# ‘THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY’: CARDINAL NEWMAN’S VISION

*di*
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*John Henry Newman’s name is associated in a particular way with education. He was not only a life-long educator at all levels, he was also a great thinker about education. His seminal work, The Idea of a University, emerged in the context of the launching of the Catholic University of Ireland between1852 and 1859. ‘What an empire is in political history, such is a University in the sphere of philosophy and research.’ This article expounds the principal insights of The Idea. Three areas stand out in a most engaging fashion. First, there is the scope of university education as the achievement of the facility to think clearly, together with the conquest of freedom in the genuine pursuit of virtue and religion. Then there is the full circle of the many sciences that are still deeply related to each other: the educated mind will perceive their unity in distinction. Finally, there is the quality of the relationship between students and their professors. That relationship is the only alternative to turning the total enterprise into ‘an arctic winter.’*

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The Venerable John Henry Newman's life spans almost the entire nineteenth century (1801-1890)[1]. This long life was the occasion of an even longer itinerary of heart and mind. To quote the words of Pope Paul VI spoken in 1963 on the occasion of the beatification of Blessed Dominic Barberi, who had received Newman into the Church in 1845, Newman's journey was «the most toilsome, but also the greatest, the most meaningful, the most conclusive, that human thought ever travelled during the (last) century, indeed one might say during the modern era»[2]. That journey took him from an initial attraction to agnosticism as a teenager when he read Voltaire and other French deists, and brought him all the way to Catholic faith when, at the age of forty-four, he entered the Catholic Church. Wherever truth and light led he followed, always willing to pay the price which was often high. In fact, his youthful motto was, "Holiness before peace",[3] a motto he had learned while reading a book by the Evangelical author, Thomas Scott, which his headmaster loaned him for the summer vacation of 1816.

His relentless pursuit of truth and holiness led him through what Ian Ker happily called "the varieties of Christianity" as Newman assembled the component elements of Catholic Faith and practice[4]. It also led him to consider topics, both religious and cultural, that were to gain centre stage on the occasion of the twenty-first ecumenical Council, Vatican II (1962-1963). Pope Paul VI lists these topics in his address to the Roman Symposium on John Henry Newman in 1975,

> «Many of the problems which he treated with wisdom - although he himself was frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted in his own time - were the subjects of the discussion and study of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, as, for example, the question of ecumenism, the relationship between Christianity and the world, the emphasis on the role of the laity in the Church and the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. Not only this Council but also this time may be considered in a special way as Newman's hour, in which, with confidence in divine providence, he placed his great hopes and expectations»[5].

Our topic is his action and thinking in relation to education, again a topic addressed at the Council[6]. The Cardinal declares this interest in these terms, «Now from first to last, education, in this large sense of the word, has been my line»[7]. The story of his life bears out the truth of his claim. «The range of his contributions

1) For biography see C. S. Dessain, *John Henry Newman*, Nelson, London 1966; I. Ker, *John Henry Newman. A Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990; S. Gilley, *Newman and his Age*: Darton, Longman + Todd, London 1990 and 2003.
2) Pope Paul VI, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 October 1963; AAS, 1963, 1025.
3) *Apologia pro vita sua*, Oxford University Press, London 1913, p. 109.
4) I. Ker, *Newman and the Fullness of Christianity*, T & T Clark Edinburgh, 1993, pp. 1-8.
5) Pope Paul VI, *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 17, 1975.
6) Vatican II, Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*.
7) H. Tristram (ed.), *John Henry Newman: Autobiographical Writings*, London 1956, p. 259.

to the organisation of teaching and learning is […] impressive. He reorganized a parish school; founded the first Catholic public school in England; played a leading role in the nineteenth-century revival of Oxford University; and was the first founder and was the first vice-chancellor of a Catholic university»[8]. However, it is his legacy in publications on education that have impacted - and continue to impact - both the theory and performance of education. Among these works it is *The Idea of a University*, perhaps his best known literary production, which occupies the foremost place educationally speaking[9].

The fact that the *Idea* is an "occasional" book, having been composed in the precise context of the setting up of the new Catholic University of Ireland, gives it a very precise character. The university would have to be both "catholic" and "Irish". Irish Catholics had gained their emancipation within the United Kingdom as recently as 1829, while their cultural "identity" as Irish men and women had to be kept in mind. With his love for education as his line, his conviction that «we want education»[10] and the fact that «from the very first month of his Catholic existence […] he wished for a Catholic University»[11], Newman jumped at the invitation from Cardinal Cullen in 1849 to found the university[12].

