

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN AND THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY

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JOHN Henry Newman was one of the most eminent of all Victorian Englishmen—subtle, witty, profound, but also hypersensitive, insecure and resentful of criticism. He was the product of two extraordinarily rich cultures—that of Oxford, which was his by inheritance and that of the Roman Catholic Church, which was his by adoption. Oxford, which did so much to discipline and sharpen his mind, was in his day a place of great beauty before the advent of the railway and motor car. The antiquity of the place, an oasis of civilized security, nourished his critical faculties but could not give him the serenity which he craved. This he sought in an institution of even greater antiquity, the Roman Catholic Church, which answered his religious needs but in whose bosom he was always liable to suspicion as the brilliant convert who might in the final analysis prove unorthodox. Both Oxford and the Roman Catholic Church were the decisive influences in his life and helped to shape his remarkable book on liberal education.

John Henry Newman was born in 1801 to a family which belonged to the Evangelical branch of the Church of England. He entered Trinity College, Oxford at age sixteen and pursued the only two courses open to undergraduates at the time: classical languages and classical mathematics. Newman was a brilliant student but suffered from a life-long disability which made him break down when under intense pressure. When he completed his course, he did poorly on the written and oral examinations and failed to secure the expected first class honours. Nevertheless, his high quality had not gone unrecognized and he was elected Fellow of Oriel College, which was at that time Oxford's most intellectually prestigious and high powered college. Here he continued to absorb the rich intellectual culture of Oxford which became so evident in his *Idea of a University* and might easily have spent the remainder of his life as a Don, devoted to ancient learning, books and port wine.

After being ordained minister in the Church of England he was appointed Vicar of St. Mary's Church, which was the church of the

university. Here his sermons attracted large attendances. But winds of change were at work. The same year that saw Newman installed at St. Mary's witnessed the Emancipation of Dissenters and Roman Catholics in the United Kingdom and a few years later there was an important parliamentary inquiry into the position of the state church. Newman's Church of England was under intense pressure and criticism in an age that was increasingly governed by the new forces which had been let loose by the Industrial Revolution. This newer England was critical, skeptical and saw no value in institutions merely because they were old and beautiful. Alarmed by these developments, Newman and a group of Oxford colleagues founded a reactionary party which became known as the Oxford Movement. The Oxford Movement stressed the ancient Christian tradition regarding the Church of England, its priesthood and its sacraments. It was a reaction not only against modern religion but against virtually all of modern life.

Gradually, Newman and a few others in the Oxford Movement drew closer to the Roman Catholic Church, first as a source of inspiration to the Church of England and later as the only true church. In 1845 Newman professed faith in the Roman Catholic Church and a year later he was ordained in Rome.

Now what was the Roman Catholic Church to do with its brilliant convert who already had a European reputation for learning and eloquence? The record shows that for a variety of reasons too complex to be analyzed in this paper, the True and Apostolic Church was ill at ease in handling Newman and for most of his career until he died in 1890 it assigned him tasks which were beneath his large capacities.

An exception might be seen in Newman's experience in the early 1850s in trying to found a Roman Catholic University in Dublin. As I have said, there were winds of change at work in this society. Vexed by its difficulties in governing Ireland the British government proposed to endow a new institution of higher learning in Ireland for Roman Catholics to match the Protestant foundation of Trinity College, Dublin. This was expected to provide conservative intellectual leadership for the Irish Catholic masses. In deference to religious feelings of all persuasions, the subjects of theology and modern history were not to be taught.

The secular nature of the proposed university was too much for Newman to endure. Passionately interested in education he dreamed of organizing for Ireland a Roman Catholic university which was to be

formed along the lines of his beloved Oxford. With the extraordinary energy that was characteristic of him, he threw himself into the task of creating almost singlehandedly a university from nothing in one of the least favorable environments in Europe. In the course of his efforts first as an organizer and then as Rector of this new Catholic foundation he delivered a series of remarkable lectures which have timeless value to all those interested in education, and it is to Newman's ideas that we shall now turn.

Newman's objection to secularism in education, which drew him into controversy, may be briefly mentioned. Like most educated men in this pre-Darwinian age he felt that knowledge revealed by the Bible could be of assistance to students of politics and history as well as philosophy. He contradicted the arguments of proponents of secular education such as the Utilitarians, who had founded the University of London in 1827. This aspect of his thought is mentioned in passing; it is not what interests us in this article.

Furthermore, Newman's university was to be a teaching institution, not one devoted to research. Newman believed that it was unlikely that teaching and research could be performed by the same man and that the former was more important. In this he anticipated the controversy which was to rage in Oxford University shortly afterward. There, Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College, led those who would have made Oxford a great research institution along the lines of the German universities, while Benjamin Jowett, Professor of Greek and Master of Balliol College, took the position that Oxford's function should remain the teaching of young men.

Today this argument has lost its importance. Carefully distinguishing between teaching and research, Robert Maynard Hutchins, while president of the University of Chicago, said that a college teaches but a university both teaches and learns. At some universities the teaching schedule for most of the faculty is light enough to permit research, and research and publication are, or should be, a requirement for promotion and tenure consideration.

In Newman's almost exclusively classical ideal university research was not as important as it is in today's modern university with its enormously wide range of course offerings in which there is constant discovery and the need for a teacher to keep abreast of new knowledge.

The three central ideas which Newman upheld in the *Idea of a Uni-*

versity are as follows: they are the ones which I shall discuss. In the first place, Newman believed that the purpose of a university was not to preach morals or to train people for a vocation but instead to pursue liberal education. Secondly, while the values of liberal education are not absolute they are good in themselves. Finally, the development of what he called a philosophical temper in individuals is of great value to society.

