

Newman and Sexuality

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Introduction

It is not uncommon to meet the argument that John Henry Newman (1801-1890) had homosexual inclinations, and that these provide the key to understanding Newman's motives. It is contended here that the argument is invariably flawed by a weak methodology, imposing theory upon the facts, failing to consider whether Newman may have been asexual, and downplaying if not implicitly denying the possibility that Newman was motivated by sincerely held religious principles. A more accurate analysis of Newman's relationships and affections may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the nature of not only his sexuality, but also his engagement with the world. Newman's life and thought are intrinsically interesting: having long been considered "the greatest religious writer of the Victorian age",¹ he is of increasing interest not only in religious studies, but also in philosophy.²

The Question

Was John Henry Newman homosexually inclined? And what does it matter? These questions have proved controversial, and that not only in a neutral sense. Further, Newman's putative homosexuality is then used to explain the course he took in life, to the virtual exclusion of other explanations, so that Newman emerges as driven not by religious or spiritual principles, but by his hidden homosexuality. Frank Turner, one of the most important modern Newman scholars, wrote:

... ever since the publication of Geoffrey Faber's *Oxford Apostles* (1933), the question of the relationship of Newman's sexuality to the Tractarian movement has concerned some scholars. The possibility of homosexual or

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¹ Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy, volume 4: Philosophy in the Modern World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 28.

² Note the comments in Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, pp. 28-30, 145-150 on Newman's epistemology, and pp. 305-308 on his religious philosophy.

homoerotic affinities between Newman and those living at Littlemore may even have crossed Harriett Mozley's mind when in May 1842, reporting to Jimima after her own visit there, she described Dalgairns, then their brother's only "companion," as a "modest looking blushing youth, all the *men* again talking of his beauty and fine eyes," ... Endless speculation about Newman's sexuality is possible, with the evidence being at best indecisive and the question not firmly resolvable.³

I shall first set out the controversy, and then in Part 2, deal with the phenomenon of asexuality, and show how it could shed a fresh perspective on Newman's life. In Part 3, I return to the controversy, to offer a critique. Finally, I draw some conclusions.

Part 1: The Controversy

The fashion of critiquing Newman by reference to his psychology, real or supposed, and so discounting his stated motives, had begun in serious literature at least as far back as 1864. An article in the *London Quarterly Review*, reviewing the Kingsley-Newman controversy, said of Newman:

From his boyhood, at once fanciful, sceptical, and superstitious; never brought into contact with the various strife and life of the outer world, or the practical claims and duties of home-life; the child has now become a cloistered enthusiast...⁴

The author went on to state:

With Newman... feelings, prepossessions, prejudices, have determined the creed; his logic has ever been an afterthought and a mere instrument of defence or persuasion. In this, as in many other respects, Newman's is eminently a feminine mind, - poetic, impressible, receptive and reproductive, rather than original and commanding.⁵

The modern controversy, which is coloured by Faber's *Oxford Apostles*, carries forward this view of Newman as feminine in mind, unnaturally cloistered, and acting from feeling rather than rational principle. In Part 1, I set out Faber's views, then those of some of the scholars of masculinity and homosexuality who saw in 'homosociality' (persons of the same sex keeping company) an exclusion of the other sex. These writers set the stage for Turner's analysis of Newman as possessing an aversion to women. After considering his views, I turn to Ker's review of and reply to Turner,

³ Frank M. Turner, *John Henry Newman: The Challenge to Evangelical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 425.

⁴ 'Mr. Kingsley and Dr. Newman', *London Quarterly Review* (October 1864), p. 139.

⁵ 'Mr. Kingsley and Dr. Newman', pp. 149-150.

then to a few more recent comments, especially the public exchange of correspondence between Skinner and Duffy.

Wherever possible, in this section, I simply state the disputants' arguments, although sometimes it seemed appropriate to note that a particular comment might be merely asserted, or altogether without any supporting reference.

1.1 Faber's *Oxford Apostles*

Kingsley's attack on Newman brought most of the elements of the controversy into view, and controversialists such as the writer in the *London Quarterly Review* whom we have seen, continued the sally. Modern Newman studies took a new turn with the writing of *Oxford Apostles* by Geoffrey Faber (1889-1961), the great-nephew of F.W. Faber of the Brompton Oratory,⁶ and one of the founders of what was to become the Faber and Faber publishing house.

In some ways, *Oxford Apostles* reads like an extended essay, for example, in the confidence with which Faber assumes that his outlook will be shared by all the world. Thus Faber can write of his grandfather that: "A saving sense of humour prevented him from going all the way with the Tractarians..."⁷, as if to be a Tractarian was to necessarily be humourless, and Faber had only to state this for its justice to be acknowledged. In another passage for which I can find no apparent basis but Faber's own opinion, he declares of Newman that:

The child learned to conform to the standards of a pious Christian household... Newman's natural masculinity, if he had it, was quickly cauterized. As he might never be an ordinary boy, so he was never to be a whole man, and as a leader he was to prove a broken reed.⁸

Much of the book is written like this style, more appropriate for an essay than for a work of impartial scholarship. Faber makes assertions which it is impossible to evaluate, such as: "he [Newman] understood them [i.e. other men] in the rational and imaginative parts of their minds, never in the

⁶ Geoffrey Faber, *Oxford Apostles* (London: Penguin, 1954), pp. 12-13. F.W. Faber was the brother of Geoffrey's grandfather.

⁷ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 13. Note, too, Faber's supporting his musings of Jewish ancestry with reference to how Newman had an aptitude for business and a "habit of closely scrutinizing tradesmen's accounts", p. 20.

⁸ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 25.

instinctive.”⁹ What does Faber mean by “instinctive”? How could one establish whether Newman did so understand other men or did not?

Interestingly, Faber nearly reaches the very point I am arguing, the possibility that Newman was actually asexual, rather than homo- or heterosexual, even if he does so by fashioning a caricature of an unnaturally precocious intellect which distorted Newman’s development:

Years of intense hard work and bodily mortification had killed what he would have called his baser instincts; or, if they were not completely dead, they were now so mutilated and enfeebled that they were completely subservient.¹⁰

All the sap, which might have nourished his instincts, was diverted into the exceptionally rapid growth of his mind.¹¹

In declaring that Newman’s stated reasons for being celibate were “very remarkably inadequate”,¹² Faber refers to Newman’s observation that celibacy was more suited to the life of a missionary.¹³ Faber discusses Newman’s attitude to the marriages made by some of his friends, and magisterially declares:

Yet this ardent sense of a singular moral beauty in the frustration of his animal nature was not the fundamental cause of Newman’s early resolve to live a single life. ... He lacked sympathy with animals, and often used to speak of the brute creation as a disturbing mystery. Perhaps this was because the mating instinct had never developed in him.¹⁴

Again, this is the craft of an essayist if not a humourist: Newman does not desire to mate, which would explain why he feels uneasy about animals. Why? Because animals are conspicuous for mating, and will irresistibly call the sex function to mind?

