

Newman's The Idea of a University and Engineering Programs in Today's Universities

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John Henry Cardinal Newman is clear that theology is as valid a field of study in the university as other subjects, such as, pertinent to the purposes of this annual pro-life science and technology symposium, engineering in any of its forms (biomedical, civil, electrical, mechanical, etc.). Newman argued the matter well in The Idea of a University, a series of discourses from 1852-1858. The idea that all subjects are worthy to be studied at the university level is—or should be—axiomatic. After all, if one had an educational institution that specialized only in one aspect of human knowledge, the technical, one has a business school, a community college, or a technical school. If one has a university, then one must cover a wide range of subjects, advancing from the purely technical to the philosophical.

However, the American academy has retreated from the comprehensive principles that Newman identified as hallmarks of university education, and I believe this can be attributed to two forces. First, ignorance about theological values continues to play a role in the formation of American academic attitudes. American students' ignorance of religious concepts, terms, and values has frustrated professors who either break from their regular andragogy to fill in the gaps of their students' common knowledge (a practice which may waste valuable classroom time) or surrender altogether to the slide to mediocrity which some commentators claim is a hallmark of American education. I am thinking primarily of E. D. Hirsch, whose Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1987), and Harold Bloom, whose The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages (1994), document the erosion of common knowledge.¹ These works not only contain (in Hirsch's case) the ubiquitous list of names, numbers, and concepts that every American should know, but also function as abbreviated encyclopedias of items in our cultural heritage that every educated person should recognize if not understand thoroughly.

This year has seen two more authors concerned about the loss of common knowledge. Clive James, whose Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts follows the Bloom-Hirsch approach, attempts to recollect significant persons and their ideas in recent history. (Whether the recollection occurs, however, is questionable; the 851 pages of text in academic diction would pose a stumbling block for an American reading public more familiar, based on the Fog Index, with newspapers and broadcasts written at the high school level or lower.) The second 2007 author concerned about the religious mediocrity and ignorance of Americans is Stephen Prothero, whose Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't, although addressed primarily to a Protestant audience, not only extends the clever titling convention of Hirsch's earlier work but also serves the didactic effort to

¹ Sol Stern's commentary on the ineffectiveness of public schools in New York City and the effectiveness of voucher schools in Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice (2003) is especially interesting, particularly those pages dealing with common knowledge matters and the purposes of education (26ff and 120).

educate Americans about biblical, church, and non-Western religious knowledge.

The second force aggravating the situation even further is the American academy's reluctance to discuss religious topics or terminology in the education of our students because of a misperception that such instruction violates constitutional prohibitions against the establishment of religion. I trust that no one will challenge the domain of common knowledge here since the media frequently contains accounts of those groups hostile to Christianity who try to force their sectarian dogmas on the majority of believing Americans.

I hold that the nineteenth-century Newman can say much to us in the twenty-first century regarding the vital purposes of the university not only in encouraging humanities knowledge, but also in strengthening the specialized, often scientific focus of many university programs. Moreover, I believe that Newman's framework for university education, although formulated with a Roman Catholic institution in mind, bears sufficient universal principles so that they can be implemented without creating undue tension between secular and religious interests. Admittedly, proceeding in such a way that religious values will not be perceived as trampling dominantly secular activities in the American academy will be a difficult task. This is especially true since the guardians of politically-correct thinking (the formerly supremely powerful traditional media and so-called "liberal" special interest groups) are ready to attack anything that will challenge the monopoly that currently transfixes academia. However, I will suggest several ways that such interaction can be accomplished without controversy.

If the general tenor of the above statements is granted, then I must begin with an examination of two categories found in Newman's work: the idea of "utility" and the idea of "liberal studies." Newman speaks expansively of "liberal education" and "liberal studies," and in some important passages he distinguishes liberal education from its etymological counterpart dating from antiquity. Newman is not merely philosophical about liberal education; he emphasizes the practical purpose of education throughout The Idea of a University. In the initial pages he asserts, "I am concerned with questions, not simply of immutable truth, but of practice and expedience" (8). He considers whether university teaching has "utility" (99). The exploration of this question occurs after pages devoted to five statements for which I think Newman is most noted, including, first, his famous syllogism (a university teaches all knowledge; theology is a branch of knowledge; therefore, a university should teach theology [19-20]). The second statement declares 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 a mental abstraction" (50). The third simply claims that "knowledge also is power" (53). The fourth asserts that "to withdraw Theology from the public schools is to impair the completeness and to invalidate the trustworthiness of all that is actually taught in them" (69). The fifth statement, what I think is perhaps the most important statement to be found in The Idea of a University, argues, "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" (73).

Moreover, Newman professes that the ability to engage with other subjects, especially those categorized as the humanities, has eminent utility: "If his reading is confined simply to one subject, [...] certainly it has a tendency to contract his mind" (100).² The various subjects "learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other" (101). Most importantly, "A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom" (101).