## 1. The Literary Character of the Idea of a University

The work comprises two parts, the first containing the *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* which are the lectures delivered as a prelude to launching the new Catholic University of Ireland. The second half is far less well known and contains the lectures Newman gave as Rector of the university. The latter «are generally more practical and usefully complement the more theoretical *Discourses*»[13]. In reading these texts it is important to remember Newman's rhetorical skill. As one of his «two most perfect works, artistically»[14], the *Idea* challenges the reader in a particular way via its rhetoric.

The *Discourses* frequently employ hyperbole, something that modern readers often

**8)** P. Shrimpton, *Newman the Educator* in P. Lefebvre & C. Mason eds., *John Henry Newman in his Time*, Oxford 2007, pp. 131-145, here p. 131.
**9)** The uniform edition of his works runs to 36 volumes, which were published by Longmans, Green, and Co. of London after 1890, not to speak of the *Letters and Diaries* which run to over 30 substantial tomes and have been published since 1961 until last year by either Nelson of London (vols. XI-XXII) or Clarendon Press: Oxford (vols. I-VI; XXIII-XXXII). When an edition of a work *other than* the uniform (LD) is referred to, the publication details will be provided.
**10)** LD, XIV, p. 213.
**11)** LD, XXVI, p. 58.
**12)** For an informative and historically insightful account of the establishment of the university consult Colin Barr's, *Paul Cullen, John Henry Newman, and the Catholic University of Ireland*, 1845-1865, Gracewing, Leominster 2003.
**13)** I. Ker, *The Achievement of John Henry Newman*, The University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1990, p. 1.
**14)** LD, XV. 226. In another place he lists it among his five most 'constructive' books, LD, XXIV, 390.

find uncongenial unless forewarned. A fine instance of such rhetorical hyperbole is his concept of "special philosophy" or "Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge", which he sees as "the end of University Education." He defines this as «a comprehensive view of truth in all its branches, of the relations of science to science, of their mutual bearings, and their respective values»[15]. This language is likely to deceive the unsuspecting reader into believing that Newman is thinking of some kind of "super-science" or "mode of knowing." Newman has in mind something much more concrete and simple. He describes this in fact in the Preface to the *Discourses* as «the intellect […] properly trained and formed to have a connected view or grasp of things»[16].

## 2. The Cultivation of Intellectual Excellence

At a time when many universities are living through moments of change, and even at times of turmoil, it is perhaps worth looking at Newman's vision of the scope of a university education. In the pages of the *Idea of a University*, he returns again and again to *the precise purpose of a university*. It is that of a liberal education, and liberal education «is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence»[17]. The goal of university education, then, is to achieve this "perfection or virtue of the intellect", it is to achieve an "enlargement of mind, or illumination." The simple test is "how best to strengthen, refine, and enrich the intellectual powers." It is not the particular subject that matters in the first instance but the achievement of «the most robust and invigorating discipline for the unformed mind»[18]. *It is the ability to think, and to think clearly.*

He remarks that so many people in everyday life "never see the point", or else "are hopelessly obstinate and prejudiced." This is the very antithesis of the educated mind. There is a «haziness of intellectual vision which is the malady of all (kinds of people) by nature, of those who read and write and compose, quite as well as those who cannot - of all who have not had a really good education». That good education he calls "Liberal." A liberal education, however, not only enables university graduates to think clearly, but also to think *with love for the truth* wherever it leads, having the ability to present it clearly. Education, in a word, is more than the imparting of knowledge or skills. It is the preparation of the mind for such knowledge and skill, and the imparting of knowledge and skill in proportion to that preparation. This distinction between education and knowledge is of great importance. Newman places «the entire emphasis […] on training the mind to be accurate, consistent, logical, orderly»[19].

**15)** *Idea*, pp. 96-97: the edition of the *Idea* being used is that edited by Ian Ker in 1976 and published by The Clarendon Press at Oxford.
**16)** *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
**17)** *Ibid.*, p. 111.
**18)** *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.
**19)** I. Ker, *Ibid.*, p. 8.

What trains the mind best? Consistent with the training of the mind to think clearly, acquiring thereby "mental cultivation", the Oxford Fellow insists that «the first step is to impress upon a boy's mind the idea of science, method, order, principle, and system; of rule and exception, of richness and harmony». To achieve this clearmindedness, the professor follows the maxim of teaching "a little, but well." Newman's thought is so finely tuned that it is appropriate to quote at length in explanation of what he means by "mental cultivation."