The *Idea of a University* is an unapologetic argument for liberal education as opposed to vocational education, and liberal education is nothing more or less than the cultivation of the intellect and its end is not merely knowledge of facts but an awareness of their relation to one another. Knowledge is a whole; it is a clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things and these things complete, correct and balance each other. Knowledge is its own end, but knowledge as T. S. Eliot once said is distinct from mere information. Newman believed that real knowledge is conducive to that overall view which he calls philosophy.

Now, before we pursue this theme, let us note what Newman says education is *not*. Education is not recreation or idle amusement. "Do not say," he notes, "the people must be educated, when, after all, you only mean amused, refreshed, soothed, put into good spirits and good humour, or kept from vicious excesses." Such occupations of mind are not education. "Stuffing birds or playing stringed instruments is an elegant pastime, and a resource to the idle, but it is not education; it does not form or cultivate the intellect." We must carefully distinguish between mere diversion and real education.

The perfection of the intellect, the enlargement and illumination of the mind is the real and only aim of a university. The intellect is central to a university just as a hospital's duty is to care for the sick or a gymnasium's function is to exercise the limbs. The function of a university is intellectual culture. If a university has any practical end, it is the training of good members of society through intellectual cultivation and thus the raising of society's intellectual tone. "It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. . . . He has

the repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad."

In this way a university education is emphatically "useful" and "relevant," to quote two shibboleths of our own time. Just as health is necessary for bodily labor so culture of the mind is the best aid to professional study and educated men can do what uneducated men cannot. The man who has learned to think, reason, discriminate and analyze, who has refined his taste and sharpened his judgment will be a better lawyer, physician, businessman, soldier or engineer. On the other hand, a narrow vocationalism leads to nothing beyond itself. As Newman says, education rises toward general ideas but vocationalism is exhausted upon what is particular and external.

The educated man "apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that his education is called 'liberal.' A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what in a former discourse I ventured to call a philosophical habit. This then I would assign as the special fruit of the education furnished at a university, as contrasted with other places of teaching or modes of teaching. This is the main purpose of a university in its treatment of its students."

All of this is liberal education—the process of training by which the intellect instead of being sacrificed to some trade or occupation is disciplined for its own sake. But how does it answer the charge so dear to the hearts of Victorians that education must have a moral purpose. The surprising answer is that it doesn't. To quote Newman's own eloquent words.

"Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith. Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life; these are the conatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a university; I am advocating, I shall illustrate and insist upon them; but

still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for conscientiousness, they may attach to the man of the world, to the profligate, to the heartless—pleasant, alas, and attractive as he shows when decked out in them. . . . Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with threads of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man.”

Thus Newman says the object of a liberal education is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence.

“To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression, is an object as intelligible . . . as the cultivator of virtue, while, at the same time, it is absolutely distinct from it.”

Here we have the purpose of education for Newman, the theme of his *Idea of a University*. It is to produce the gentleman. The gentleman is modest, courteous, patient, fair, candid and large minded. He may be a Christian but he need not be. As Newman says, Basil and Julian were fellow students at the schools of Athens but while one became a Christian saint, the other was the scoffing and relentless foe of the Church.

The object of a university was thus for Newman a secular one: to produce this gentleman. Here Newman revealed himself to be a man of his time, for the thrust of the classical curriculum in the public schools and the two ancient English universities was to cultivate this ideal. Thomas Arnold, after becoming Headmaster at Rugby school in 1828, did more than any man to develop the image of a middle class Englishman as being one devoted to duty with a sense of responsibility toward inferiors, which was ideal for governing an Empire on which the sun never set. The ancient Greek ideals of duty, courage and decorum were familiar to generations of young Englishmen who emerged from school and university intent upon living up to a code that is not entirely extinct even today, despite the horrors of twentieth century life.

The concept extended to Ireland, not only in the schools of the Protestant Ascendancy but even in the Jesuit Clongowes Wood school which James Joyce described in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The purpose of this school does not seem to have been to frighten the

wits out of boys as the reader of Joyce might infer but instead to train candidates for the British civil service.

It was this principle that was in full vigor at the time he wrote his lectures that Newman paid tribute to in *Idea of a University*. His was not a plea for either an education based upon religion or for a new departure in the light of the latest knowledge.

The model of a university which would produce such an individual was Oxford: not the Oxford which emerged from mid-nineteenth century parliamentary inquiries but the older Oxford of Gibbon and Dr. Johnson which brought young men together for a few years but where formal, didactic instruction yielded to the gentler and more subtle processes of self education, where knowledge was more than a passive reception of scraps and details. This produced for Protestant England a characteristic tone of thought and recognized standard of judgment and Newman hoped that the same might be done for Catholic Ireland. In short, Newman saw higher education as a community of learners, not in the shallow, canting terms of those of today's youth who are impatient with all discipline and restraint, but in a mature association of eager minds who have one great object—the pursuit of knowledge. In this, liberal education represents an extension of mind, of reason and of reflection.

Within a few years Newman's dream of a great Catholic university in Ireland was shattered. Despite his heroic efforts as Rector Newman failed principally because he could not persuade the Irish Catholic hierarchy of the need for a real university on the lines which I have indicated. Their idea of a university seems to have been a seminary whose object was the inculcation of Roman Catholic teaching in sacred and secular subjects. In England Newman was viewed as conservative, hostile to the major intellectual movements of his time and in love with the past and tradition, but in Ireland he was suspected of being a radical who would damage the faith of Catholic youth by permitting the free play of ideas. Newman returned to England and spent the remainder of his life in frustration as one enterprise after another collapsed.

But in a real sense this great conservative—for this is how we should view him—was captivated by the learning of the Catholic middle ages and saturated with the culture of the great European tradition. He was the product of the ideals of Oxford as well as the Roman Catholic Church at its best and most generous and these ideals were not mean ones.