Faber proceeds to distinguish Newman from the ‘normal boy’ who becomes attracted to the opposite sex, and to conclude that Newman “realized in himself an abnormal lack of that sensibility”.¹⁵ Faber then discusses what he terms Newman’s “feminine” or “neutral” character. This

⁹ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 26.

¹⁰ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 26.

¹¹ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 34.

¹² Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 39.

¹³ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, pp. 39, 43.

¹⁴ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, pp. 43-44.

¹⁵ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 44.

seems to include both Newman's stated "sexual indifference" and also a certain impression of femininity about Newman.¹⁶

Oddly, Faber states that: "There were moments when his [Newman's] own conviction that he was not for any woman wavered. All that is known of these occasions is that they were few and brief, and that they cease after 1829, the year in which, as he says, his acquaintance with Hurrell Froude ripened into 'the closest and most affectionate friendship'."¹⁷ Faber goes on to say that there was "no conscious misogyny in his composition", but that he had an "indifference, not dislike" of women.¹⁸ Quite fairly, he concludes on this note that: "It must be remembered that passionate friendships, usually coloured by high religious aspirations, were far from uncommon a century ago."¹⁹ Faber returns, quite explicitly, to homosexuality later in the volume.

There, discussing Newman and Froude together, Faber speaks of an "inversion, a falling short of the proper human standard..."²⁰ This, the contemporary view of homosexuality in England of the 1930s, will not leave anyone acquainted with the ancient Greek view of it "entirely comfortable".²¹ Faber proceeds to speak of "the sense of a godlike excellence in the Greek ideal of love between friends", which has been influential in England.²² He then states:

In no generation has this been more clearly marked than in that of the Tractarians. In them it entered into close union with another ideal, the ideal of the sanctification of earthly loves by the love of God. ... Psychology had not yet taught them to look for the roots of spiritual ideals in their animal nature. ... Both Froude and Newman may have derived the ideal of virginity from a homosexual root; but this does not of itself justify us in sneering either at the ideal or at the condition which gave rise to it. On the other hand, we cannot possibly begin to understand their emotional life if we shut our eyes to everything except its surface appearance.²³

I will pause for a moment to highlight the idea that "the roots of [the Tractarians'] spiritual ideals [lay] in their animal nature." This is, I suggest,

¹⁶ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, pp. 45-47.

¹⁷ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 47.

¹⁸ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 47.

¹⁹ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, pp. 47-48.

²⁰ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 212.

²¹ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 213.

²² Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 213.

²³ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 213.

the key to Faber's analysis, and it is his single most important influence on subsequent scholarship for its consigning to irrelevance religious and spiritual aims and impulses. Faber's charming way of harping upon animals will be forgotten, but that idea that the spiritual yearnings of man are a sort of superficial layer upon the physical, will be remembered.

Faber then commences a survey of the evidence concerning Froude, which seems to me to assume as much as it proves (e.g., "This is the unmistakable language of conflict with sexual temptation".²⁴ This is written as if calling an inference "unmistakable" places it beyond challenge.) Having established to his own satisfaction that Froude had homosexual desires, Faber continues:

To what extent was this true of other participants in the movement? That Newman himself was in very much the same case as Froude can scarcely be doubted.²⁵

However, avers Faber, Newman was better able to hide his feelings, from posterity and from himself, and that unlike Froude, he never kept any but religious company, and so had fewer temptations.²⁶ It seems to Faber that once Newman had found "real intimacy" with Froude, he nevermore entertained even occasional ideas of marrying; and that, whereas with other friends Newman was the beloved, with Froude "the relation was reversed."²⁷

From Froude, Faber turns his attention to Newman's relationship with Ambrose St John: "... a friend of very inferior mental calibre... who accompanied Newman to Rome and served him with dog-like devotion until he, too, died in 1875".²⁸ Faber details at length the scene of St John's last days, when he grasped Newman's neck to him, and then held his hand so tightly that it had to be prised loose by others. He notes that Newman could not understand St John's final smile, but that he did desire to be buried in the same grave.²⁹

Loss and Gain is examined for tell-tale signs, and Faber notes, quite accurately, I would say, that Newman seems to find no "fascination"

²⁴ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, pp. 213-214.

²⁵ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 217.

²⁶ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, pp. 217-218.

²⁷ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 218.

²⁸ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 219.

²⁹ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, pp. 219-220.

with “the idea of sexual union”, although he strays far beyond the evidence in then saying that “the physical side of marriage was deeply repugnant to him...”³⁰ Faber seems not to have been not able to contemplate the possibility that *repugnance* and *indifference* are inimical states.

Frederick Faber, his grandfather’s brother, next falls under Faber’s psychologising eye. All that requires notice is Faber’s conclusion:

Reading between the lines of their correspondence, one perceives that there was something in Frederick Faber from which Newman shrank. Was it the younger man’s fashionable success? Or was it that in him Newman felt his own romantic sensibilities exposed, as it were, for all to see, without any of the careful screens which he set about them? Did he see, in this transition from extravagant friendship to extravagant piety, a too naked and obvious rendering of his own emotional progress?³¹

1.2 Studies of Newman, Homosexuality, and Homosociality

After Faber, some modern studies of Newman’s relation to Victorian homosexual and homosocial culture appeared. As they inform Turner’s approach, mention must be made of those which Turner states he employed.

Perhaps the most significant of the studies Turner refers to is *Epistemology of the Closet*, by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.³² Turner states that pages 1 to 90 of this book are “important for this topic”.³³ That work is basically a literary analysis, from which the author extrapolates the attitude of the selected writers. The main subjects are Melville’s *Billy Budd*, Wilde, Nietzsche, Henry James, and Proust. Newman is nowhere mentioned in the book. Pages 1 to 90 comprise the introduction and the first chapter, “Epistemology of the Closet”. Sedgwick’s point of departure is that we are living through “a long crisis of modern sexual definition”.³⁴ She is continuing, with this book, the line of research she set out in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. As she now states, in that work, she: “attempted to demonstrate the immanence of men’s same-sex

³⁰ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, pp. 222-223.

³¹ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 226.

³² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008 [1990]).

³³ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, pp. 696-697.

³⁴ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 1.

bonds, and their prohibitive structuration, to male-female bonds in nineteenth-century English literature.”³⁵

In this work, she argues that to understand Western culture, one must: “incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition”³⁶ Sedgwick states that the volume was intended to be “resolutely non-algorithmic. A point of the book is *not to know* how far its insights and projects are generalizable”.³⁷

Yet, having read the pages Turner refers to, I find it hard to credit that he took anything from them except two views, first, that the modern theories of homosociality should be applied to the nineteenth century, and secondly perhaps, that “male homosexuality could be, and often was, seen as the practice for which male supremacy was the theory.”³⁸

Turner also used Dowling’s *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1994).³⁹ Dowling stresses that Newman and Froude revived the older tradition of the tutorial, and it “began to function at Oxford as a vehicle for the intensifying bonds of masculine interest, affection and obligation to which modern cultural theory has given the name “male homosociality”.”⁴⁰ However, Dowling seems to find the key to Newman’s thought and work in his dislike of modern society and commerce. She paints a portrait of an intellectual dreamer, enchanted by Oxford as heir to the monastic tradition.

