lead us to suspect that the doctrine of private judgment, in its simplicity, purity, and integrity,—private judgment, all private judgment, and nothing but private judgment,—is held by very few persons indeed; and that the great mass of the population are either stark unbelievers in it, or deplorably dark about it; and that even the minority who are in a manner faithful to it, have glossed and corrupted the true sense of it by a miserably faulty reading, and hold, not the right of private judgment, but the private right of judgment; in other words, their own private right, and no one's else. [[10](#)]

Religious mysteries, a challenge to judgment

Our happiness consists in loving God. And we cannot love Him without knowing about Him. And we cannot know about Him, ever so little, without seeing that He is beyond our understanding, *i.e.* mysterious ... [[11](#)]

Mysteries in religion are measured by the proud according to their own comprehension, by the humble, according to the power of God; the humble glorify God for them, the proud exalt themselves against them. [[12](#)]

Private judgment for inquirers

And now let me add for your comfort that you are not bound to leave the Anglican Church till you clearly see your way to do it—You are, I repeat, in God's hands—He will help you, strengthen you, console you, and bring you into the light ... But every soul stands by itself—and you are thrown on your private judgment as you never would have been, had not the so-called Reformers put everything into confusion. *You* are not to blame for this—it was their sin—but you are suffering for it—as I before now have suffered, but as God's mercy has brought me out of that miserable position, so will It bring you. [[13](#)]

Private judgment appropriate under circumstances

And here we see what is meant when a person says that the Catholic system comes home to his mind, fulfils his ideas of religion, satisfies his sympathies, and the like; and thereupon becomes a Catholic. Such a person is often said to go by private judgment, to be choosing his religion by his own standard of what a religion ought to be. Now it need not be denied that those who are external to the Church must begin with private judgment; they use it in

order ultimately to supersede it; as a man out of doors uses a lamp in a dark night, and puts it out when he gets home ... There is no absurdity, then, or inconsistency in a person first using his private judgment and then denouncing its use. Circumstances change duties. [[14](#)]

Authority and private judgment in religion

It is the custom with Protestant writers to consider that, whereas there are two great principles in action in the history of religion, Authority and Private Judgment, they have all the Private Judgment to themselves, and we have the full inheritance and the superincumbent oppression of Authority. But this is not so; it is the vast Catholic body itself, and it only, which affords an arena for both combatants in that awful, never-dying duel. It is necessary for the very life of religion, viewed in its large operations and its history, that the warfare should be incessantly carried on. Every exercise of Infallibility is brought out into act by an intense and varied operation of the Reason, both as its ally and as its opponent, and provokes again, when it has done its work, a re-action of Reason against it ... Catholic Christendom is no simple exhibition of religious absolutism, but presents a continuous picture of Authority and Private Judgment alternately advancing and retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide;—it is a vast assemblage of human beings with wilful intellects and wild passions, brought together into one by the beauty and the Majesty of a Superhuman Power ... [[15](#)]

Knowledge and opinion in the Church

Where the Church speaks, there is knowledge; where not as yet, there is opinion, and it is opinion that varies ... Her infallible voice is seldom exercised and comparatively few dogmas have been promulgated to be accepted *de fide*. But the subtle and curious intellect of her theologians has investigated and determined innumerable questions, not with infallible accuracy, but each in his own way, and often in opposition to each other, still with incalculable advantage to religion. The result has been a wide knowledge of Revelation and a large freedom of thought, a flood of illustration on existing dogmas, and a store of material which, as human means, are at the service of the Infallible Church, when she is called upon to decide a controversy and to formulate some new definition of faith. [[16](#)]

Private judgment constrained by revealed doctrine

... all of us, learned and unlearned, are bound to believe the whole revealed doctrine in all its parts and in all that it implies according as portion after portion is brought home to our consciousness as belonging to it; and it also stands to reason, that a doctrine, so deep and so various, as the revealed depositum of faith, cannot be brought home to us and made our own all at once ... Thus, ... if we really believe that our Lord is God, we believe all that is meant by such a belief; or, else, we are not in earnest, when we profess to believe the proposition. In the act of believing it at all, we forthwith commit ourselves by anticipation to believe truths which at present we do not believe, because they have never come before us;—we limit henceforth the range of our private judgment in prospect by the conditions, whatever they are, of that dogma. Thus the Arians said that they believed in our Lord's divinity, but when they were pressed to confess His eternity, they denied it: thereby showing in fact that they never had believed in His divinity at all.

[\[17\]](#)

Private judgment and Catholic devotions

While private judgment is forbidden to Catholics in matters of divine revelation, it is fully accorded to them in matters of devotion ... Catholics may choose *their own* saints to be devout to. They may honor this one, they may pass over that. They have their own 'special devotions.' And as they choose the object or the matter to which they are specially devout, so (under ... rational limits) they choose the manner. [\[18\]](#)

How to judge and how not

Yet after all, which is the more likely to be right,—he who has given years, perhaps, to the search of truth, who has habitually prayed for guidance, and has taken all the means in his power to secure it, or they, 'the gentlemen of England who sit at home at ease'? No, no, they may talk of seeking the truth, of private judgment, as a duty, but they have never sought, they have never judged; they are where they are, not because it is true, but because they find themselves there, because it is their 'providential position,' and a pleasant one into the bargain. [\[19\]](#)

Judgment and Grace

Certainty, in its highest sense, is the reward of those who, by an act of the will, and at the dictate of reason and prudence, embrace the truth, when

nature, like a coward, shrinks. You must make a venture; faith is a venture before a man is a Catholic; it is a gift after it. You approach the Church in the way of reason, you enter into it in the light of the Spirit. [[20](#)]

References

- 1 [Essays Critical and Historical, Volume 2](#), pp 336-337
- 2 [Letters and Diaries, Volume 25](#), p 259 *
- 3 [Essays Critical and Historical, Volume 2](#), p 336
- 4 [Letters and Diaries, Volume 20](#), pp 464-465 *
- 5 [Letters and Diaries, Volume 27](#), p 162 *
- 6 [Essays Critical and Historical, Volume 1](#), pp 125-126 (Irenæus had heard St. Polycarp, the disciple of St. John the Apostle; [Vincent of Lerins](#))
- 7 [Historical Sketches, Volume 1](#), pp 419-420
- 8 [Sermon Notes](#), p 326
- 9 [Discourses to Mixed Congregations](#), pp 199-200
- 10 [Essays Critical and Historical, Volume 2](#), pp 340-341
- 11 [Sermon Notes](#) (Trinity Sunday), pp 208-209
- 12 [Parochial and Plain Sermons, Volume 4](#), p 283
- 13 [Letters and Diaries, Volume 24](#), p 340 *
- 14 [Loss and Gain](#), pp 203-204
- 15 [Apologia](#), p 252
- 16 [Via Media, Volume 1](#), Notes, pp 90-91
- 17 [Grammar of Assent](#), p 151
- 18 [Letters and Diaries, Volume 20](#), p 471 *
- 19 [Loss and Gain](#), p 369
- 20 [Loss and Gain](#), p 385

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This paper first appeared on the stjhnewman.guide website.