

Virtue, Truth & God: Has the Modern University Lost the Plot?

The relevance of Newman's *Idea of a University* today

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This essay explores the relevance of John Henry Newman's writings about the university with respect to the modern university, seeking to reconcile the two, and looking for ways in which Newman's ideas can help to solve the problems of the latter. The essay is divided into three sections. The first one looks at some of the problems of the modern university – particularly that of *over-specialisation* and *narrowness* within the different disciplines – and, in the context of Newman's ideas in that respect, emphasises the importance of virtue – derived from the unity of the human person – in providing a context for all disciplines. The second section discusses the crisis of relativism which prevails in the modern university, and explores how Newman's stress on the objective truth as the goal of every study can help university education today. The final part of the essay looks at the role of theology in modern universities, using Newman's ideas in order to justify and guide its teaching.

University education as a unity: the importance of context – by Ezequiel Mercau

The modern university has adapted to the professional needs of our age. In many senses, it can be said that it has achieved outstanding results and

transformations since its inception in the eleventh century. For one thing, the spread of in-depth knowledge in the most diverse fields all around the world has facilitated the great advances which the world has seen since the renaissance, particularly in the last century. Secondly, education has become available to the bulk of the population, thus accelerating the rate of improvement and change in society. Indeed, it can be said that the globalisation of university education and knowledge has helped to create a world consensus on crucial issues such as human rights and democracy.

Nevertheless, the modern university suffers from several problems which are also a result of its close link with the professional world. One of the characteristics of this modern institution is its tendency towards an ever-narrower specialisation. As a result, the different disciplines of study are increasingly seen as independent from the others, as discreet units. This can be evidenced in many fields, such as, for example, in economics, which many times crosses its own boundaries in order to deal with social and moral issues, or science, which repeatedly attempts to give answers to philosophical questions which lie outside of its field of study. Subsequently, the fact that disciplines desire a position of supremacy vis-à-vis other fields of knowledge means that, very often, they place their ultimate goals in progress within the field and in the training of ever more competent professionals. All this is exacerbated by the fierce competition among the different disciplines, among students and scholars, and among universities, which characterises the modern university, and by the crucial role that funding plays in the world of education nowadays.

This issue has several negative outcomes. Firstly, students tend to get a very narrow education. In this regard, John Henry Newman says that this excessive specialisation and narrowing of focus 'has a tendency to contract [the student's] mind' (Newman, 1961: 100). Secondly, progress within

disciplines tends to become an absolute goal, which must be pursued at all cost, ignoring the philosophical and ethical implications of it. Finally, the university, which traditionally was meant to be – as indicated by the word *universitas* – both a ‘School of Universal Learning’, where a myriad of disciplines would be taught, and an ‘assemblage of strangers from all parts in one spot’ (Newman, 1961: 6), becomes more of an *agglomeration of faculties and departments*, only united by their being part of the same institution.

Finally, a few more aspects of modern university education can be outlined. To start with, university education has become very widespread in the Western world – particularly among the middle and upper classes –, to the extent that it is now considered by many as *another stage in the educational path*, and which is regarded by many employers as a crucial *requirement* that must be met by prospective employees. Furthermore, the spread of university education has created, firstly, a demand for more universities, which means that most major urban centres have their own universities – and, as a result, the proportion of students staying in residences is possibly lower than that of Newman’s time; and secondly, class sizes in many universities – particularly in the liberal arts – have become very large, to the extent of undermining student-professor contact as well as dealings among students themselves.

In this context, it is worth exploring to what extent Newman’s ideas regarding the university can be applied to the modern university in order to correct its problems. It is important to note that they must be adapted to the context of the modern university, which is different to that of the university of Newman’s time. Furthermore, his ideas can be complemented with some issues of ethics and philosophy derived from Aristotle.