I note that Dowling wrote: “their sense of the living alternative reality of the medieval past was heightened by... the novels of Walter Scott, to whom Newman, as he would say in later years, owed his very self”.⁴¹ There is no supporting reference for this statement; I return to it in Part 3.

³⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 15.

³⁶ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 1.

³⁷ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 12.

³⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 36.

³⁹ Turner refers to pp. 36-44 of this book, in *John Henry Newman*, pp. 696-697.

⁴⁰ Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 35, and also pp. 40-41 on Newman and the tutorial.

⁴¹ Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality*, p. 39.

Turner also refers to James Eli Adams' *Dandies and Desert Saints* (1995).⁴² Again, this is a work of literary analysis. Adams' aim, he states, is to: "explore a contradiction within Victorian patriarchy by which the same gender system that underwrote male dominance also called into question the "manliness" of intellectual labour."⁴³ When he turns to Newman, Adams notes that Newman's circle provided a sense of brotherhood, and his preaching strongly addressed itself to the consciences of his hearers.⁴⁴ Adams opines that there is something apparently "hysterical" about Kingsley's attack on Newman, and that Faber implies a homosexuality in Newman by insinuation more than by direct statement, and that these very attacks were homophobic.⁴⁵ I could not find evidence that Turner had absorbed this, or if he had, that he had agreed.

Adams achieved other insights, which also seem to have little mark on Turner. Thus, Adams is aware that the Oxford Movement had the alluring air of a conspiracy, and that this was a factor which marked it as a "masculine social formation".⁴⁶ He also grasps Newman's understanding of the importance of personality in education and human endeavour (although he does not seem to understand that a *sacrament* specifically requires a connection between heaven and earth, not merely between tradition and the present).⁴⁷ Adams is aware that the Tractarians formed a self-regarding "intellectual elite".⁴⁸ Adams does not say that this was a by-product of a genuine intellectual achievement, but neither does he depict it as a deliberate posture. Adam's emphasis is on the sense of "corporate solidarity" which the sense of belonging to an elite produced.⁴⁹

Adams observes that when Kingsley spoke of "effeminacy" he alluded to not homosexuality, but "a male person or institution weakened

⁴² James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 696, referring to pp. 61-106.

⁴³ Adams, *Dandies*, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Adams, *Dandies*, pp. 75-77, 79.

⁴⁵ Adams, *Dandies*, pp. 83-85.

⁴⁶ Adams, *Dandies*, p. 87.

⁴⁷ Adams, *Dandies*, pp. 88-89. On the sacramental, see J.H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2018), pp. 436-452.

⁴⁸ Adams, *Dandies*, p. 96.

⁴⁹ Adams, *Dandies*, p. 96.

by luxury or inactivity”.⁵⁰ Further, the quality of “manliness” as then understood was inimical to any secrecy, and that would be inferred from the reserve of the Tractarians.⁵¹ However, while “male secrecy” did come to be associated with “sexual transgression,”⁵² celibacy itself could “readily be described, as it had been in early Christian monasticism, as an eminently masculine and martial discipline.”⁵³ As Adams states:

The provocative power of celibacy in the 1830s – as in most eras – is not its affiliation with transgressive sexuality, but its disturbingly powerful challenge to gender norms, to structures of masculine identity and authority, in which it was at one with “the virtues peculiarly Christian,” as Newman well understood.⁵⁴

That is, Adams possesses the rare virtue of acknowledging that religion may have been a source of action for Newman and his brethren.

Turner’s stated reading of Sussman’s 1995 study *Victorian Masculinities* is more apparent. Sussman articulates that view that by the 1840s and 1850s, “the boundary between the homosocial and the homosexual had become an increasingly contested territory”.⁵⁵ This was a factor in the Protestant dislike of monasticism, which saw “homoeroticism registered within monastic discourse”.⁵⁶

Finally, in 1998, Buckton stated that in the minds of Charles Kingsley and others, Catholicism and celibacy were associated with homosexuality.⁵⁷ He asserts:

Despite Newman’s self-proclaimed celibacy, his life was in fact characterized by a series of intense and emotionally (if not physically) intimate relationships with other men. Precisely by withholding the full nature of his attachments, Newman is in effect eroticizing them.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Adams, *Dandies*, p. 98.

⁵¹ This point is soundly developed at some length. See Adams, *Dandies*, pp. 88-101.

⁵² Adams, *Dandies*, p. 102.

⁵³ Adams, *Dandies*, p. 103.

⁵⁴ Adams, *Dandies*, p. 104, and also p. 105.

⁵⁵ Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 56. Turner cites this volume, in *John Henry Newman*, p. 696.

⁵⁶ Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, pp. 56-59, quoting p. 59.

⁵⁷ Oliver S. Buckton, *Secret Selves: Confession and Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Autobiography* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 28. Turner specifically refers to pp. 21-59 of this book, in *John Henry Newman*, p. 696.

⁵⁸ Buckton, *Secret Selves*, p. 28.

Later, Buckton declares that the relationship between Newman and Froude was “certainly homoerotic, if not homosexual, in nature”.⁵⁹ Again, Buckton’s influence upon, or support for the direction Turner was taking, shall be evident as we consider Turner’s work.

1.3 Turner on Newman and Sexuality

Published in 2002, Turner’s large scale reappraisal of Newman’s journey from Anglicanism to Catholicism, in many ways continued Faber’s finding of hidden motives which were often inconsistent if not inimical to Newman’s avowed intentions. Turner accepts Faber’s view that physical love was “deeply repugnant” to Newman, referring to “his disgust at sexual relations”.⁶⁰ For Turner, Newman was a man who “dwelled in communities of unmarried men”, and then, in becoming celibate, “made a virtue of his aversion to women.”⁶¹ This “misogyny”, a diagnosis which goes beyond Faber’s,⁶² allegedly manifested in Newman’s “anger and even petulance” to those of his friends, the layman Bowden only excepted. When Bowden married, Newman wrote but did not post a letter to Wilberforce, which was “the single piece of evidence from his years in the English Church which might point toward latent homoerotic yearnings”.⁶³

Newman’s draft to Wilberforce is said to point to “a profound inability to understand love between a man and a woman”.⁶⁴ This together with his “near contemptuous” dismissal of demands for marriage reform, are taken as evidence of “a disgust at sexual intimacy between husbands and wives” and, once more, his “aversion to women.”⁶⁵ Turner here distinguishes the “aversion” from “any homosexual orientation on his [Newman’s] part.”⁶⁶ Yet, only the page before, as we have seen, Turner has linked that “aversion” with Newman’s desire to live with celibate men (i.e., with “homosociality”).

⁵⁹ Buckton, *Secret Selves*, p. 35.

⁶⁰ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 429.

⁶¹ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 426.

⁶² Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 436 for the word ‘misogynist’. The concept is ubiquitous in this section.

