Frederick D. Aquino and Benjamin King (Eds.)


In Truth and Method, Hans-Georg Gadamer claims: “The prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his free disposal. He cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings” (p. 295). Receptions of Newman is a splendid example of Gadamer’s point. The volume is largely not an exposition of Newman’s own thought but a history of interpretations of Newman. The text collects eleven scholarly articles that explore various meanings of ‘reception’ as they apply to specific works of Newman—Essay on Development, Grammar of Assent, Idea of a University—as well as how Newman influences diverse intellectual regions (nineteenth-century Protestant England, late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century France, contemporary Orthodox theology) and interpretations of particular topics (e.g., divine revelation, Newman’s sanctity). The scholarship of each chapter is generally careful. The volume succeeds, quite strongly, in realizing the aims of ‘critical appreciation,’ correction of misunderstandings, and challenging any ‘official interpretation’ of Newman. As the essays convincingly demonstrate, Newman’s texts and influence evidences complexity and nuance—a point not all commentators observe consistently. Efforts at facile categorization or one-sided judgments are shown throughout the volume to be misleading and problematic.

Newman scholars will likely find the chapters treating the reception of Newman’s texts and influence in certain areas the most interesting. Let me single out several. In Ben King’s chapter one, ‘Protestant Reception of the Essay,’ it is fascinating to follow the similarities and contrasts of Newman’s Protestant critics of the Essay on Development, helpfully and coherently distinguished by King into evangelical, liberal, and high churchmen. Protestant critics unite with some common claims. King ably shows how Newman was often judged to be on a specious ‘voyage of discovery’ and also as one who spurned the ‘via media’—which, of course, he did. Yet these critics also differ regarding how the Essay connects to Romanizing tendencies of later generations. Like other essays that concern a single text, King traces well the historical development of response to the Essay, internal and external, in relation to other intellectual currents, i.e., Oxford Movement, Newman’s conversion, and the emergence of evolutionary thinking taking root after Darwin in Protestant theological circles.

In chapter six, ‘Historical (Mis)Understandings of the Idea of a University,’ Colin Barr persuasively argues for a nuanced, revisionist account of the errors
and shortcomings that have historically plagued scholarship regarding the Cullen-Newman relationship and its subsequent interpretations of both the Idea of a University and the historical context of the Catholic University of Ireland (p. 129). Typical of the points and arguments made in this chapter, Barr wants readers to consider the judgment of Fergal McGrath about Newman’s university: “Consideration of a complex character such as that of Newman,” he wrote, “is better judged from his own words and actions than from the views of others upon them.” On points such as this, Barr scolds: “There is perhaps no better summary in print of the fatal flaw of Newman Studies: the failure to raise the gaze from the great cardinal and examine his surroundings” (p. 129). Barr’s chapter is a masterful study of proper historical research and how many scholars on Newman failed to do so.

One welcome contribution is chapter nine, Dan Lattier’s ‘The Orthodox Theological Reception of Newman.’ Much in this chapter will be new to Newman scholarship. Lattier brings out Newman’s connection to the Eastern fathers well (a point many scholars would know). Yet he goes further by connecting Newman’s interest in them to how four major Orthodox interpreters (Georges Florovsky, Georges Dragas, Andrew Louth, and Jaroslav Pelikan) view Newman’s thought as vital and continuous with Eastern theology. Lattier shows how Florovsky “endorses” Newman’s view of doctrinal development (p. 180). Dragas appreciates Newman’s ‘catholicity’ by connecting it more philosophically to the Father’s “Neopatristic synthesis” (p. 183). Louth values Newman’s understanding of the act of faith in the University Sermons, but has come to reject Newman’s theory of development. Lattier perceptively suggests that Louth’s reasoning for this lies less with theological argument than ecclesial fidelity (p. 188). Lattier judges—quite rightly—that it is from and through these three Orthodox theologians’ influence that Newman will continue to inform Orthodox theology.

John Sullivan’s chapter five, ‘Newman’s Circle of Knowledge and Curriculum Wholeness in The Idea of a University,’ is a solid overview for readers unfamiliar with Newman’s educational philosophy. Still, for serious Newman scholars and readers, there is little new here. Indeed, similar points can be found in Frederick Aquino’s book, An Integrative Habit of Mind: John Henry Newman on the Path to Wisdom (DeKalb 11, 2012). The main claim: “the need for comprehensiveness in a university curriculum, giving priority to a sense of the whole, and unity and interconnectedness among the disciplines, with these features seen as contributing to the development of intellectual virtues and personhood,” (p. 96) are tropes in the educational philosophies for the last hundred years. Other platitudes and refrains can be found as well. That these points are common does not detract from their veracity, however. What remains more problematic is some