

## Introduction

Most readers know only the early life of F. W. Newman (1805-1897), that which he revealed of himself in *Phases of Faith; or, Passages from the History of My Creed* (London: John Chapman, 1850). This classic work of Victorian faith and doubt was published when Newman's long life was only half over and the most active part of his public life had only begun. Even so, as far as Newman's religious convictions are concerned, in 1850 there were few and relatively minor changes through which his creed had yet to pass. All of these later changes are fully discussed in the Braithwaite Correspondence. With that in mind, this collection, which is partly autobiographical, might be considered a companion volume to the *Phases*. The editorial annotations will provide the reader with further biographical detail and explanations.

That aside, there still remains something to be said in regard to Newman's training as a thinker on religion and biblical literature. As a master of Greek and Latin and student of various other ancient languages, his comprehension of biblical texts was independent of the Authorized Version. He was trained to approach a text philologically, to determine what it actually says rather than what any generally approved interpretation of the text might insist. Moreover, as a classicist and historian, Newman was trained to bring to the study of religion and religious texts a wealth of comparative knowledge and a scholarly method of evaluation that rejected the assumption either that all historical authorities or witnesses are equally trustworthy or equally worthless. But, whereas an understanding of classical and biblical texts requires some erudition, religion itself does not. Moreover, eternity is *not* at stake in a study of the literature of historical religions, for religion is neither a history nor a literature; both give witness to the fact that religion is a natural development, existing prior to and independent of texts.

### Robert Braithwaite

Extremely little is known of the Robert Braithwaite to whom these letters of Francis W. Newman are addressed. Apart from the letters themselves, all that is known is from his two publications and official records.<sup>1</sup> From the latter we learn that he was born on 23 December 1845, the son of Robert Braithwaite, a clergyman of the Church of England, retired and living in Weston-super-Mare at the time of his

only son's matriculation at Wadham College, Oxford, in 1864. This senior Braithwaite died sometime before 1867, before Newman moved from Clifton to Weston-super-Mare, and he is not once referred to in the letters.

We can only conjecture why Braithwaite thought to begin a correspondence with Newman, but it is certainly possible that Mrs. Braithwaite and her daughter remained at Weston-super-Mare long enough to become acquainted with Newman after his move into their neighborhood. From Newman's letters we learn that, in the 1880s, Braithwaite's mother was living in Cheltenham; his sister, however, may have remained in the area, as her visits with the Newmans suggests. In any event, it is quite clear that Braithwaite was on good terms with his mother and sister.

Upon entering Oxford, Braithwaite formally converted to Roman Catholicism. Just how precipitate was his decision we do not know, but the influence of the Ritualist Movement was then at its height, and even today the tranquil garden outside the antique walls of Wadham College is reputed to be conducive to a devotional state of mind. In November of 1867, a month before turning twenty-one, he was enrolled as a law student at Lincoln's Inn. In 1869 he graduated B.A., and on 6 June 1871 was called to the bar.

### A Narrative Synopsis

The correspondence begins in 1868. Braithwaite writes a letter to Newman recommending a particular solution to the problem of the Gospels in regard to the day of the Passover Feast. Newman politely responds, stating the difficulties he sees in the proposed solution and suggesting other sources of information.

Five years pass. Braithwaite is now a barrister, a well-read man in contemporary literature, and a published author. In *No-Worship, Hero-Worship, and Christianity* (1872), he had argued, on Carlylean grounds, that Roman Catholicism alone provides reasonable satisfaction for the inalienable human need to worship someone greater than oneself. But, in the process of his liberal reading, troubling doubts had begun to disturb his mind. The Vatican Council of 1868-1869 had declared the infallibility of the papacy, after which the widely esteemed Dominican preacher Robert Rudolph Suffield, a friend of John Henry Newman, announced to the public his secession from the Church. In explaining his departure and his movement toward Unitarianism, Suffield noted the deep and lasting impression made upon him through reading Professor Newman's book *The Soul: Her Sorrows and Aspirations* (1849). Once again, Braithwaite writes to Newman, beginning a correspondence that would lead, first, to Braithwaite's reversion to Protestantism, and then, to a struggle between the claims of pure Theism and Agnosticism.

It is during this long period of religious unrest—while Braithwaite alternates between attendance at South Place Chapel (afterwards, South Place Ethical Society), Finsbury, where Moncure Daniel Conway lectured, and the Theistic Church, Piccadilly, where Charles Voysey preached, and while the sense of spiritual loss and of

intellectual uncertainty, of wandering “between two worlds,” still fills him with a nostalgic longing for Christianity—that the greater part of the correspondence between Newman and Braithwaite takes place. We have only the letters of Newman, but from these we can clearly discern the nature of the spiritual and intellectual struggle through which the younger man must pass.

At the same time, a friendship slowly develops between the two. As the correspondence becomes more personal, less reserved, the reader is made aware that something more than creed is at stake. Newman has gradually become a confessor and spiritual counselor for Braithwaite, who suffers from alcoholism, marital difficulties, depression, and poor self-esteem. Through all Braithwaite’s trials, Newman provides him with much-needed moral support and encouragement.

As the years pass, Braithwaite settles into definite Theistic convictions, and on Newman’s urging and with his assistance, Braithwaite writes a critical response to James Martineau’s *The Seat of Authority in Religion* (1890). It is published as *The True Grounds of Religious Faith* (1890) and is dedicated affectionately to Newman. Meanwhile, Newman has been gradually losing the use of his eyes and the steadiness of hand needed for his own writing. He gladly entrusts his manuscripts to Braithwaite’s perusal and solicits his help in copying. Finally, knowing that death is near, Newman places all his manuscripts at the disposal of his devoted friend, encouraging him to carry his torch and to keep aflame the gospel of pure Theism.

