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Yahoo Watch: John Cornwell

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

John Cornwell has delivered himself of an essay about Cardinal Newman that, unsurprisingly, tells us more about Cornwell than it does about Newman. Cornwell hates the Pope. Is that news?

Rarely does one discover such a perfect example of published idiocy as Cornwell's essay. The burden of his argument is that Newman was a liberal, Pope Benedict is not, and the pope is "hijacking" Newman's reputation to his own ends. John Henry Newman was many things, but a liberal is not one of them, if by liberal you mean someone who is unconcerned with the dogmatic content of the faith, or someone who values that dogmatic content less than contemporary intellectual fads, or someone who rejects the supernatural in favor of a rationalistic faith, or someone who ascribes to any one of a number of contemporary political concerns, all of them more or less rooted in a hyper-individualistic view of the human person. If by liberal you mean "broad minded," well who isn't a liberal? And, Newman was never so "broad minded" that he valued his mindedness, broad or otherwise, above the teaching authority of the Church.

Frank Turner, the Yale history professor whose biography of Newman overstates the case for Newman's opposition to evangelicalism as the central intellectual concern of the great English convert, allows that Newman could not be considered a liberal in nineteenth century terms either. Turner writes: "In almost no serious instance did he [Newman] associate liberalism during the Tractarian era with secular rationalism or secular critical thought which was the chief connotation of liberalism in Victorian intellectual life during the second half of the century."

But, why let a little thing like the facts get in the way of an opportunity to attack Pope Benedict? Cornwell has evidenced through his life that he does not know the difference between theology and tortellini. Why does any one read him? Why does any one publish him?

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