> «This (mental cultivation) is commonly and excellently done by making him begin with Grammar; nor can too great accuracy, or minuteness and subtlety of teaching be used towards him, as his faculties expand, with this simple purpose. Hence it is that critical scholarship is so important a discipline for him when he is leaving school for the University. A second science is the Mathematics: this should follow Grammar, still with the same subject, viz., to give him a conception of development and arrangement around a common centre. Hence it is that Chronology and Geography are so necessary for him, when he reads History, which is otherwise little better than a storybook […] Let him once gain this habit of method, of starting from fixed points, of making his ground good as he goes, of distinguishing what he knows from what he does not know, and I conceive he will be gradually initiated into the largest philosophical views, and will feel nothing but impatience and disgust at the random theories and imposing sophistries and dashing paradoxes, which carry away half-formed and superficial intellects»[20].

The students will gradually acquire «a habit of order and system, a habit of referring every accession of knowledge to what they already know, and of adjusting the one with the other; and, as such a habit implies, the actual acceptance and use of certain principles as centres of thought, around which our knowledge grows and is located»[21]. One learns to think clearly, not by learning a science of thinking, such as logic, but rather by thinking about the ordinary subjects of knowledge. When a university sends out into society and schools, into the professions and businesses, into the factories and offices such trained minds, then the university will have fulfilled its purpose and done its work, «just as the work of a hospital lies in healing the sick or wounded, of […] a gymnasium in exercising the limbs».

The practical benefit of such an education will express itself in the ability to ask the questions that are the most practical and the most radical about what comes before us, questions like, Is what is being said true? Is what is being suggested good? Is this truly beneficial to society? Only minds that are trained to think will put the relevant questions. The rise of the mass media and the vulnerability of society to manipulation by the idols of the marketplace make such an education vital to our freedom as persons and to our flourishing as a people.

**20)** *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
**21)** *Ibid.*, pp. 403-404.

Has a university fulfilled its duty by this discipline and formation of mind? Cardinal Newman's answer to this question has remained both delicate and challenging. However, it is an answer that can speak engagingly to the global culture of today. Since the human person is more than intellect or mind, being gifted with freedom and will and having to cope with passions, a full education requires *also* the proper training of the will, the conquest of freedom and the authentic integration of the passions according to the law of reason. Education worthy of the name must be the education of the whole person, taking into account will, heart and passions as well as intellect. The mind has not only an intellectual dimension, but also a moral or spiritual dimension.

Newman traces the source of contemporary nihilism and forsakenness to the separation of the intellectual and the moral in education. In that way one person is talented and able, and not virtuous, while a second is the reverse. An authentic education has to aim, in the name of authentic humanity, at an education that connects the intellectual and the moral. As he put it in one of his *Sermons on Various Occasions*, the aim of a university education is to make each student an «oracle of philosophy and a shrine of devotion»[22]. For the truth is that we are not only knowers but also doers.

It is said that rivers cannot rise higher than their sources. Neither can human beings rise above their passions by their own resources. We need another source, a higher source, and we need connection to that Source. In a word, we need the Transcendent, we need the faith. This need, in fact, points towards the true depth and mystery of the person as called to communion with the God who made them. Newman loved to stress the fact that only the God who made the human heart is enough for the heart. It is this God who gives freedom from the gravitational pull towards selfishness and self-interest. «You must go to a higher source for renovation of the heart and will. You do but play a sort of "hunt the slipper" with the fault of our nature, till you go to Christianity». He explains further that «Christianity raises men from earth, for it comes from heaven; but human morality creeps, struts, or frets upon the earth's level, without wings to rise»[23]. All his life long he fought against the view that men and women can be made virtuous and good by intellectual enlightenment *on its own*. As a Tutor in Oxford in the 1830s, he employed this role to bring students to the divine source of grace and truth when dealing with students. The liberal education produces the gentleman, it does not produce the man or woman of virtue!

A "knowledge culture" that is exclusively such leaves out of reckoning the values of goodness and generosity, and their necessity. There is a kind of post-Enron syndrome that reminds us of this truth. The human being is in fact an image of Infinity, being made in the image and the likeness of God. *To disconnect the education of the human being from the full identity of the human being is to deform and not*

**22)** *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions,* 'Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training', p. 13.
**23)** *Discussions and Arguments*, 'The Tamworth Reading Room', pp. 268 and 272.

