

Religious Faith is Reasonable:

John Henry Newman

John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was an Anglican priest in England who converted to Catholicism. He later was ordained a Catholic priest and cardinal, becoming canonized by the Catholic Church in 2019 for his work in defense of the Catholic faith. His most notable works include *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1866) and the *Grammar of Ascent* (1870). In this sermon, Newman argues that religious faith is perfectly reasonable, given the fact that we quite reasonably rely on faith in many other aspects of our lives.

“He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God: and being fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform.” (Rom. 4. 20, 21).

There are serious men who are in the habit of describing Christian Faith as a feeling or a principle such as ordinary persons cannot enter into; a something strange and peculiar in its very nature, different in kind from every thing that affects and influences us in matters of this world, and not admitting any illustration from our conduct in them. They consider that, because it is a spiritual gift, and heavenly in its origin, it is therefore altogether superhuman; and that to compare it with any of our natural principles or feelings, is to think unworthily of it. And thus they lead others, who wish an excuse for their own irreligious lives, to speak of Christian Faith as extravagant and irrational, as if it were a mere fancy or feeling, which some persons had and others had not; and which, accordingly, could only, and would necessarily, be felt by those who were disposed that certain way. Now, that the object on which Faith fixes our thoughts, that the doctrines of Scripture are most marvelous and exceeding in glory, unheard and unthought of elsewhere, is quite true; and it is also true that no mind of man will form itself to a habit of Faith without the preventing and assisting influences of Divine Grace. But it is not at all true that Faith itself, i.e. Trust, is a strange principle of action; and to say that it is irrational is even an absurdity. I mean such a Faith as that of Abraham, mentioned in the text, which led him to believe God’s word when opposed to his own experience. And it shall now be my endeavor to show this.

John Henry Newman. *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. 8 Vols. Longmans, Green, and Co, 1907. Introduction by Michael S. Russo.

To hear some men speak (I mean men who scoff at religion), it might be thought we never acted on Faith or Trust, except in religious matters; whereas we are acting on trust every hour of our lives. When faith is said to be a religious principle, it is (I repeat) the things believed, not the act of believing them, which is peculiar to religion. Let us take some examples.

It is obvious that we trust to our memory. We do not now witness what we saw yesterday; yet we have no doubt it took place in the way we remember. We recollect clearly the circumstances of morning and afternoon. Our confidence in our memory is so strong that a man might reason with us all day long, without persuading us that we slept through the day, or that we returned from a long journey, when our memory deposes otherwise. Thus we have faith in our memory; yet what is irrational here?

Again, even when we use reasoning, and are convinced of any thing by reasoning, what is it but that we trust the general soundness of our reasoning powers? From knowing one thing we think we can be sure about another, even though we do not see it. Who of us would doubt, on seeing strong shadows on the ground, that the sun was shining out, though our face happened to be turned the other way? Here is faith without sight; but there is nothing against reason here, unless reason can be against itself.

And what I wish you particularly to observe, is, that we continually trust our memory and our reasoning powers in this way, though they often deceive us. This is worth observing, because it is sometimes said we cannot be certain that our faith in religion is not a mistake. I say our memory and reason often deceive us; yet no one says it is therefore absurd and irrational to continue to trust them; and for this plain reason, because on the whole they are true and faithful witnesses, because it is only at times that they mislead us; so that the chance is, that they are right in this case or that, which happens to be before us; and (again) because in all practical matters we are obliged to dwell upon not what may be possibly, but what is likely to be.

In matters of daily life, we have no time for fastidious and perverse fancies about the minute chances of our being deceived. We are obliged to act at once, or we should cease to live. There is a chance (it cannot be denied) that our food today may be poisonous,—we cannot be quite certain,—but it looks the same and tastes the same, and we have good friends round us; so we do not abstain from it, for all this chance, though it is real. This necessity of acting promptly is our happiness in this world's matters; in the concerns of a future life, alas! we have time for carnal and restless thoughts about possibilities. And this is our trial; and it will be our condemnation, if with the experience of the folly of such idle fancyings about what may be, in matters of this life, we yet indulge them as regards the future. If it be said, that we sometimes do distrust our reasoning powers, for instance,

when they lead us to some unexpected conclusion, or again our memory, when another's memory contradicts it, this only shows that there are things which we should be weak or hasty in believing; which is quite true.

