UNITY OF OPPOSITES: A CHINESE INTERPRETATION OF NEWMAN.

The work of Ching Yao-shan was offered to the public in 1987, the International Year of Peace. It was the author’s intention to contribute to the promotion of peace in the world by educating the minds of readers toward reconciliation, even toward a unity of opposing factions. The University of Cambridge accepted Fr. Ching’s doctoral dissertation on John Henry Newman, and the present work is a modification of that dissertation.

The author reveals his own knowledge and love of Newman. He knows Newman’s writings in their setting and he appreciates the inner life of this magnanimous person so far as it can be discerned in his writings and inferred from his contemporaries and from later authors.

Ching attempts with delicate reverence to understand Newman from his own Chinese viewpoint. This is mainly the ancient tradition of yin and yang, that is, the conception that the world and its parts are the result of two basic forces “balancing and interacting on each other” (p. 4). Ching gently asserts that Newman exemplifies this harmonious unity of opposites in his religious and theological thought and in his way of life.

One of the main chapters of the book is concerned with Newman’s views on the Church and on God’s word. This topic is wisely chosen because of Newman’s own personal decisions on church membership and because of the debates about authority in the Church which were prevalent in the last century. Newman maintained that the need of central authority in the Church increases in proportion to the growth of the Church in extent and complexity. Balance is kept only if real and wholesome influence of the center can be a unifying element of the growing sphere. The center should be a living person. Bishops are supposed to rule and to officially declare what the apostles handed down. But there are also prophets and teachers who interpret the revelation. The latter “unfold and define its mysteries, they illuminate its documents, they harmonize its contents, they apply its promises” (p. 117, quoting Via Media). This is the prophetical tradition, profuse, multiform, pervading the church. This prophetical office should be performed by believing servants of the word, paraphrasing, supplementing, translating, interpreting faithfully for the changing times. The living authority lovingly supervises and serves as a bond of unity for cultural groups addressed by the Christian message.

The prophets and the bishops have complementary roles. The former are expected to ask creative questions about the meaning of God’s word and to understand more faithfully the meaning of the revelation in the light of those questions. Bishops too may do exploratory thinking. But their more proper responsibility is to care lovingly for the deposit of faith, to correct deviations
that may arise in the process of creative exploration, to praise with warmth and enthusiasm the good results of creative theology.

In two other important chapters Ching presents Newman's understanding of sanctity as illustrated in real saints and in his own style of holiness. In his own life as well as in his opinions about holiness Newman put emphasis on creative balance as a reconciliation of opposites. The saintly person is thoroughly devoted to God and for this reason (among others) is immersed in the earthly problems of the needy. No balance between opposites is to be rigidly maintained; rather every balance is to be a center of power, of flexibility, of readiness to be led by Divine Providence toward a new balance. The serenity which comes from loving God and all creatures is a source of energy for doing what must be done. This is a spirituality of change, in keeping with the demands of the time (chaps. 1 and 2).

Newman was habitually kind, a delightful companion, yet characteristically serious. He was a lover of the poor, but a bit too class conscious. He was cheerful but quite incapable of being a comedian. In his old age as his trials diminished and public opinion turned in his favor he was able to be more serene and relaxed even though his fighting spirit did not wither very much (chap. 3).

Fr. Ching has understood and appreciated the human and religious excellence of Newman and has offered to the readers of his book a way of reaching a similar understanding and appreciation. But the eager reader should know something about the life and times of Newman before attempting to study Fr. Ching's interpretation. The usual encyclopedias should be preparation enough. Ching's work is scholarly in tracing certain actual linkages between Newman and other authors. Furthermore the book is erudite with fresh insights which discern similarities of thought and theme without actual influence, and even in creatively explaining Newman through others who are not explicitly concerned with Newman.

With the help of Ching's book the inquisitive person can perhaps himself become more like Newman in developing an inclusive ontology: reality is composed of two opposite elements, finite and infinite, the simple and the complex, light and shade, the beautiful and the severe, etc. The sensitive inquirer may also adopt Newman's practical orientation to public life: political powers evolve into their opposites, the mighty are put down, the weak grow strong only to decline again.

The religious believer who desires to follow God's will and nothing else may find in Newman a model for making opportune changes as God calls him in career, lifestyle and even in church membership.

Fr. Ching's book is the result of hard study, and wide reading in several fields, and therefore it makes demands on the reader. The immediate demand is the work of study. The long range demand is the way the student himself changes his outlook and the basis for his decisions.
The book is well printed on durable white paper. There is a typographical error on page 116.

Francis E. Reilly, S.J.


What does it mean to be a Christian? Guthrie proposes that there are four types of Christianity, each with its own presuppositions, its emphases and attitudes, and its characteristic approach to controversial and ethical issues such as nuclear armament, capital punishment, homosexuality.

Part I of the book ("Some Old Songs") presents the four types of Christianity and introduces each chapter with a well-known Christian song that serves to characterize the type proposed. Chapter 1: Christian Orthodoxy, which emphasizes the correct content of Christian faith and defines Christianity in terms of what Christians believe, is introduced by the hymn "Faith of Our Fathers." Chapter 2: Liberal Moralism, which defines Christianity in terms of personal morality, is introduced by "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love." Chapter 3: Liberal Social Activism, which emphasizes Christian social activism and judges one's Christianity by one's commitment to the political and economic justice of God's Kingdom, is introduced by "Rise Up, Men of God." Chapter 4: Pietism, which stresses one's personal experience of the grace of God in Jesus, is introduced by "Amazing Grace."

Each chapter describes the type and then goes through a Defense (three to six points) and finally a Criticism (three to five points) of each type. This first part rambles on with a very balanced, orderly and objective presentation, but the general statements leave this reviewer vaguely dissatisfied. I would have appreciated a more detailed and documented description and critique in the main text. There are a few footnotes that help one who would pursue the question further; but more concrete details could have served to make the main text more interesting reading. Still the first part does present a good framework for distinguishing the various Christian attitudes and emphases; and the apologia and criticism of each type can serve as a good examination of conscience for all of us.

The Second Part ("Learning To Sing A New Song") proposes a type that would combine the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of the types previously evaluated. There is no hymn to introduce this part; but the synthesis revolves around the key word "Witness." A witness that is proclaimed not only by words and inner attitudes, but also by actions and social involvement. Christians are called upon to witness to Jesus Christ (chap. 5), to the Suffering Love of God (chap. 6), and to the Liberating Power of God (chap. 7). Again