

1 "The Philosophical Temper, First Enjoined by the Gospel"
2 *Oxford University Sermons* sermon 1
3 St. John Henry Newman
4 July 2, 1826
5

6 "Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the Light of the world." John viii. 12.

7 FEW charges have been more frequently urged by unbelievers against Revealed
8 Religion, than that it is hostile to the advance of philosophy and science. That it has
9 discouraged the cultivation of literature can never with any plausibility be maintained,
10 since it is evident that the studies connected with the history and interpretation of the
11 Scriptures have, more than any others, led to inquiries into the languages, writings, and
12 events of ancient times. Christianity has always been a learned religion; it came into the
13 world as the offspring of an elder system, to which it was indebted for much which it
14 contained, and which its professors were obliged continually to consult. The Pagan
15 philosopher, on enrolling himself a member of the Christian Church, was invited, nay,
16 required, to betake himself to a line of study almost unknown to the schools of Greece.
17 The Jewish books were even written in a language which he did not understand, and
18 opened to his view an account of manners and customs very different from those with
19 which he was familiar. The writings of the ancients were to be collected, and their
20 opinions examined; and thus those studies which are peculiarly called learned would
21 form the principal employment of one who wished to be the champion of the Christian
22 faith. The philosopher might speculate, but the theologian must submit to learn.

23 2. It cannot, then, be maintained that Christianity has proved unfavourable to literary
24 pursuits; yet, from the very encouragement it gives to these, an opposite objection has
25 been drawn, as if on that very account it impeded the advancement of philosophical and
26 scientific knowledge. It has been urged, with considerable plausibility, that the
27 attachment to the writings of the ancients which it has produced has been prejudicial to
28 the discovery of new truths, by creating a jealousy and dislike of whatever was contrary
29 to received opinions. And thus Christianity has been represented as a system which
30 stands in the way of improvement, whether in politics, education, or science; as if it
31 were adapted to the state of knowledge, and conducive to the happiness, of the age in
32 which it was introduced, but a positive evil in more enlightened times; because, from its
33 claim to infallibility, it cannot itself change, and therefore must ever be endeavouring to
34 bend opinion to its own antiquated views. Not to mention the multitude of half-educated
35 men who are avowedly hostile to Revealed Religion, and who watch every new
36 discovery or theory in science, in hope that something to its disadvantage may hence
37 be derived, it is to be lamented that many even of the present respectable advocates of
38 improvements in the condition of society, and patrons of general knowledge, seem to
39 consider the interests of the human race quite irreconcilable with those of the Christian
40 Church; and though they think it indecorous or unfeeling to attack Religion openly, yet
41 appear confidently to expect that the progress of discovery and the general cultivation of
42 the human mind must terminate in the fall of Christianity.

43 3. It must be confessed that the conduct of Christians has sometimes given
44 countenance to these erroneous views respecting the nature and tendency of Revealed
45 Religion. Too much deference has been paid to ancient literature. Admiration of the
46 genius displayed in its writings, an imagination excited by the consideration of its very
47 antiquity, not unfrequently the pride of knowledge and a desire of appearing to be
48 possessed of a treasure which the many do not enjoy, have led men to exalt the
49 sentiments of former ages to the disparagement of modern ideas. With a view,
50 moreover, to increase (as they have supposed) the value and dignity of the sacred
51 volume, others have been induced to set it forth as a depository of all truth,
52 philosophical as well as religious; although St. Paul seems to limit its utility to
53 profitableness for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. Others,
54 again, have been too diligent and too hasty in answering every frivolous and isolated
55 objection to the words of Scripture, which has been urged,—nay, which they fancied
56 might possibly be urged,—from successive discoveries in science; too diligent, because
57 their minute solicitude has occasioned them to lose sight of the Christian Evidence as a
58 whole, and to magnify the objection, as if (though it were unanswerable) it could really
59 weigh against the mass of argument producible on the other side; and too hasty
60 because, had they been patient, succeeding discoveries would perhaps of themselves
61 have solved for them the objection, without the interference of a controversialist. The ill
62 consequences of such a procedure are obvious: the objection has been recognized as
63 important, while the solution offered has too often been inadequate or unsound. To feel
64 jealous and appear timid, on witnessing the enlargement of scientific knowledge, is
65 almost to acknowledge that there may be some contrariety between it and Revelation.