⁶³ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, pp. 426-472.

⁶⁴ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 427.

⁶⁵ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 427.

⁶⁶ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 427.

It is chiefly Newman's comments about the recently deceased Mrs John Keble which show "the deep and lasting resentment he felt toward his male friends who chose marriage and family over affection for himself and toward the women who had become the new object of their love and affection."⁶⁷

Turner cites some of Newman's strong declarations of affection for the young male friends, to whom, "rather than to women", he looked for support.⁶⁸ Rather than interpreting them as homoerotic, Turner believes: "The real issue for Newman was an unfulfilled desire for emotional intimacy."⁶⁹ At this point Turner takes a turn towards Geoffrey Faber-like psychologising:

Newman's desire for some to take "an affectionate interest" in him may have reflected an unfulfilled longing for both parental love and the kind of love and aid that he had so steadily provided his brothers, sisters, and aunts without having received what he regarded as sufficient affection and appreciation in return. ... it is by no means clear that Newman ever achieved that level of adult emotional development and personal confidence required for a committed relationship of love or sexuality with either a man or a woman.⁷⁰

I will pause to comment that it is difficult to see how, in the circumstances of Newman's life, such a statement could be falsified. Newman's choice of celibacy prevents us from obtaining any clarity on the question.

After speaking of "inner feelings" which "may well have" and "may have been" connected with Newman's "consistent attack on feeling and subjectivity in religion", Turner avers that "these inner feelings so clearly distrusted by Newman could just as well have been heterosexual as homosexual, or they may have just as much related to fears about his aggressiveness and anger as well as his sexuality."⁷¹ If it is true, then why raise it in a section devoted to just that issue of sexuality? Yet Turner discusses this and some miscellaneous correspondence between Morris, Faber and Newman on celibacy, and concludes that, "in all cases, the issue

⁶⁷ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 428.

⁶⁸ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, pp. 428-429.

⁶⁹ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 429.

⁷⁰ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, pp. 429-430.

⁷¹ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 430.

appears to be more nearly one of aversion to women and sex rather than one of attraction to relationships with other men.”⁷²

Turning to the Tractarian use of fasting as a spiritual exercise, Turner contends that: “fasting served as a device to exert self-control over sexual feelings, substituted thoughts about desire for food for those about desire for sex, and simultaneously fulfilled duties of penance”.⁷³ He then proceeds to cite studies suggesting that “male eating disorders may well be associated with men having no sexual experience, or homosexual men, or men encountering some conflict over sexual orientation”.⁷⁴ He also connects eating disorders with “depression and perfectionism”, which were also, he states, “characteristics of men associated with Littlemore”.⁷⁵ With all this battery of studies, Turner can conclude only that: “Although there is no evidence of open homosexual orientation, some of the Newman coterie may well have been latently homosexual”.⁷⁶ I note that he does not state what he understands a “latent” homosexual to be, or how one can be identified.

Turner settles on Newman’s “concept of penitential celibacy”, and asserts that certain figures (Faber is certainly one, perhaps also Kingsley, J.A. Froude, and Pattison, it is not clear) finally rejected:

... the utter joylessness and relentlessly self-condemnatory character of Newman’s religious vision into which they had for a time been drawn. Either within or outside marriage, they had rejected the body-hating, misogynist elements of Tractarian celibacy.⁷⁷

Turner draws on this discussion elsewhere in the book. It is central to his entire thesis, for his view of Newman is that: “The single most consistent emotional element in Newman’s adult life was his sustained determination to dwell among other celibate males and outside the company of women.”⁷⁸

Discussing Newman’s experiment in communal living at Littlemore, Turner writes that: “As so often when driven by inner personal needs, Newman described himself... as functioning as an instrument of

⁷² Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 433, rounding out a discussion from pp. 430-433.

⁷³ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 434.

⁷⁴ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 434.

⁷⁵ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 434.

⁷⁶ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 434.

⁷⁷ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 436.

⁷⁸ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 624.

Providence.”⁷⁹ These inner needs were, for Turner, precisely the desire for male company, the aversion to women, and the desire to be recognised as a *leader*, a role which “he had failed to sustain in his family”.⁸⁰ Turner also speculates that the appointment of Thomas Arnold to the Regius Professorship of Modern History “may” also have induced Newman to move to Littlemore, although, as he states, Newman and the Tractarians never publicly commented on the appointment.⁸¹

Once more, one might ask how such an imputation of motive can be answered when it stands independent of any evidence.

Another example of Turner’s finding hidden true motives for Newman’s beliefs and actions, which are at variance with his stated religious purposes, is his conjecture that Newman’s devotion to his sister Mary was the ground of his views on Mariology:

It seems possible that if Newman could convince himself that Marian devotion did not obscure the distinction between Creator and creature, then his intense affection for his own sister Mary had not challenged the decencies of family relationships. ... Newman’s sustained criticism of what we regarded as excessive Marian devotion or Marian devotion carried out in bad taste may have been another way in which he protested that his love for his own sister Mary had not exceeded the boundaries of good taste and morality.⁸²

Turner considers Newman’s inability to prevent his brother Francis setting out on an evangelical mission to Persia, and states that Newman “lifted the private battles located in his family to a universal plane of criticism... Of course, what stirred Newman’s anger at Francis was not only his brother’s religious experimentation but the manner in which the new religious commitment encouraged him to flout John’s authority.”⁸³ That is, for Newman, this was a personal affront as much as anything else. I shall analyse Turner’s arguments in Part 3.

⁷⁹ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 414.

⁸⁰ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, pp. 624-625.

⁸¹ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 395.

⁸² Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 634.

⁸³ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, pp. 134-135.

1.4 Ker's Review of and Reply to Turner

Ian Ker of the University of Oxford has published two pieces of significance for this article: his review of Turner's book in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the afterword to his biography of Newman.

I first note the book review of 2002.⁸⁴ Ker alleges that Turner evinced a tendency to assert rather than prove his case, and to dismiss evidence contradicting his thesis. For example, refuting Turner's contention that Newman's true opponents at Oxford had been not the "Liberals" as Newman claimed, but the "Evangelicals", Ker observes that Turner draws a rigid but illusory distinction between the two, for he seems not to have understood what "Liberalism" was in religious terms.

Coming to Turner's explanation of Newman's career by reference to a desire to live with other males, and not with females, Ker points out that the evidence Turner cites actually points to Newman's unconcern at being with males, as such.⁸⁵ In the third column, Ker describes the sacrificial nature of Newman's decision to live the religious ideal of being celibate. In answering Turner on Newman's attitude to Keble's marriage, Ker provides an alternative interpretation, stating that "Newman was simply acknowledging that conversion was a practical impossibility for married Anglican clergy faced with estrangement from wife and family, and penury."

Finally, Ker observes that the facts show that Newman could have achieved his "goal" of living in a male community other than by taking the path he did, and this shows that Newman's way through life was not governed by that alleged desire. That is, something more is needed to explain why Newman chose one way rather than another. It is implied that Newman's stated spiritual principles provide the clue.