*to educate.* Such a person may have everything he or she needs, except a reason to live and a reason to die! If the university project is severed from the moral and spiritual layers of our humanity, then the weight of knowledge, scientific technique and technology will crush out of existence the springs of humanity and the islands of love that are in the world - the family, the community, the volunteers. Science and technology will crush them out of existence. The result will be a world without children, without reverence, without giving. Power and the profit-motive will be the sole criteria. In such a world, the aged, the unproductive, the incurably ill will be increasingly overlooked and perhaps eventually shunned as a burden upon society. For a knowledge culture that is no longer at the service of the person, aiming at the integral education of the whole person, is a long ways down the road towards what C. S. Lewis has called «the abolition of man» where the human person is no longer someone great and unconditionally valuable[24].

At the beginning of the final sermon of the *Oxford University Sermons* that deal with the theme of faith and reason and were composed between 1826 and 1843 and written while Newman was still Anglican, he proposes the Virgin Mary as the personal ideal for both the simple believer and the learned divine. The Gospel of St Luke tells us of the Angel Gabriel's visit to announce to Mary the incarnation of his eternal Son. Mary's faith stands out in her tremendous Yes to the offer of God, «I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word». (1:38) St Luke, however, proceeds at once to show Mary thinking and pondering on the great event that has happened in her. (*Lk* 2:19, 52) Newman comments on this fact as follows, «Thus Mary is our pattern of faith, both in the reception and in the study of Divine Truth. She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to possesses, she uses it; not enough to submit the reason, she reasons upon it»[25]. Mary combines believing and reasoning, she unites love of God with love of thinking. She is the "shrine of devotion" and the "oracle of philosophy" in harmonious combination.

## 3. 'A place of *Teaching* universal *Knowledge*'?

Newman insists not only on the wholeness of knowledge, at least in principle, but above all on the *unity* of knowledge. It is this unity and fullness that ground the imperative of that academic hospitality which the university owes to the realms of knowledge and learning. In a passage of rhetorical brilliance he stresses that «all knowledge forms one whole» because «its subject-matter is one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together, that we cannot separate off portion from portion, and operation from operation, except by mental abstraction […] As they all belong to one and the same circle of objects, they are one and all connected together»[26].

**24)** C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man,* or, *Reflections on education with special reference to the teaching of English in the upper forms of schools*, Oxford 1943.
**25)** *Oxford University Sermons*, p. 313.
**26)** *Idea*, p. 57.

It is the unity of the real that demands the unity of the many sciences studying the real.

There are many passages in the *Idea* where Newman appears to inculcate as an absolute principle that a university ought to teach universal knowledge. The etymology of the word "university" suggests this, while the standing of all the sciences requires it. Still this is a mistaken understanding of his position occasioned by his use of hyperbole. The truth is not that a university should in practice teach each and every science and discipline, but rather that *it should not discriminate against any particular science*. The university ought, at least in principle, aspire towards an intellectual catholicity. He writes, «are we to limit our idea of University Knowledge by the evidence of our senses? Then we exclude ethics; by intuition? We exclude history. By testimony? We exclude metaphysics. By abstract reasoning? We exclude physics»[27].

A further benefit of a liberal education is the ability to appreciate both the relations and the boundaries between the sciences and the disciplines. Just as the universe is one, so the many sciences that study the universe are one, touching each other like the many meshes of one and the same net. The student will gradually come to realize this *interconnection* of the many sciences and disciplines. «It is a great point then to enlarge the range of studies which a University professes, even for the sake of the students; and, though they cannot pursue every subject which is open to them, they will be the gainers by living among those and under those who represent the whole circle»[28]. For the special task of the university is «to draw the many things into one»[29].

The *Idea* provides an engrossing analysis of what happens when this principle is not followed. Newman shows what occurs when a particular science or discipline is denied its place in university learning. The first effect of this discrimination will be ignorance of the discipline in question. A good instance is Theology as the ordered study of divine revelation. Three of the *Discourses* in fact deal with the place of Theology in the curriculum of university study. With great vigour of thought they highlight the absence and consequent insouciance of the mystery of God and of divine revelation. In the second place, the space vacated by that subject will not remain vacant: another subject will sooner or later occupy its place. The reason is simple: «if you drop any science out of the circle of knowledge, you cannot keep its place vacant for it; that science is forgotten; the other sciences close up, or, in other words, they exceed their proper bounds, and intrude where they have no right. For instance, I suppose, if ethics were sent into banishment, its territory would soon disappear, under a treaty of partition, as it may be called, between law, political economy, and physiology»[30].