66 4. Our Saviour, in the text, calls Himself the Light of the world; as David had already
67 said, in words which especially belong to this place [\[Note 1\]](#) and this day [\[Note 2\]](#), "The
68 Lord is my Light;" and though He so speaks of Himself as bringing religious knowledge
69 to an ignorant and apostate race, yet we have no reason to suppose that He forbids
70 lawful knowledge of any kind, and we cannot imagine that He would promulgate, by His
71 inspired servants, doctrines which contradict previous truths which He has written on
72 the face of nature.

73 5. The objection to Christianity, to which the foregoing remarks relate, may be variously
74 answered.

75 First, by referring to the fact that the greatest Philosophers of modern times—the
76 founders of the new school of discovery, and those who have most extended the
77 boundaries of our knowledge—have been forced to submit their reason to the Gospel; a
78 circumstance which, independent of the argument for the strength of the Christian
79 Evidence which the conviction of such men affords, at least shows that Revealed
80 Religion cannot be very unfavourable to scientific inquiries, when those who sincerely
81 acknowledge the former still distinguish themselves above others in the latter.

82 6. Again, much might be said on the coincidence which exists between the general
83 principles which the evidence for Revelation presupposes, and those on which inquiries
84 into nature proceed. Science and Revelation agree in supposing that nature is governed

85 by uniform and settled laws. Scripture, properly understood, is decisive in removing all
86 those irregular agents which are supposed to interrupt, at their own pleasure, the order
87 of nature. Almost every religion but that of the Bible and those derived from it, has
88 supposed the existence of an indefinite number of beings, to a certain extent
89 independent of each other, able to interfere in the affairs of life, and whose interference
90 (supposing it to exist) being reducible to no law, took away all hope of obtaining any real
91 information concerning the actual system of the universe. On the other hand, the
92 inspired writers are express in tracing all miraculous occurrences to the direct
93 interposition, or at least the permission of the Deity; and since they also imply that
94 miracles are displayed, not at random, but with a purpose, their declarations in this
95 respect entirely agree with the deductions which scientific observation has made
96 concerning the general operation of established laws, and the absence of any arbitrary
97 interference with them on the part of beings exterior to the present course of things. The
98 supposition, then, of a system of established laws, on which all philosophical
99 investigation is conducted, is also the very foundation on which the evidence for
100 Revealed Religion rests. It is the more necessary to insist upon this, because some
101 writers have wished to confuse the Jewish and Christian faiths with those other religions
102 and those popular superstitions which are framed on no principle, and supported by no
103 pretence of reasoning.

104 7. Without enlarging, however, on arguments of this nature, it is proposed now to direct
105 attention to the moral character which both the Jewish and Christian Religions hold up
106 as the excellence and perfection of human nature; for we shall find that some of those
107 habits of mind which are throughout the Bible represented as alone pleasing in the sight
108 of God, are the very habits which are necessary for success in scientific investigation,
109 and without which it is quite impossible to extend the sphere of our knowledge. If this be
110 so, then the fact is accounted for without difficulty, why the most profound philosophers
111 have acknowledged the claims of Christianity upon them. And further, considering that
112 the character, which Scripture draws of the virtuous man, is as a whole (what may be
113 called) an original character,—only the scattered traces of it being found in authors
114 unacquainted with the Bible,—an argument will almost be established in favour of
115 Christianity, as having conferred an intellectual as well as a spiritual benefit on the
116 world.