### The Contribution of the Braithwaite Correspondence to Francis William Newman Studies

Many readers will come to the Braithwaite Correspondence not for a *bildungsroman*—although that they may find—but rather to acquire either some knowledge of F. W. Newman’s thought on religion or some further insight into the progression and background of his thought. In either case, they will not be disappointed. The *Letters of Francis William Newman, Chiefly on Religion* provide a summary and explanation of the author’s perspective on religion and ethics, as well as autobiographical commentary and critique. We can be grateful to Braithwaite for being unsatisfied with abbreviated or simple answers, diligent in comparing and contrasting Newman’s statements, unsparing in his criticisms, and persevering in his search for truth. In this correspondence, we sometimes see the professor exasperated by his student—and those of us who teach, or who already possess a fairly solid grasp of Newman’s thought, may empathize with the teacher rather than the pupil—but, in the end, we realize that we would not have wanted Braithwaite to have been any different. Who else could have elicited such detail of explanation on so wide a range of theological, philosophical, and moral issues? Who else would have inquired so often and so deeply into the relation of the Newman brothers, John, Charles, and Francis? Who else could have brought out so clearly the personality

of the reclusive professor, even to have coaxed his softer side out from under his stiff Victorian cloak?

This unique collection of letters, together with the copious notes attached, will provide the reader with a closeness of detail regarding the Professor's life that has hitherto been available only for students of the Cardinal, his brother. Isabel Giberne Sieveking, in her *Memoir and Letters of Francis William Newman* (1909), has shown us the classicist, the philologist, the laborer for land nationalization, decentralized government, vegetarianism, and women's rights; yet, she has failed to show us the heart and soul of Newman—his pure, moral Theism. Worse still, she has tried to convince us that, *sub specie æternitatis*, Newman's heterodoxy is irrelevant, for in the end he returned to the Christian faith. Just how untrue—and, I must add—how ungenerous such a remark is will be understood by the reader of the Braithwaite Correspondence.

But the value of these letters transcends Francis William Newman studies. They record a crucial era of transition in the history of Unitarianism, that period in which the study of comparative religions, along with the re-evaluation of the canonical gospels and increased acceptance of the results of biblical and moral criticism, were preparing the way for a more broadly Theistic approach, less constrained by the Christian tradition. The Braithwaite Correspondence will furnish all persons interested in the philosophy of religion, and especially Unitarian Universalists, with an abundance of material for thought and discussion.

Finally, this collection of letters will be regarded as a significant contribution to all students of nineteenth-century English culture. Newman's observations in regard to Victorian trends and celebrities will provide researchers and writers with a rich fund of anecdote and illustration. Herein readers will find discussion of or allusion to such topics as evolution, mesmerism, ghosts, human sexuality, Turkish baths, and the Robert Browning Society. Victorianists will be enlightened or amused by the professor's remarks on Charles Voysey, James and Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe, Moncure Daniel Conway, John Chapman, Matthew Arnold, and of course, his two brothers, Charles and John.

### The Transcription and Annotation

In editing these letters, I have, as much as was possible or convenient for the reader, left them as they are. The alterations are of five sorts:

(1) Where Newman inserted a parenthetical word or phrase by writing the additional text immediately above the line and position where it was to be inserted, I have brought the text down into its proper place and have indicated its parenthetical character by adding the essential and implied parentheses.

(2) In those few instances in which Newman inadvertently omitted a word essential for grammatical coherence, I have added the needed word, placing it within italicized brackets (*e.g.*, [interpolation/]). Since Newman himself often uses brackets,

the reader should note that *only* italicized brackets indicate an interpolation. Moreover, I have noted each interpolation by an endnote.

(3) Wherever the text has been illegible, I have added ellipses within italicized brackets (*e.g.*, [ . . . ]) and have noted the illegibility by an endnote. Occasionally Newman himself uses ellipses, but *only* those ellipses placed within italicized brackets indicate an omission resulting from illegibility.

(4) Where Newman has used superscript for abbreviations, I either have converted the superscription into normal font (*e.g.*, “M<sup>r</sup>” is converted to “Mr”), or I have replaced the abbreviation of the word with its complete form (*e.g.*, “sh<sup>d</sup>” is converted to “should”).

(5) Since Newman often adds his own footnotes, signified by symbols in superscript, I have distinguished his symbols from those signifying editorial endnotes by representing the latter alone by numerical sequence. This distinction will be readily noted by readers.

## The Works of Francis William Newman on Religion

Many of Newman’s works on religion are difficult to obtain, and some have passed through several editions, each edition with its own pagination, sometimes even with significant textual revision. References to original editions would, therefore, have been of dubious value to most readers. Moreover, with the recent release online of *The Works of Francis William Newman on Religion: A Critical Edition*, 10 vols., ed. Tod E. Jones (The Philosophy Documentation Center, 2009 <<http://www.pdcnet.org>>), most readers will find the references to the *Works* to be of greater usefulness.

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1. Robert Braithwaite is the author of *No-Worship, Hero-Worship, and Christianity* (London: Burns, Oates, and Co., 1872) and *The True Grounds of Religious Faith: An Essay on Dr. Martineau’s Recent Book, “The Seat of Authority in Religion”* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, and Co, 1890). For biographical data on Braithwaite, see Joseph Foster’s invaluable resources, *Alumni Oxonienses: The Members of the University of Oxford, 1715-1886: Their Parentage, Birthplace, and Year of Birth, with a Record of Their Degrees*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1891), and *Men-at-the-Bar: A Biographical Hand-List of the Members of the Various Inns of Court*, 2nd ed. (London: Hazell, Watson, and Viney, 1895).