Some persons fidget at intellectual difficulties, and, successfully or not, are ever trying to solve them. Charles [Reding] was of a different cast of temper; a new idea was not lost on him but it did not distress him, if it was obscure, or conflicted with his habitual view of things. He let it work its way and find its place, and shape itself within him, by the slow spontaneous action of the mind. Yet perplexity is not itself a pleasant state and he would have hastened its removal, had he been able.


Chalk it up to an odd coincidence, but the lines inscribed above, from *The Story of a Convert* (as *Loss and Gain* was subtitled), by John Henry Newman (1801–1890), surely the best-known of the nineteenth century’s cohort of Anglicans who embraced Catholicism, happened to have been written at virtually the very time in 1848 that Nilakantha Goreh (1825–1895), a Benares Brahmin and likewise one of the same century’s best-known cohort of Hindus who embraced Anglicanism, was baptized and renamed ‘Nehemiah.’ Thereafter, and not at all coincidentally, their lives would begin to intertwine, though not for years to come and for reasons that await elaboration in the pages ahead. Concurring, as I do, with Frank M. Turner, Newman’s most recent—and controversial—biographer, that, historiographically, one cannot divine in Newman’s life an invariable “teleological direction” with Roman Catholicism as its final goal, and moreover that Turner is right that the pre-conversion Newman “underwent one indeterminate metamorphosis after another,” I cannot help but think

---

of Charles Reding, the fictional convert of *Loss and Gain*, as a narratological device, one that enabled Newman to invest his own conversion, ex post facto, with more coherence of a cognitive kind than appears to have been the case, objectively.

**Conceptual Preliminaries**

That said, I am less than satisfied with a pervasive bias against the cognitive ‘factor’ (if I may so call it) in conversion studies, well-exemplified by the sweeping claim made by Robert Hefner against social anthropologist Robin Horton, architect of the ‘Intellectualist’ model of conversion whom Hefner accuses of harboring an “interiorist bias,” that “Conversion is rarely the outcome of intellectual appeal alone.”³ Personally, I go further and reject as a fantasy any idea that conversion could ever be a purely noetic process, but am also indebted to the insight of social psychologists such as Leon Festinger, who argued in the 1950s that “the individual strives toward [cognitive] consistency within himself [or herself].”⁴ This, it seems to me, is congruent with Newman’s enduring insight from *Loss and Gain*, that “perplexity is not itself a pleasant state.”

For reasons like the above, I am myself sensing a certain dissonance in the field of conversion studies and am wondering why the intellect and its role in conversion—along with that of theology, although Festinger understood it more reductionistically than I would—is now so very understated (if not actually trivialized). This, I suppose, has much to do, by and large, with social science theory and methodology being geared toward, and scaled to, largish ethno-linguistic populations and not to single individuals (that being left to historians and hagiographers, not to anthropologists or ethnographers)—a John Henry Newman, say, or a Nehemiah Goreh. One such study I admire a great deal is Rita Smith Kipp’s on the Batak Protestants of Indonesia, which throws a good deal of light on what it means to be a convert. Conceptualizing conversion as

---