For the 2009 edition of his *John Henry Newman: A Biography*, Ker wrote an afterword. Relevantly for this study, in that afterword he considered the speculation that Newman and St John may have been in

⁸⁴ Ian Ker, 'Slow Road to Rome', *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5201 (December 2002), p. 32. As the review was one page only, all references are to this page.

⁸⁵ I might also note here that there is evidence that Newman did not like being followed by young men while at Oxford. See Charles Stephen Dessain and Edward E. Kelly (eds), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. XXI (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1971), p. 261, n. 1.

“some kind of homosexual relationship”.⁸⁶ Observing that this sort of speculation is today understandable, Ker shows that Newman’s desire to be buried in the same grave as St John was by no means unique in previous generations, and was practised in instances where a sexual relationship was not at all in question. Rather, it was a sign of humble love for his most loyal friend, it would prevent a monument being erected for him (Newman), and it would see him buried between the other original English Oratorians.⁸⁷

Newman’s autobiographical writings next fall under Ker’s consideration. A concise selection from these show Newman at age 15, describing dances and parties as being temptations to him. Ker observes that: “Had the pious Evangelical Newman been so inclined in the slightest way... we would have found him praying fervently for the school holidays and the accompanying release from an all-male society.”⁸⁸

Ker then cites this famous passage from the *Apologia*:

I am obliged to mention, though I do it with great reluctance, another deep imagination, which at this time, the autumn of 1816, took possession of me,—there can be no mistake about the fact; viz. that it would be the will of God that I should lead a single life. This anticipation, which has held its ground almost continuously ever since,—with the break of a month now and a month then, up to 1829, and, after that date, without any break at all,—was more or less connected in my mind with the notion, that my calling in life would require such a sacrifice as celibacy involved; as, for instance, missionary work among the heathen, to which I had a great drawing for some years. It also strengthened my feeling of separation from the visible world, of which I have spoken above.⁸⁹

The “sacrifice” is clearly, states Ker, the forsaking of marriage.⁹⁰ Ker reinforces this by quoting Newman’s account of 25 March 1840, in which he writes of having foregone “the sort of interest which a wife takes and none but she... I willingly give up the possession of that sympathy, which I feel is not, cannot be, granted to me. Yet, not the less do I feel the need of it.”⁹¹ Ker closes with this consideration for seeing nothing homosexual in Newman’s desire to be buried in the same grave as St John:

⁸⁶ Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [1990]), p. 747.

⁸⁷ Ker, *John Henry Newman*, pp. 747-748.

⁸⁸ Ker, *John Henry Newman*, pp. 748-749, quoting from p. 749.

⁸⁹ J.H. Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, ed. Ian Ker (London: Penguin, 1994 [1864]), p. 28.

⁹⁰ Ker, *John Henry Newman*, p. 749.

⁹¹ Ker, *John Henry Newman*, p. 749.

Newman would scarcely have left such an instruction had he ever dreamed that it could ever be interpreted as having any significance beyond the significance which he attached to it – nor would the Oratory or the Church authorities ever have permitted such a joint burial if they had had the slightest suspicion about what must have seemed to them a totally innocent, not to say praiseworthy gesture.⁹²

1.5 Recent Controversies

It would be impossible, even futile, to attempt to cover the entirety of the modern controversy. However, special mention should be made of the debate between Simon Skinner and Eamon Duffy, two eminent scholars. In Skinner's article 'History versus Hagiography', he notes, quite correctly, that Turner's contention was:

... that Newman's conversion, rather than the natural and inevitable course of a spiritual teleology which he mapped for posterity, is inexplicable without reference to a set of veiled and deeply personal motives, prominent among them an anxiety to preserve a quasi-monastic life in the company of young male admirers.⁹³

Skinner cites the praise which greeted Turner's book, and depicts its critics as being "a lobby with a common interest: Newman's canonisation."⁹⁴ Skinner critiques the two pieces of Ker which I have cited above.⁹⁵ Skinner protests the attention given to this "minor feature" of Turner's book, "fewer than thirty pages out of a book of 740", especially given that Turner himself had said that his comments were "speculative and tendentious".⁹⁶ Skinner has much to say on the qualifications of Turner's critics;⁹⁷ Turner's praise for Newman's gifts and influence is highlighted,⁹⁸ and Skinner closes with stating that: "What is at stake is the legitimacy and remit of historical inquiry itself, when confronted with a vocal interest group whose principles and prejudices are seldom acknowledged".⁹⁹

⁹² Ker, *John Henry Newman*, p. 750.

⁹³ Simon Skinner, 'History versus Hagiography: The Reception of Turner's *Newman*', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 61, no. 4 (2010), p. 765.

⁹⁴ Skinner, 'History versus Hagiography', p. 766.

⁹⁵ Skinner, 'History versus Hagiography', pp. 767-770.

⁹⁶ Skinner, 'History versus Hagiography', pp. 770-771.

⁹⁷ Skinner, 'History versus Hagiography', pp. 774-779.

⁹⁸ Skinner, 'History versus Hagiography', pp. 779-780.

⁹⁹ Skinner, 'History versus Hagiography', p. 781.

Eamon Duffy published a reply in the pages of the same journal, in 2012.¹⁰⁰ It is possible only to summarise some of his arguments. For example, he replies to Skinner's observation that Turner's psycho-sexual conjectures occupied but a portion of a relatively immense volume, with:

A merely quantitative assessment... does not do justice to the very prominent role of such speculations in Turner's overall project. It is central to Turner's argument that the overt explanations that Newman offered for his actions were usually bogus, and that we need to look to the underlying psychological drives of a devious and dysfunctional personality for real understanding.¹⁰¹

Among other sallies, Duffy takes Turner to task for seeing sexual issues behind fasting, while: "[Turner] dismisses the possibility that ascetical practices like fasting, which are as old and as widespread as Christianity itself, might be embraced by indiscreetly zealous young Tractarians from a sense of duty or religious conviction, rather than as a result of a morbidly compulsive psycho-pathology."¹⁰² Duffy then turns his attention to Turner's thesis about Newman's true historical hostility having been against Evangelicalism, not Liberalism,¹⁰³ and Turner's misunderstanding of Newman's attitude while at Littlemore, especially as expressed in the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.¹⁰⁴

Of Skinner's reply, only four points need to be noted here: first, Skinner rejects Duffy's comment that although the pages from Turner's book which were strongly criticised were few, they were significant enough to warrant sustained response. Skinner's stated ground is: "I persist in the view that those speculations loomed far larger in the fevered minds of Turner's Catholic reviewers than in his pages, and certainly than in the minds of most lay academic readers who have been baffled by the commotion."¹⁰⁵

Second, Skinner repeats his concessions that Turner had arguably made some errors elsewhere in his book, most significantly that Turner

¹⁰⁰ Eamon Duffy, 'The Reception of Turner's *Newman*: A Reply to Simon Skinner', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 63, no. 3 (2012), pp. 534-548.

¹⁰¹ Duffy, 'A Reply to Simon Skinner', p. 536.