To begin with, Newman gives a definition of university which stresses the importance of the unity of all the disciplines within a university:

An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. (Newman, 1907: 101)

Indeed, in Newman's model, disciplines complement each other rather than seeking to prevail over the rest. Another section below will deal with the issue of truth and relativism, which is at the core of this definition. As for the purpose of the university, he states that it is *knowledge* itself, since, it 'is the constitution of the human mind (...) that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward' (Newman, 1907: 103).

However, Newman is not solely concerned with the intellectual gain that results from university education, but he also deals with other aspects of the human person which are affected by university life. Thus, he stresses the role of the *college*, which he describes as 'a place of residence for the University student, who would there find himself under the guidance and instruction of Superiors and Tutors, bound to attend to his personal interests, moral and intellectual' (Newman, 1961: 174-75). It is interesting to note that *personal* and *moral* interests are on a par with *intellectual* ones, thus emphasising the unity of the human person, and the importance of those aspects for his development. In fact, not only are they important; they cannot be separated from the intellectual development of the person. Any advancement in knowledge means an improvement of the whole person, while any deviation – moral or otherwise – of the person will directly impinge on the person's capacity to know the truth and to live by it. Therefore, the fact that Newman defines the goal of the university as knowledge *per se* is not contradictory to the claim that the university ultimately must seek to foster virtue in the human person. In this respect, it is useful to consider Aristotle's concept of a *practical intellect*, whose 'function (...) is to arrive at the truth that corresponds

to right appetite' (Aristotle, 1976: 206). In other words, the practical intellect allows the person to choose good. However, this practical intellect is acquired through virtue rather than study. Indeed, this is where Newman's concept of colleges and tutors combines with Aristotle's *practical intellect*, since they seek to foster virtue in the person.

Accordingly, interpreting these ideas from Newman in the light of the problems of the modern university described above, some conclusions can be reached. Firstly, the modern university must seek to deal with the whole person rather than simply with their intellectual aspect. This means that the system of colleges and tutors – or another system which can achieve the same results – must be reinforced and possibly restructured in order to match the reality of contemporary universities. On the one hand, personal contact between the student and the tutor must be fostered, while, on the other hand, ethical and philosophical issues must be emphasised in all disciplines, in order to give cohesion to the knowledge acquired in the university, whose aim is to reach the truth, as will be outlined below. This means that university learning must always take into account the *human context* of all disciplines, bearing in mind that the ultimate goal is the development of the person as a whole, which also implies a greater grasp of the truth.

Relativism vs. critical thinking: the truth as goal – by David Monnelly

In this section of the essay we aim to show how relativism has moved the focus of the university away from the search for truth towards argument for the sake of argument, and how this has damaged the soul of the university.

The University celebrates itself as the bastion of knowledge, rooted in the tradition of unending questioning. This tradition is, in fact, strongly based on the search for truth. However, the modern approach to the liberal arts is

becoming divorced from its roots in reality and the human question. The modern world's most ardent critics of the liberal arts stress its lack of relevance and apparent lack of concrete facts. This argument usually comes from a worldview that only accepts empirical and scientifically verifiable knowledge. However, there is an element of truth in it. Indeed, it is the grim spectre of relativism that haunts the halls and houses of the humanities. The stress on criticism rather than understanding, argument rather than ideas, and trends rather than events, has conspired to turn the most relevant and encompassing faculty into a most aloof and obscure one.

Firstly we define relativism. For the purpose of this essay, we will use the definition given by Mgr. Ángel Rodríguez Luño, namely, that relativism is the philosophy which holds that true reality is inaccessible and unknowable. Following from this, all views 'are equally valid, insofar as they are different and complementary ways of approaching the same reality that substantially remains hidden' (Rodríguez Luño, 2006: 151). It must be stressed, nevertheless, that accepting the existence of an objective truth does not take away from diversity of opinion; indeed, in the liberal arts there is scope for that. Yet, the truth must be the ultimate goal of any study.