Doubtless there is such a fault as credulity, or believing too readily and too much (and this, in religion, we call superstition); but this neither shows that all trust is irrational, nor again that trust is necessarily irrational, which is founded on what is but likely to be, and may be denied without an actual absurdity. Indeed, when we come to examine the subject, it will be found that, strictly speaking, we know little more than that we exist, and that there is an Unseen Power whom we are bound to obey. Beyond this we must trust; and first our senses, memory, and reasoning powers; then other authorities:—so that, in fact, almost all we do, every day of our lives, is on trust, i.e. faith.

But it may be said, that belief in these informants, our senses, and the like, is not what is commonly meant by faith;—that to trust our senses and reason is in fact nothing more than to trust ourselves;—and though these do sometimes mislead us, yet they are so continually about us, and so at command, that we can use them to correct each other; so that on the whole we gain from these the truth of things quite well enough to act upon;—that on the other hand it is a very different thing from this to trust another person; and that faith, in the Scripture sense of the word, is trusting another, and therefore is not proved to be rational by the foregoing illustrations.

Let us, then, understand faith in this sense of reliance on the words of another, as opposed to trust in oneself. This is the common meaning of the word, I grant;—as when we contrast it to sight and to reason; and yet what I have already said has its use in reminding men who are eager for demonstration in matters of religion, that there are difficulties in matters of sense and reasoning also. But to proceed as I have proposed.—It is easy to show, that, even considering faith as trust in another, it is no irrational or strange principle of conduct in the concerns of this life.

For when we consider the subject attentively, how few things there are which we can ascertain for ourselves by our own senses and reason! After all, what do we know without trusting others? We know that we are in a certain state of health, in a certain place, have been alive for a certain number of years, have certain principles and likings, have certain persons around us, and perhaps have in our lives traveled to certain places at a distance. But what do we know more? Are there not towns (we will say) within fifty or sixty miles of us which we have never seen, and which, nevertheless, we fully believe to be as we have heard them described? To extend our view;—we know that land stretches in every direction of us, a certain number of miles, and then there is sea on all sides; that we are in an island. But who has seen the land all around, and has proved for himself that the fact is so?

What, then, convinces us of it? the report of others,—this trust, this faith in testimony which, when religion is concerned, then, and only then, the proud and sinful would fain call irrational.

And what I have instanced in one set of facts, which we believe, is equally true of numberless others, of almost all of those which we think we know.

Consider how men in the business of life, no, all of us, confide, are obliged to confide, in persons we never saw, or know but slightly; no, in their hand-writings, which, for what we know, may be forged, if we are to speculate and fancy what may be. We act upon our trust in them implicitly, because common sense tells us, that with proper caution and discretion, faith in others is perfectly safe and rational. Scripture, then, only bids us act in respect to a future life, as we are every day acting at present.

Or, again, how certain we all are (when we think on the subject) that we must sooner or later die. No one seriously thinks he can escape death; and men dispose of their property and arrange their affairs, confidently contemplating, not indeed the exact time of their death, still death as sooner or later to befall them. Of course they do; it would be most irrational in them not to expect it. Yet observe, what proof has any one of us that he shall die? because other men die? how does he know that? has he seen them die? he can know nothing of what took place before he was born, nor of what happens in other countries. How little, indeed, he knows about it at all, except that it is a received fact, and except that it would, in truth, be idle to doubt what mankind as a whole witness, though each individual has only his proportionate share in the universal testimony!

And, further, we constantly believe things even against our own judgment; i.e. when we think our informant likely to know more about the matter under consideration than ourselves, which is the precise case in the question of religious faith. And thus from reliance on others we acquire knowledge of all kinds, and proceed to reason, judge, decide, act, form plans for the future. And in all this (I say) trust is at the bottom; and this the world calls prudence (and rightly); and not to trust and act upon trust, imprudence, or (it may be) headstrong folly, or madness.

But it is needless to proceed; the world could not go on without trust. The most distressing event that can happen to a state is (we know) the spreading of a want of confidence between man and man. Distrust, want of faith, breaks the very bonds of human society. . . .