¹⁰² Duffy, 'A Reply to Simon Skinner', p. 538.

¹⁰³ Duffy, 'A Reply to Simon Skinner', pp. 540-544.

¹⁰⁴ Duffy, 'A Reply to Simon Skinner', pp. 544-547.

¹⁰⁵ Simon Skinner, 'A Response to Eamon Duffy', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 63, no. 3 (2012), p. 558.

drew a rigid distinction between Evangelicalism and Liberalism, when in fact: “for a High-Church Oxford don of the 1830s to attach Evangelicalism was... simply to attack liberalism at its closest quarter.”¹⁰⁶

Third, referring to Ker’s afterword to the reissue of his biography, he avers: “Ker stated that the 1957 publication of Newman’s *Autobiographical writings*, and the *Apologia*, ‘made available all the evidence necessary to disprove any notion that Newman was homosexual in his inclinations’. Just like that!”¹⁰⁷

Fourth, Skinner discloses that in an email to him (Skinner), Turner wrote:

I was [surprised] by the honing in on 11 pages regarding Newman’s sexuality. I cannot tell you how many times these pages were written and rewritten in consultation with serious professional historians and others qualified to comment.¹⁰⁸

The controversy has been wide and interesting, but the final remark I will note is Diarmaid MacCulloch’s attempt to cut the Gordian knot in 2013:

The homosexual identity of... John Henry Newman... has been the subject of intense controversy. ... After a survey of Newman’s emotional life – his passionate friendship with other single men (of whom his companion in the grave Ambrose St John was just the most longlasting), his tortured opinions about his own sinfulness, his obvious revelling in the homosocial world of early Victorian Oxford, it is difficult to avoid applying to him that useful variant of Ockham’s Razor: “Looks like a duck, waddles like a duck, quacks like a duck – can it be a duck?” Other members of Newman’s circle, such as the extrovert F.W. Faber... can much less controversially be identified as homosexual. We should remember that in such cases, the question is one of identity – not necessarily of sexual activity – among deeply pious clergy, many of whom were committed to physical if not emotional celibacy.¹⁰⁹

Part 2: Asexuality

That is the controversy, albeit in a short span. Before offering my own critique of it, I shall discuss the question of asexuality because I shall be contending that although some, especially Faber, came close to seeing that it could be relevant to Newman’s sexuality, the discussion as a whole is flawed by a failure to consider it.

¹⁰⁶ Skinner, ‘A Response to Eamon Duffy’, pp. 558-559.

¹⁰⁷ Skinner, ‘A Response to Eamon Duffy’, p. 560.

¹⁰⁸ Skinner, ‘A Response to Eamon Duffy’, p. 558.

¹⁰⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 186.

2.1 Asexuality in Modern Research

‘Asexuality’ refers to a “lack of sexual attraction to others”, but not necessarily to a “lack of romantic attraction to others”, for some asexual people do have romantic inclinations.¹¹⁰ One view, based on anecdotal evidence, is that most asexual persons have romantic feelings.¹¹¹ Although the emergence of asexual identity is contemporary (the term was little known before 2004), asexuality is not a modern phenomenon. For example, while it is conceded that the evidence is too sparse to be conclusive, Isaac Newton (1642-1727) and Emily Brontë (1818-1848) are thought to have been asexual, although Brontë was “likely not aromantic”.¹¹² Bogaert is of the view that the restrictive sexual norms of Victorian England may have contributed to Brontë’s asexuality, and speculates that a person who would have been asexual may be “sexualised” by exposure to cultural forces that promote sexuality.¹¹³

Interestingly, Bogaert conjectures that preadolescent boys, being presexual, can identify with asexual characters.¹¹⁴

The incidence of asexuality in modern Great Britain is about 1% of the population, and likewise in the USA,¹¹⁵ but an almost contemporary survey in Australia found only 0.4%.¹¹⁶ These estimates are often beset with difficulties (e.g., do they measure behaviour, identity or attraction?).¹¹⁷ Further, samples from different age groups, social groups (e.g., city versus country), and of people with different values will yield different results, as will “volunteer bias”.¹¹⁸ It should also be borne in mind

¹¹⁰ Anthony F. Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), p. 13. Other indicators, e.g., lower sexual arousability and excitation, are mentioned in Nicole Prause and Cynthia A. Graham, ‘Asexuality: Classification and Categorisation’, *Archives of Sex Behavior*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2007), pp. 341-356.

¹¹¹ Pere Estupinya, ‘Science in Sexual Orientation’, in *S=EX²: The Science of Sex* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016).

¹¹² Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, pp. 31-32, and pp. 34-35.

¹¹³ Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, p. 32. Bogaert is vague on this point.

¹¹⁴ Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, p. 33.

¹¹⁵ Dudley L. Poston Jr and Amanda K. Baumle, ‘Patterns of Asexuality in the United States’, *Demographic Research*, vol. 23 (2010), p. 527. This survey was the least satisfactory in that it tested for people who were “not sure” of their sexual attractions.

¹¹⁶ Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, pp. 36, 40, and 42.

¹¹⁷ Poston and Baumle, ‘Patterns of Asexuality’, p. 510.

¹¹⁸ Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, pp. 39-40, and for “volunteer bias”, pp. 41-42.

that research concerning the existence of an attraction does not necessarily also report the strength of those attractions.¹¹⁹

Significantly for the case of Newman, there is reason to think, although the reasons are not conclusive, that asexuals may share with homosexuals the tendency to be “less conforming to traditional gender roles”, to some extent.¹²⁰ This would make sense, for the sexualisation of attraction tends to accentuate the masculinity of men and the femininity of women. Since the asexual is not aware of themselves as a sexual actor, they may escape this process.¹²¹ This could explain the ‘femininity’ some found in Newman.

It is reported that contemporary asexuals attend religious services more frequently than other groups.¹²²

Asexual people can, and often do, seek affection and romance. *AVENwiki*, a website run by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, states: “Heteroromantic asexuals seek romantic relationships for a variety of reasons, including companionship, affection, and intimacy, but they are not necessarily sexually attracted to their romantic partners.”¹²³

However, the three most significant points to bear in mind from this section are 1) the possibility that Newman may have had little or no sexual desire; 2) the speculation that asexual people, lacking a strongly developed sexual identity of their own, can be “sexualised” by external influences. That is, they can be conditioned to have not only romantic but even sexual relationships; and 3) it seems that children can identify with asexual characters.

2.2 Hints of Asexuality in Newman

As we have seen, Faber believed that “the mating instinct had never developed in him [i.e. Newman]”, and that he could not detect in *Loss and Gain* any “fascination” with “the idea of sexual union”. However, focussed

¹¹⁹ Prause and Graham, ‘Asexuality’, p. 342.

¹²⁰ Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, pp. 61-62.

¹²¹ Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*, p. 62.

¹²² Research cited in Poston and Baumle, ‘Patterns of Asexuality’, p. 515.