This is indeed Newman's vision of the university; the truth is its ultimate goal, be it in the physical sciences or the faculty of arts. It is clear from this that Newman's university is utterly incompatible with relativism. Whereas Newman saw the university as the gathering of people, both students and professors, for the purpose of expanding and furthering the horizons of human knowledge, relativism on the other hand conflates statements of logic and statements of fact, and reduces them to questions of language. By doing this the relativist thereby 'undermines the epistemological view according to which there is a universal way of structuring human experience or an universal method of pursuing epistemological inquiry' (Harris, 1992: 27).

When we cannot truly know anything, how can we gather together, as Newman suggests, to study a body of knowledge? Unfortunately the focus has been taken away from the search for truth. What matters to the ambitious student is not the search for what really happened, but how they can derive their own theory from the data available. The pre-eminence of individual interpretation has negated the accumulation of knowledge. A student can be extremely successful in their chosen subject, regardless of their depth of knowledge, by contradicting the argument of another in order to produce their own. While apologists emphasise the importance of critical thinking to the university experience, they fail to acknowledge that while the faculty of critical thinking is vital to any study, the concentration on this to the detriment of appreciating a sound argument stunts the progression of understanding, and makes critical thinking *per se* – instead of the truth – the goal of that study.

This insidious intellectual climate is prevalent in all university circles, from undergraduate to post-doctoral. Scholarly journals tend to give preference to contrarian articles, and it is only by tearing down the theories and ideas of others that the aspiring academic can gain any degree of notoriety. A degree of criticism is always acceptable and necessary. Nonetheless, unless the objective truth is the ultimate goal of all sciences, university learning becomes a purposeless exercise that bears no lasting fruit for the human person.

Theology: its role in university learning – *by Guillaume Conquer*

In the third part of our essay, we consider the question of the teaching of theology in the university. Firstly, we show that the study of theology is part of knowledge. Secondly, we outline why it should be taught in the university. Finally, we look at some practical aspects of the teaching of theology in the modern university.

As stated above, today more than ever, Newman's concept of an integral and unified knowledge within the University is relevant, and theology is part of this knowledge, more so than any other discipline.

From tradition and history, there is a sense of the centrality of theology in university studies. During the High Middle Ages, theology was the ultimate subject at universities, being named *The Queen of the Sciences* and serving as the capstone to the *Trivium* and *Quadrivium* that young men were expected to study. This meant that the other subjects including philosophy existed primarily to help with theological thought (Howard, 2006: 56). Today, many colleges that were first founded for the study of theology have either abandoned it – such as the University of Paris –, or marginalised it – as is the case with in Trinity College Dublin –, though some have maintained it – a prime exception being Harvard University (cf. Marsden, 1994: 41).

Newman attempts a justification of this in his *Idea of a University*. He first shows how theology is a branch of knowledge; then how it bears on other branches of knowledge; and, finally, how other branches of knowledge affect it. Thus, he argues, firstly, that theology is a science, the study of 'the being of God reported to us by testimony, handed down by history, inferred by an inductive process, brought home to us by metaphysical necessity, urged on us by the suggestions of our conscience.' (Newman, 1907: 25) Therefore, he asks, 'how can we investigate any part of any order of knowledge, and stop short of that which enters into every order?' (Newman, 1907: 26) Secondly, theology must not refuse its take from knowledge: 'it is not only the loss of theology, it is the perversion of other sciences' (Newman, 1907: 78).

Objectivity is universality. Yet, how can anyone claim to have universal knowledge in an area that is as divisive as religions in their diversity? The second part of this essay dealt with relativism and knowledge, and it concluded that if the university is to seek the truth through knowledge, it

must then seek objectivity. At this junction, it is necessary to understand the subject matter of religion not as a part of Comparative Religious Studies, Anthropology or Philosophy of Religion but rather the study of God. For Newman, theology 'cannot be omitted without great prejudice to the teaching of the rest' of sciences (Newman, 1907: 98).

The word *theology* has classical Greek origins, but it was taken up in both Greek and Latin forms by Christian authors, and it is the history of the term in Christian contexts, particularly in the Latin West, that lies behind most contemporary usage. One could wonder if the ethnocentrism of this science could have granted it the universality sought by knowledge in the University. But the term can now be used to speak of reasoned discourse within and about a variety of different religious traditions.

