

Deep in Church History

John Henry Newman wrote, ‘To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant.’

Does this often quoted statement imply, as many seem to assume, that to be deep in history is to *commence* to be a Roman Catholic? Are the teachings and practices of the modern Roman Catholic Church identical to the early church?

By the time of his death, Newman believed the dogma of the infallibility of the Pope. However papal infallibility was a mere theological opinion at the time of his conversion to Catholicism. A popular Catholic catechism at that time asked, ‘Must not Catholics believe the pope in himself to be infallible?’ The catechism answered, ‘This is a Protestant invention; it is no article of Catholic faith.’ (Keenan's Controversial Catechism, 1851).

A few years later, by 1870, the ‘Protestant invention’ was declared dogma by the First Vatican Council.

Did Newman accept new dogma on the evidence of history? He must have read the book, *The Pope and the Council*, by the influential Roman Catholic historian, Ignaz von Döllinger, a fully documented historical repudiation of papal infallibility. Yet Newman consented to the new dogma despite the historical witness to the contrary and he remained a faithful member of the Roman Catholic Church; Döllinger, the historian, left.

Yet Newman too must have experienced the tension. To a suggestion of setting up a Catholic historical review, he responded, ‘Nothing would be better than an Historical Review for Roman Catholics – but who would bear it? Unless one doctored all one’s facts, one would be thought a bad Catholic’ (*The Month*, Jan. 1903, p.3).

That is an amazing admission. Had he written an honest and factual historical account, he would have been considered ‘bad’ by fellow Catholics, unless he altered, falsified or tampered the facts of history. Another way of saying the same is this: To be deep in history is to cease to be a Roman Catholic - unless of course, one is happy to be considered a bad Catholic.

But perhaps we should ask a more basic question – should history be the judge and criterion of true religion? Undoubtedly church history is of great value, and we would be utterly foolish to ignore the lessons we can glean from our forefathers in the faith.

But then, their beliefs and practices did vary from place to place, and from time to time. Being changeable and inconsistent, history cannot be the gold standard for Christianity.

Jesus did not fault the Jews for not adhering to history; on the contrary, he rebuked them for bringing to naught the Word of God by their zeal to adhere to the traditions of their fathers. History tells us what ‘was’; it does not tell us what ‘ought’. The Word of God should be the rule of faith.

We rejoice when we read of the faithfulness of our forefathers to the teaching of the New Testament, but sometimes they went astray. We must have the courage to be different if need be.

And different we all are, whether Catholic or Protestant, for better or for worse, to a greater or lesser extent, to the Christians of bygone centuries. All of us will be judged by the Word of God; it is to that inspired and authoritative Word that we must constantly return and submit if we seek God’s approval and blessing.