SUMMARY

Faith on Authority.
A Critical Analysis of Noordmans’ Reception of Newman in Connection with the Church and the Turn to the Subject

This study investigates the reception of the theology of the English cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) by the Dutch theologian and minister Oepke Noordmans (1871-1956). As both were theologians with an outstanding reputation, Noordmans’ ‘encounter’ with Newman is therefore a matter of special importance. Noordmans is generally appraised as a 20th-century personification of the reformed tradition in a most brilliant and pure form. Newman for his part is one of the most outstanding Catholic theologians of the 19th century. Therefore, Noordmans’ reception of Newman represents a high-quality encounter of the two main traditions of Western Christianity: Rome and the Reformation. This encounter was definitely more than a mere prolongation of an age-long wearisome controversy. Both Noordmans and Newman recognised that the Church faced the serious problem of the ‘turn to the subject’, a problem that originated in the late Middle Ages and has been in full swing since the 19th century. In this ‘turn to the subject’ people start to consider themselves capable of gaining knowledge of the surrounding world (including God) under their own steam, seeing themselves as the subjectum of reality.

To the extent that it stimulates the act of believing as a personal act, the turn to the subject is welcomed by Newman and Noordmans, since, according to the Christian tradition, to believe is to live in a personal relationship with God. There is another, extremely dangerous, effect of the turn to the subject, however, which both Noordmans and Newman fear: Christian faith becoming subjective and highly individualized. In the turn to the subject, people construct their own image of God. Believing, as Newman says, will become a kind of self-contemplation, i.e. a kind of wandering around in one’s own thoughts about God and no longer a conversation with a Person outside ourselves. ‘Liberalism in religion’, Newman calls it. Noordmans fears the same frame of mind, dubbing it ‘monism’: ‘revelation being stretched on a human frame’. In this so-called monism the Spirit of God and the spirit of man are dangerously joined, forming a monistic frame of mind. Ultimately, the turn to the subject prevents God from speaking to man. Seeking to counter this development, Newman and Noordmans bring in a congruent solution: we believe on authority. We are able
to know God because of an authoritative voice telling us who He is. Both Newman and Noordmans regard the Church as that authoritative voice. But how will she be able to speak with authority?

To enable the Western Church to cope with this problem, Noordmans wants her to take the plunge and give free rein to the Spirit. According to the Dutch minister, the main thrust in Western theology has always been in this direction. Newman, on the other hand, following the Church Fathers, builds his theology on the incarnation without neglecting the Spirit. Thus, both men developed a theology deeply affected by the critical attitude they adopted towards this cultural tendency of the West.

In October 1845 Newman asked permission to enter the Roman Catholic Church, to find in it the authority he was looking for. Noordmans, for his part, first made a supreme effort to provide the Dutch Reformed Church with a new church order. But in the end he abandoned all the existing churches and looked forward to a new outpouring of the Spirit ushering in a new Church, to be built on a new confession.

The purpose of the present study is to consider the encounter between Noordmans and Newman in its historical context, subjecting it to a chronological analysis. Special attention is paid to the way Noordmans treated Newman: has the Dutch minister done justice to the English cardinal? In order to trace this, due notice is taken of Newman’s theology, because only in this way can we verify the correctness of the Newman-image offered by Noordmans. Doing so, this study provides an answer to the question: ‘Has Newman in any way influenced Noordmans?’

Ultimately, this analysis leads into an assessment of the actual significance of Noordmans’ reception of Newman for the Church of the 21st century. Bearing in mind the forthcoming 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the Protestant inability to integrate the turn to the subject in an adequate way in Church and theology is striking. Against the Reformers’ intentions, the Protestant ethos turned into an ethos of autonomy. As a result, ‘Reformation’ has become a byword for the disintegration of the Church, as was already visible in the earliest days of the Reformation.

This study does not agree with Brad Gregory’s thesis that Rome and Reformation are different to such an extent that they are not ‘meaningfully comparable’. In view of the appreciation of the turn to the subject that both Noordmans and Newman expressed, a rapprochement of the two church traditions of the West seems possible.

I conclude by stating that my illative sense tells me that Newman’s theological design is still persuasive. This theology offers the Church of the 21st century what she needs. Threatened by the negative consequences of the turn to the subject, which undermine Church and Revelation, Newman offers the Church an opportunity to retain the benefits of this turn: loyalty to Scripture, openness to the Spirit, to objectivity, authority and unity. If Noordmans is right in stating that Schleiermacher is the 19th century Church Father and Kierkegaard the 20th-century one, this study makes out a case for declaring Newman to be the Church Father of the 21st century.