This debate reached its height in the late nineteenth century, between Charles Eliot and James McCosh at Harvard University. Eliot specifically encouraged the study of religion over that of theology, as it was the only way for him to avoid 'the odium of sectarian partiality' (in Shoemaker, 2008: 426). To his categorisation of universities as denominational or non-denominational, McCosh replied that universities were rather religious or irreligious and he wished to 'inculcate religion without interfering with anyone's conscience' (McCosh, 1886: 8). Today, it is accepted that Eliot's perspective was 'ultimately triumphant in the American academy' (Shoemaker, 2008: 429). Newman brings a solution to this quarrel. Instead of division, he believes the study of theology truly brings unity and tolerance. He argues that the man who is to have 'his opinions without toleration for his neighbour's (...) will soon have all things altogether to himself, and no one to share them with him' (Newman, 1907: 22). Academics come together, 'coalitions and comprehensions for an object, have their life in the prosecution of that object, and cease to have any meaning as soon as that object is compromised or

disparaged' (Newman, 1907: 23). 'A number of persons come forward (...) with the one object of advancing universal knowledge, much we may allow them to sacrifice – ambition, reputation, leisure, comfort, gold; one thing they may not sacrifice – knowledge itself' (Newman, 1907: 23-24). Thus, all put aside their personal interest in the search for truth and theology becomes a place for ecumenism and tolerance within the University.

Finally, this essay deals with the practical aspects of the teaching of religion in a university, conditional to its commitment of always seeking the objective truth.

Since the early nineteenth century, various different approaches have emerged in the West to theology as an academic discipline. Much of the debate concerning theology's place in the university or within a general higher education curriculum centres on whether theology's methods are appropriately theoretical and – broadly speaking – scientific or, on the other hand, whether theology requires a pre-commitment of faith by its practitioners, and whether such a commitment conflicts with academic freedom (D'Costa, 2005). There it becomes necessary for the university to guarantee the commitment to seek the truth. Newman is quite aware of this peril, and seeks to avoid through a truly *liberal education*. In a 'pure and clear atmosphere of thought' (Newman, 1907: 101), the University must seek to form in its student 'a habit of mind (...) of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom' (Newman, 1907: 101). This is what Newman refers to as the 'philosophical habit' (Newman, 1907: 102), which is to be understood in its original meaning as the true love of knowledge in itself and for its own sake. Thus the university must strive always not to be the place of partisan ideology and worldly passions, but rather, it must, through its students, tutors, and professors, always seek this universal knowledge. Finally, it must be stressed that seeking objectivity is

not only a challenge for theology. All sciences are subject to theories and positions. The key is always to keep the truth as the objective, and not to forget the importance of virtue in its attainment.

In the now famous Regensburg Address, Benedict XVI appeals to university scholars everywhere not to truncate their definition of reason by confining all knowledge to the material, the empirical, and the readily quantifiable. Human reason, which derives from God's, the *logos*, is capable of reaching greater heights. He does not argue that all faculties should submit to the declarations of the theologians; rather, he states unequivocally that theology and philosophy should not be excluded from the essential human dialogue about truth, or be dismissed as irrelevant (Benedict XVI, 2006).

Conclusion

This essay argues that the modern university can learn from Newman's ideas in three main respects. Firstly, it must seek unity among the diversity of its disciplines by always bearing the *human context* in mind, which implies that university education must also foster virtue among students and academics. Secondly, it is crucial that the goal of any study be the truth, which allows for diversity of opinion so long as the truth is not replaced by something else as the objective. Finally, theology, being the science that studies God – the origin of everything, and, by extension, of the objects of all sciences – must have a place in university curricula. Ultimately, an honest quest for the truth, which requires virtue, a desire to know for the sake of knowledge, and the recognition of theology as a fundamental part of knowledge, are ideas Newman can offer to solve some of the problems of the modern university.

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