117 8. For instance, it is obvious that to be in earnest in seeking the truth is an
118 indispensable requisite for finding it. Indeed, it would not be necessary to notice so
119 evident a proposition, had it not been for the strange conduct of the ancient
120 philosophers in their theories concerning nature and man. It seems as though only one
121 or two of them were serious and sincere in their inquiries and teaching. Most of them
122 considered speculations on philosophical subjects rather in the light of an amusement
123 than of a grave employment,— as an exercise for ingenuity, or an indulgence of
124 fancy,—to display their powers, to collect followers, or for the sake of gain. Indeed, it
125 seems incredible that any men, who were really in earnest in their search after truth,
126 should have begun with theorizing, or have imagined that a system which they were
127 conscious they had invented almost without data, should happen, when applied to the
128 actual state of things, to harmonize with the numberless and diversified phenomena of

129 the world. Yet, though it seems to be so obvious a position when stated, that in forming
130 any serious theory concerning nature, we must begin with investigation, to the exclusion
131 of fanciful speculation or deference to human authority, it was not generally recognized
132 or received as such, till a Christian philosopher forced it upon the attention of the world.
133 And surely he was supported by the uniform language of the whole Bible, which tells us
134 that truth is too sacred and religious a thing to be sacrificed to the mere gratification of
135 the fancy, or amusement of the mind, or party spirit, or the prejudices of education, or
136 attachment (however amiable) to the opinions of human teachers, or any of those other
137 feelings which the ancient philosophers suffered to influence them in their professedly
138 grave and serious discussions.

139 9. Again: modesty, patience, and caution, are dispositions of mind quite as requisite in
140 philosophical inquiries as seriousness and earnestness, though not so obviously
141 requisite. Rashness of assertion, hastiness in drawing conclusions, unhesitating
142 reliance on our own acuteness and powers of reasoning, are inconsistent with the
143 homage which nature exacts of those who would know her hidden wonders. She
144 refuses to reveal her mysteries to those who come otherwise than in the humble and
145 reverential spirit of learners and disciples. So, again, that love of paradox which would
146 impose upon her a language different from that which she really speaks, is as
147 unphilosophical as it is unchristian. Again, indulgence of the imagination, though a more
148 specious fault, is equally hostile to the spirit of true philosophy, and has misled the
149 noblest among the ancient theorists, who seemed to think they could not go wrong while
150 following the natural impulses and suggestions of their own minds, and were conscious
151 to themselves of no low and unworthy motive influencing them in their speculations.

152 10. Here, too, may be mentioned the harm which has been done to the interests of
153 science by excessive attachment to system. The love of order and regularity, and that
154 perception of beauty which is most keen in highly-gifted minds, has too often led men
155 astray in their scientific researches. From seeing but detached parts of the system of
156 nature, they have been carried on, without data, to arrange, supply, and complete. They
157 have been impatient of knowing but in part, and of waiting for future discoveries; they
158 have inferred much from slender premisses, and conjectured when they could not
159 prove. It is by a tedious discipline that the mind is taught to overcome those baser
160 principles which impede it in philosophical investigation, and to moderate those nobler
161 faculties and feelings which are prejudicial when in excess. To be dispassionate and
162 cautious, to be fair in discussion, to give to each phenomenon which nature
163 successively presents its due weight, candidly to admit those which militate against our
164 own theory, to be willing to be ignorant for a time, to submit to difficulties, and patiently
165 and meekly proceed, waiting for farther light, is a temper (whether difficult or not at this
166 day) little known to the heathen world; yet it is the only temper in which we can hope to
167 become interpreters of nature, and it is the very temper which Christianity sets forth as
168 the perfection of our moral character.

169 11. Still further, we hear much said in praise of the union of scientific men, of that spirit
170 of brotherhood which should join together natives of different countries as labourers in a
171 common cause. But were the philosophers of ancient times influenced by this spirit? In

172 vain shall we look among them for the absence of rivalry; and much less can we hope to
173 find that generosity of mind, which in its desire of promoting the cause of science,
174 considers it a slight thing to be deprived of the credit of a discovery which is really its
175 due. They were notoriously jealous of each other, and anxious for their personal
176 consequence, and treasured up their supposed discoveries with miserable precaution,
177 allowing none but a chosen few to be partakers of their knowledge. On the contrary, it
178 was Christianity which first brought into play on the field of the world the principles of
179 charity, generosity, disregard of self and country, in the prospect of the universal good;
180 and which suggested the idea of a far-spreading combination, peaceful yet secure.