¹²³ ‘Heteroromantic’, at <http://wiki.asexuality.org/Heteroromantic>. Accessed 11/04/2017. For an example of a nineteen year old male who states that he is asexual but heteroromantic, in those terms, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BxKCaYBW4Q>. Accessed 22/04/2017.

on the idea of a “homosexual root” to Newman’s behaviour, and long before the rise of modern studies of asexuality, which even now are in their infancy, Faber did not pursue this line of enquiry.

Writing of his childhood in the *Apologia*, Newman recalls:

I thought life might be a dream, or I an angel, and all this world a deception, my fellow-angels by a playful device concealing themselves from me, and deceiving me with the semblance of a material world.¹²⁴

Newman regarded the angels as being perfect in purity (i.e., celibacy) because they have no bodies.¹²⁵ This was the view of the Catholic tradition, developing the dominical statements in Mark 12:25 and Matthew 22:30, suggesting asexuality in angels.¹²⁶ It is therefore not without significance that Newman should entertain this fancy. Newman knew it to be a whimsical notion, but this raises the question of how he saw himself.

With all respect for Sedgwick’s opinion, I do not believe that it is sound in history or in philosophy to read back contemporary categories of thought into the nineteenth century. Yet Skinner feels that the objective study of history is at stake.

The simple fact is that there is no evidence whatsoever, and no one has ever adduced any, that Newman considered himself to have any same-sex attractions, or even to find men particularly pleasing to the eye. In this respect, the contrast with Kingsley is instructive. Chitty writes of Kingsley:

He was always much moved by the beauty of the male body. In an essay in which he denigrated mountains he remarked how much more beautiful was the body of the mountaineer, ‘if you but strip him of his jacket and breeches’, than the mountain he climbed. ... he claimed that he would walk ten miles to see a certain butcher’s nephew playing cricket... ‘One looks forward with delight to what he would be “in the resurrection”’.¹²⁷

There is also an irony, but a significant one, in the fact that in the sermon which Kingsley had seized on to justify his now notorious comments in his

¹²⁴ Newman, *Apologia*, p. 23.

¹²⁵ J.H. Newman, *Sermon Notes of John Henry Newman: 1849-1878*, with an introduction and notes by James Tolhurst (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2000), p. 163.

¹²⁶ For example, Aquinas said that angels were incorporeal, could exercise no corporeal functions, and lacked an irascible and concupiscible appetite: *Summa Theologica* First Part, qq. 50-64, especially q. 59, art. 4. The demons were not inclined to carnal pleasures, but through envy they can take pleasure in human sins, and could use the semen of humans: qq. 51, art. 3 and q. 63, art. 3. Biblical passages which on one interpretation suggest otherwise, were differently explained, e.g., q. 51, art. 3, reply to objection 6.

¹²⁷ Susan Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk: A Life of Charles Kingsley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974), pp. 52-53.

review of volumes 7 and 8 of Froude's *History of England*, Newman had said:

By innocence... is meant simplicity in act, purity in motive, honesty in aim; acting conscientiously and religiously... without caring for consequences or appearances... this conduct accordingly has pre-eminently the appearance of craft. ... sobriety, self-restraint, control of word and feeling, which religious men exercise, have about them an appearance of being artificial because they are not natural...¹²⁸

Newman's insight accounts for Kingsley's charges almost prophetically, and can, depending upon one's interpretation of Newman's sexuality, be taken as mirroring the modern controversy. That is, Newman's sexual innocence, because it was not considered to be natural, has been interpreted as artificial, and so hidden significances have been found in it.

This innocence would explain the complete lack in Newman's writings of any passages such as those from Froude, which were quoted by Faber and Turner.¹²⁹ The fact that Froude could sermonise matters which do seem to have been sexual, at least in part, while Newman did not, may point either to less frankness in Newman (Faber's position), or to less personal awareness of sexual matters (which is also Faber's position). It is a question of judgment and interpretation. The nature of Newman's sexuality is today beyond proof, unless new evidence should emerge, but it is not beyond informed discussion of the possibilities and their relative likelihood.

I think that the possibility that Newman was asexual cannot be dismissed. Newman's affections were, on the basis of the evidence which Ker formidably marshals, heteroromantic. I suggest that, living in the age he did, Newman had no conception of homosexuality and heterosexuality, but he would have recognised that certain acts took place between persons of the same or of the opposite sex. Accordingly, he may not have realised the extent to which he was different from so many other men in this respect.

If this is so, then Newman's asexuality is an important part of his character, and may be related to the innocence and tranquillity he often felt. In other words, his sexuality may have been an important part of his

¹²⁸ J.H. Newman, 'Wisdom and Innocence', in *Sermons Bearing on Subjects of the Day* (London: Rivingtons, 1869), p. 299.

¹²⁹ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 81.

character, but not for the reasons previously given. Only further research could show whether this surmise is plausible or not.

Part 3: Critique of the Controversy to Date

I turn now to each of the scholars whose views I considered in Part 1.

3.1 Faber's Assertions

I have already indicated that Faber often expects his assertions to be accepted without contention, and that he not infrequently makes declarations which cannot be evaluated (from another perspective, what he says is often not falsifiable). But Faber also conveniently does not bring into his discussion of Newman's sexuality, the "deep imagination" at the age of fifteen (cited by Ker, above), which he elsewhere refers to.¹³⁰

Faber dates Newman's final decision for celibacy to 1829, and causally relates it to his friendship with Froude, giving us to understand that his relationship with Froude was such as to render marriage otiose. First, this would not explain why Newman never returned to thoughts of marriage after Froude's death in 1836. But perhaps even more cogently, while Newman's friendship with Froude had matured in late 1828,¹³¹ his sister Mary had died in January 1828.¹³² The unsettling effect this had on Newman is not in doubt. If one can speculate that a friendship made marriage superfluous for Newman, one can equally speculate that his sensitivity made it too painful to contemplate the possibility of avoidable loss.

Faber establishes a false dichotomy: Newman can have been acting under an "animal" (Faber's word) impulse, or a spiritual one, but not both. This is too absolute; a person can have mixed motives, at one moment or throughout their life. Faber's work is impressionistic, and is based on the implicit assumption of his own superior understanding of Newman's motives. It is a tale told, rather than a case argued. I will not make the attempt to turn the tables on Faber by considering whether his blood relationship to Frederick Faber may have influenced his book.

But, to my mind, the most disturbing aspect of Faber's book is not what he says about Newman, at least not directly, but rather his contemptuous, inaccurate, and most unfair dismissal of Ambrose St John as being of a "very inferior mental calibre" and having "served him (Newman) with dog-like

¹³⁰ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 38.

¹³¹ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 82.

¹³² Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 125.

devotion.”¹³³ For the record, St John (1815-1875) obtained an MA from Oxford. An entry in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1913 states: “He was an excellent classical scholar and a remarkable linguist both in Oriental and European tongues. ... He was a man of marked individuality”.¹³⁴

To choose the phrase “dog-like devotion” rather than one like “sterling loyalty” must strike one as gratuitous and even malicious in the lack of any reason given. As for his mental calibre, Faber does not state the standard by which St John is being judged. Faber’s tremendous talent for invective is here apparent, for with one snide and arrogant sentence, he not only dispraises St John, but also paints Newman in black, for taking advantage of the pathetic St John.