**27)** *Ibid.*, p. 38.
**28)** *Ibid.*, p. 96.
**29)** *Ibid.*, p. 369.
**30)** *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Newman is not opposed at all to the idea of "specialization." In fact, he stresses the principle of mastering the few subjects in order to learn order, method, sequence and exception as we have seen already. But what he vigorously resists is one science invading the territory of another. This academic imperialism is the source of serious imbalance in the university as institution and of damage to the ideal of a liberal education which quite simply presupposes a certain architectonic sense of the totality of all the sciences[31]. Ian Ker takes the rise of sociology as a social science as an illustration of Newman's thinking in this respect. He cites «its consequent intrusion into the areas of, for example, ethics, theology, and literature, when sociological criteria and norms are used to criticize and evaluate data (which may indeed bear a sociological analysis) in such a way as to suggest that other (ethical, theological, and literary) interpretations are irrelevant or redundant or unnecessary»[32]. This disregard for the scientific integrity of ethics, theology and literature represents a serious disturbing of the unity of the many subjects.

## 4. The Interaction between Professors and Students

Newman emphasized the unity-in-distinction of the many disciplines in the university curriculum, then. Even more important, however, was the unity and rapport among professors and students. This unity actually influences profoundly the quality of university education. He puts it like this, «An academical system without the personal influence of teachers upon pupils, is an arctic winter; it will create an ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron University, and nothing else»[33]. The quality of the relationships in the academic community formed by staff and students is what is most important. Why is that the case? It is because greatness and unity go together. In the final analysis it is this unity which will determine the quality of an education.

For Newman the learning or academic environment is largely determined by this relationship. He writes, «When a multitude of young men […] come together and freely mix with each other, they are sure to learn one from another, even if there be no one to teach them; the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each, and they gain for themselves new ideas and views, fresh matter of thought, and distinct principles for judging and acting, day by day»[34]. The professor is «the great instrument or rather organ» in the university on condition, however, of personal presence to and for the students[35].

As if to put his meaning beyond all doubt, Newman shares an experience from his days as an undergraduate in Oxford.

**31)** *Ibid*., p. 87.
**32)** I. Ker, *The Achievement of John Henry Newman*, p. 26.
**33)** Historical Sketches, III, pp. 74-75.
**34)** *Ibid*., III, 13.
**35)** This is a recurring theme in all of his works. Consult, for example, Sermon V, 'Personal Influence, the Means of Propogating the Truth,' in *Oxford University Sermons*, pp. 75-98.

> «I have experienced a state of things, in which teachers were cut off from the taught as by an insurmountable barrier; when neither party entered into the thoughts of the other; when each lived by and in itself; when the tutor was supposed to fulfil his duty, if he trotted on like a squirrel in his cage, if at a certain hour he was in a certain room, or in hall, or in chapel, as it might be; and the pupil did his duty too, if he was careful to meet his tutor in that same room, or hall, or chapel, at the same certain hour; and when neither the one nor the other dreamed of seeing each other out of lecture, out of chapel, out of academical gown»[36].

As a Fellow of Oriel College he worked to change this scenario radically. To that end he championed the introduction and the development of a tutorial system which has become the normal system of learning in Oxford and Cambridge[37].

John Henry Newman had a passion for education[38]. He expressed that passion in deed and in writing. This article has occupied itself principally with the theoretical, focusing in a particular way on the *Idea of a University*. Even if the university envisaged and sketched in the *Idea* did not continue beyond a few decades, Newman's thinking has still the energy to engage and to inspire a century and a half after its appearance. This exposition focused on three principal dimensions of that energy. First, there is the notion of a "liberal education" which is open to a Catholic sense. Then there is the principle of the fullness and the unity of the sciences comprising the university curriculum. Finally, there is the unity of the professors and students in the total enterprise which generates the climate best suited to the adventure of university life. In reading the text of the *Idea* one could accept Newman's assertion that «what an empire is in political history, such is a University in the sphere of philosophy and research»[39].

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**36)** *Historical* Sketches, III, p. 75.
**37)** See P. Shrimpton, *Newman the Educator* in *John Henry Newman and his Time*, pp. 132-145.
**38)** See *My Campaign in Ireland*, privately printed in Aberdeen in 1896 for the documents and the reports relating to the establishment and administration of the Catholic University of Ireland.
**39)** *Idea*, p. 370.