181 12. It cannot be denied, however, that the true philosophical spirit did not begin to
182 prevail till many ages after the preaching of Christianity, nay, till times comparatively of
183 recent date; and it has, in consequence, been maintained that our own superiority over
184 the ancients in general knowledge, is not owing to the presence of the Christian
185 Religion among us, but to the natural course of improvement in the world. And
186 doubtless it may be true, that though a divine philosophy had never been given us from
187 above, we might still have had a considerable advantage over the ancients in the
188 method and extent of our scientific acquirements. Still, admitting this, it is also true that
189 Scripture was, in matter of fact, the first to describe and inculcate that single-minded,
190 modest, cautious, and generous spirit, which was, after a long time, found so necessary
191 for success in the prosecution of philosophical researches. And though the interval
192 between the propagation of Christianity and the rise of modern science is certainly very
193 long, yet it may be fairly maintained that the philosophy of the Gospel had no
194 opportunity to extend itself in the province of matter till modern times. It is not surprising
195 if the primitive Christians, amid their difficulties and persecutions, and being for the most
196 part private persons in the less educated ranks of life, should have given birth to no new
197 school for investigating nature; and the learned men who from time to time joined them
198 were naturally scholars in the defective philosophies of Greece, and followed their
199 masters in their physical speculations; and having more important matters in hand, took
200 for granted what they had no means of ascertaining. Nor is it wonderful, considering
201 how various is the subject-matter, and how multiform have been the developments of
202 Christianity at successive eras, that the true principles of scientific research were not
203 elicited in the long subsequent period. Perhaps the trials and errors through which the
204 Church has passed in the times which have preceded us, are to be its experience in
205 ages to come.

206 13. It may be asked how it comes to pass, if a true philosophical temper is so allied to
207 that which the Scriptures inculcate as the temper of a Christian, that any men should be
208 found distinguished for discoveries in science, who yet are ill disposed towards those
209 doctrines which Revelation enjoins upon our belief. The reason may be this: the humility
210 and teachableness which the Scripture precepts inculcate are connected with principles
211 more solemn and doctrines more awful than those which are necessary for the temper
212 of mind in which scientific investigation must be conducted; and though the Christian
213 spirit is admirably fitted to produce the tone of thought and inquiry which leads to the
214 discovery of truth, yet a slighter and less profound humility will do the same. The
215 philosopher has only to confess that he is liable to be deceived by false appearances

216 and reasonings, to be biassed by prejudice, and led astray by a warm fancy; he is
217 humble because sensible he is ignorant, cautious because he knows himself to be
218 fallible, docile because he really desires to learn. But Christianity, in addition to this
219 confession, requires him to acknowledge himself to be a rebel in the sight of God, and a
220 breaker of that fair and goodly order of things which the Creator once established. The
221 philosopher confesses himself to be imperfect; the Christian feels himself to be sinful
222 and corrupt. The infirmity of which the philosopher must be conscious is but a relative
223 infirmity—imperfection as opposed to perfection, of which there are infinite degrees.
224 Thus he believes himself placed in a certain point of the scale of beings, and that there
225 are beings nearer to perfection than he is, others farther removed from it. But the
226 Christian acknowledges that he has fallen away from that rank in creation which he
227 originally held; that he has passed a line, and is in consequence not merely imperfect,
228 but weighed down with positive, actual evil. Now there is little to lower a man in his own
229 opinion, in his believing that he holds a certain definite station in an immense series of
230 creatures, and is in consequence removed, by many steps, from perfection; but there is
231 much very revolting to the minds of many, much that is contrary to their ideas of
232 harmony and order, and the completeness of the system of nature, and much at
233 variance with those feelings of esteem with which they are desirous of regarding
234 themselves, in the doctrine that man is disgraced and degraded from his natural and
235 original rank; that he has, by sinning, introduced a blemish into the work of God; that he
236 is guilty in the court of heaven, and is continually doing things odious in the sight of the
237 Divine holiness. And as the whole system of the Christian faith depends upon this
238 doctrine, since it was to redeem man from deserved punishment that Christ suffered on
239 the cross, and in order to strengthen him in his endeavours to cleanse himself from sin,
240 and prepare for heaven, that the Holy Spirit has come to rule the Church, it is not
241 wonderful that men are found, admirable for their philosophical temper and their
242 success in investigating nature, and yet unworthy disciples in the school of the Gospel.