Faber was perhaps the most influential of the writers we have studied, for his psychologising provided a screen for the failure, and sometimes even the refusal, to see Newman as genuinely being motivated by religious and spiritual considerations.

3.2 Modern Sexuality Studies

So far as I can see, Sedgwick draws from *literature* the thesis that English society had a male homosocial aspect which necessarily excluded women. I cannot pretend that I find this to be a startlingly original thesis. However, she also displays some awareness that mores and attitudes to sexual expression and orientation change over time and society. In my view, she has not taken that insight far enough, but I shall return to this below.

Dowling’s comment is revealing because it means that she understands neither what Newman said about Sir Walter Scott the novelist, nor about Thomas Scott the theologian. It also means that she has not absorbed the *Apologia pro vita sua*, not the least significant of Newman’s works, for in the very opening chapter, Newman wrote of “the writer who made a deeper impression on my mind than any other, and to whom (humanly speaking) I almost owe my soul,—Thomas Scott of Aston Sandford.”¹³⁵ But Dowling is determined to see in Newman a medievalist dreamer, and in this she is followed to a lesser extent by Turner, who writes that “The organizational model for Littlemore was... those medieval monastic associations that contemporary writers as Walter Scott... used as foils against commercial,

¹³³ Faber, *Oxford Apostles*, p. 219.

¹³⁴ Edwin Hubert Burton, ‘Ambrose Saint-John’, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13354a.htm>. Accessed 11/04/2017.

¹³⁵ Newman, *Apologia*, p. 26.

urban, and industrial culture.”¹³⁶ Having read all Scott’s novels and much of his other writing, I cannot think where Scott does any such thing; certainly in *The Abbot* and *The Monastery* he does not.

Of the other authors mentioned, Adams’ scholarship seems to me to be entirely creditable. I find no inconsistency between his thesis and my more modest suggestions. If Sussman’s intends us to understand that the homosocial is often thought to accompany or even to hide homosexuality, this is accurate, and explains some of the interpretations of Newman’s life with which I am taking issue. Buckton is, in my view, completely wrong in his reading of Newman’s sexuality, despite his scholarship and thoroughness. He simply did not consider the possibility that Newman may have been asexual, which is not surprising, given that asexuality studies are only now appearing.

3.3 Turner

On the surface, Turner’s volume is quite different from Faber’s, and not only because its focus was Newman alone rather than the Tractarians. Turner’s research is vast, and he expends great effort in building a case, supporting it with references to source materials and wider studies which informed his perspective. His tone, although at times judgmental, is not so personal and dismissive as Faber’s. However, as history, Turner’s work is flawed. Particularly in the 2009 afterword to his Newman biography, Ker has satisfactorily exposed Turner’s main errors, and made out a not inconsiderable case that Newman was heterosexual.

In addition, Turner has the signal weakness of speculating, acknowledging that he is speculating, but then treating his speculations as established facts. When defending Turner, Skinner is able to accurately point to Turner’s hesitance at key points. Yet, as we saw, Turner nonetheless is quite unequivocal in the relevant conclusions: Newman was motivated by his desire to live with celibate men and his aversion to women. Further, although Turner is aware that Newman had some religious principles,¹³⁷ by being largely tacit about these and giving the foreground to Newman’s alleged sexual dysfunction, Turner implicitly runs the argument which Duffy pinpointed, that Newman’s alleged motives were bogus. That is, the Newman of Turner’s pages is a self-justifying humbug.

Turner is absolute in speaking of “the utter joylessness and relentlessly self-condemnatory character of Newman’s religious vision”, as we saw. Even a

¹³⁶ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 413.

¹³⁷ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, p. 198, on Newman as restoring what had been lost.

cursory reading of *Loss and Gain* should be enough to temper so extreme a statement. Then there is the question of how one can answer theories such as that concerning the Virgin Mary which are independent of any evidence. As with Faber, this is the material of a speculative essay rather than of a historical study.

Otherwise, Turner's arguments are, I suggest, sufficiently answered by pointing out that he did not consider the possibility that Newman may have been asexual. Once more, his scholarship is not lacking in this, given when he was writing, although Faber had come close to perceiving some of the matters which support such a hypothesis.

3.4 Ker

There are certain criticisms which could be made of Ker's contributions to this debate; both Turner himself in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 20 December 2002 and Skinner point to some of them. However, when it comes to the questions agitated in this article, Ker is, on the whole, quite correct. Indeed, my acceptance of Newman as heteroromantic is based on the extracts from the autobiographical materials, a point which Skinner does not reply to (and which Turner could not be expected to, as they were published in 2009). Once more, in so far as Ker does not consider the possibility that Newman was asexual, this would be to expect him to have been twenty years ahead of his time.

3.5 The Modern Controversy

MacCulloch begs the question: how do we interpret Newman's action and behaviour? It is somewhat dismissive to use a rhetorical device about ducks to evade the real issues which Ker, for one, has raised. More substantial, however, are Skinner's replies, especially in his second piece, which, perhaps because of Duffy's contribution, was more focussed and clearer than the first.

The first issue is that Skinner reiterates that Turner's psychosexual musings "loomed far larger in the fevered minds of Turner's Catholic reviewers than in his pages". But is this to the point? If one writes 1,000 pages about the life of Napoleon, for example, and but one page on his motives and aims, and then that is drawn upon throughout the book, that is the most important page in the book. Skinner's simply repeating his belief does not make the case any stronger. I am fortified in this by the disclosure that Turner wrote to Skinner: "I cannot tell you how many times these pages were written and rewritten in consultation with serious professional historians and others qualified to comment."

The next point which calls for comment is Skinner's counter that Ker, in his afterword "stated that the 1957 publication of Newman's

Autobiographical writings, and the *Apologia*, ‘made available all the evidence necessary to disprove any notion that Newman was homosexual in his inclinations’. Just like that!”¹³⁸ But it was not “just like that”. As we have seen, Ker quoted those materials with telling effect. I do not accuse Skinner of bad faith, but the fact that he somehow overlooked this is arguably a sign of how powerful Ker’s case is.

Conclusion

I am not concerned to debate whether Newman did or did not have an aversion to women, that would require considering Newman’s actual relations with women, and a reading of his extensive letters, and even of his two novels, especially *Callista*, which seems to me to possess some deft insights into human psychology, male and female alike.

It has been enough to suggest that there is reason to think that Newman may have been what we would now call an ‘asexual’, while his affections were heteroromantic. I can find nothing homosexual about him. Even his homosocial life was related to his faith and his acceptance of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 19:12) more than to any supposed misogyny.

I have conjectured that Newman’s sexuality was a significant element in his character, although to develop that thought will take another article of equal length to this one.

¹³⁸ Skinner, ‘A Response to Eamon Duffy’, p. 560.