243 14. Such men often regard Christianity as a slavish system, which is prejudicial to the
244 freedom of thought, the aspirations of genius, and the speculations of enterprise; an
245 unnatural system, which sets out with supposing that the human mind is out of order,
246 and consequently bends all its efforts to overthrow the constitution of feeling and belief
247 with which man is born, and to make him a being for which nature never intended him;
248 and a pernicious system, which unfits men for this life by fixing their thoughts on
249 another, and which, wherever consistently acted upon, infallibly leads (as it often has
250 led) to the encouragement of the monastic spirit, and the extravagances of fanaticism.

251 15. Although, then, Christianity seems to have been the first to give to the world the
252 pattern of the true spirit of philosophical investigation, yet, as the principles of science
253 are, in process of time, more fully developed, and become more independent of the
254 religious system, there is much danger lest the philosophical school should be found to
255 separate from the Christian Church, and at length disown the parent to whom it has
256 been so greatly indebted. And this evil has in a measure befallen us; that it does not
257 increase, we must look to that early religious training, to which there can be no doubt all
258 persons—those in the higher as well as in the poorer classes of the community—should
259 be submitted.

260 16. To conclude. The ignorance of the first preachers of Christianity has been often
261 insisted on, particularly by the celebrated historian of the Roman Empire, as a
262 presumption or proof of their hostility to all enlightened and liberal philosophy. If,
263 however, as has been here contended, from the precepts they delivered the best
264 canons may be drawn up for scientific investigation, the fact will only tend to prove
265 that *they* could not, unassisted, have originated or selected precepts so enlarged and so
266 profound; and thus will contribute something to the strength of those accumulated
267 probabilities, which on other grounds are so overpowering, that they spoke not of
268 themselves, but as they were moved by the inspiration of God Himself.

269 (Preached on Act Sunday afternoon, July 2, 1826, by appointment of the Vice-
270 Chancellor.)

271 Notes

272 1. [The motto of the University is "Dominus illuminatio mea."]

273 2. [Act Sunday. "The candidate," says Huber on the English Universities, "emancipated
274 from his teacher, makes himself known to the other teachers by taking part in the
275 disputations in the schools. These services afterwards become formal public
276 acts, *disputationes, responsiones, lecturæ cursoriæ*. A more especially solemn Act
277 formed the actual close of the whole course of study. The licence was then conferred on
278 him by the Chancellor. A custom arose that all the final and solemn exercises should fall
279 in the second term of the year (hence called the Act Term), and be closed on the last
280 Saturday in term by a solemn general Act, the *Vesperiaë*, by keeping which the
281 candidates of all degrees in their different Faculties were considered qualified and
282 entitled to begin the exercises connected with their new degree upon the following
283 Monday. This fresh beginning (*inceptio*) took place with the greatest solemnity, and
284 formed the point of richest brilliancy in the scholastic year. In Oxford it was called
285 emphatically 'the Act,' in Cambridge 'the Commencement.'" {Abridged from F. W.
286 Newman's translation.) The Act Sunday is or was the Sunday next before the Act, which
287 falls in the first week of July.]