I briefly mentioned the etymological counterpart of the term "liberal," and this is the appropriate place to delve further into the significant etymology that Newman considers. Liberal education is clearly opposed to servile work. Newman queries, "What is really meant by the word ['liberal']? Now, first, in its grammatical sense it is opposed to *servile*; and by 'servile work' is understood, as our catechisms inform us, bodily labour, mechanical employment, and the like, in which the mind has little or no part" (106; italics in original). He argues that the sixteenth- and early seventeenth century philosophy of Francis Bacon radically redirected humanity's attention to that which is more concerned with what in the previous quote is "bodily labour, mechanical employment, and the like." To his credit, Newman does not call such redirection worthless: "the Baconian Philosophy, by using its physical sciences in the service of man, does thereby transfer them from the order of Liberal Pursuits to, I do not say the inferior, but the distinct class of the Useful" (109). Newman's argument against Bacon is based on an ancient principle, first recorded by Aristotle, he who "while the world lasts [...] is the oracle of nature and of truth" (109). Aristotle's distinction between that which is "useful" and that which is "liberal" is the basis for Newman's idea of what university education should be. Newman quotes Aristotle thus: "'Of possessions,' he says, 'those rather are useful, which bear fruit; those *liberal, which tend to enjoyment*. By fruitful, I mean, which yield revenue; by enjoyable, where *nothing accrues of consequence beyond the using*" (109; italics in original).³

² I trust that the modern twenty-first century audience would not make much of Newman's use of sexist language, understanding that at the time of writing The Idea of a University the use of the male pronouns was meant to be as inclusive as our typographically longer usage of "he or she" or "his or her." Also, since some writers use only the feminine pronouns today, we should accord Newman the same respect as we would those authors using obviously sexist language to make their political point.

³ A twentieth-century translation of Aristotle's Rhetoric by W. Rhys Roberts renders the Greek in similar language, but substitutes "gentlemanly kinds" for "liberal": "The useful kinds [of property] are those that are productive, the gentlemanly kinds are those that provide enjoyment. By 'productive' I mean those from which we get our income; by 'enjoyable', those from which we get nothing worth mentioning except the use of them" (39). Perhaps Roberts was trying to avoid the politicization that the term "liberal" had undergone since the nineteenth century, which, unfortunately, distances it from the etymological sense that Newman had in mind as well as makes the translation the target

This dichotomy between useful and liberal permeates The Idea of a University. Shortly after the initial discussion of Aristotle's division of terms, Newman says that there "are two methods of education; the end of the one is to be philosophical, of the other to be mechanical; the one rises towards general ideas, the other is exhausted upon what is particular and external" (112). Newman attacks the overemphasis on the part of "some great men" on the utility in education about forty pages later:

[T]hey insist that Education should be confined to some particular and narrow end, and should issue in some definite work, which can be weighed and measured. They argue as if every thing, as well as every person, had its price; and that where there has been a great outlay, they have a right to expect a return in kind. This they call making Education and Instruction "useful," and "Utility" becomes their watchword. (153)

Newman says that "This question [...] has been keenly debated in the present age" (153), and it is no less debated in the twenty-first century world of legislative questioning of subsidies to university education versus community college funding, assessment initiatives which strive to show that community colleges and universities are actually teaching what they are supposed to teach, and public opposition to an academic elite which is stridently liberal in the political sense and which offends the conservative sensibilities of the vast majority of Americans.

Newman answers the charge that a university education is not eminently useful, offering the following stipulative definition:

I say, let us take "useful" to mean, not what is simply good, but what *tends* to good, or is the *instrument* of good; and in this sense also, Gentlemen, I will show you how a liberal education is truly and fully a useful, though it be not a professional, education. (163-4; italics in original)

In fact, Newman's claim that university education is "useful" reaches epideictic:

[A] University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspirations, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. (177-8)

Finally, some discussion must be made on commentary on the useful that obtains in that aspect of humanities instruction which is most reviled as useless: literature. The following instances of the usefulness of the humanities, especially literature, are all contained within Discourse IX of The Idea of the University, titled

of feminist assault.

"Duties of the Church Towards Knowledge." Newman neatly reduces all human knowledge to three areas:

There are three great subjects on which Human Reason employs itself:--God, Nature, and Man: and theology being put aside in the present argument, the physical and social worlds remain. These, when respectively subjected to Human Reason, form two books: the book of nature is called Science, the book of man is called Literature. (219)

This division is enhanced further by a simple proportion: "Literature stands related to Man as Science stands to Nature; it is his history" (227). I find what Newman says next in this discourse fascinating, for it shows how liberal and tolerant Catholic universities (and I think especially how liberal and tolerant Jesuit universities) have been and continue to be towards literature which may not be as pure as some would want it to be. Since "on the whole, all Literatures are one; they are the voices of the natural man" (228), Newman says that "It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless Literature of sinful man" (229). As a final charge against those who would bowdlerize humanity's literature, Newman commands, "Put up with it, as it is, or do not pretend to cultivate it; take things as they are, not as you could wish them" (232). Of course, twenty-first century literature consists not only of the printed word, but also of sexually-explicit films and rap lyrics which record events in the life of sinful humanity, and I doubt whether the efforts of certain myopic evangelical Christians or Islamic fundamentalists to censor such material would find support in Newman's thinking.

How does one reorient twenty-first century education so that Newman's ideas about what constitutes university education can be implemented without unduly disturbing the secular elements in society?

I propose an initial strategy: ignore those secular elements. Some universities may be hampered by funding problems that community colleges and public universities don't have. Citizens are right in questioning whether their tax dollars shoveled to community colleges and universities are not just put to use, but put to effective use. Religious colleges and universities would do well to continue to seek grants from the private sector, from graduates who have succeeded in the business world, and from appreciative alumni to fund their existence. That means, of course, that religious colleges and universities should regard themselves as the standard bearers of an ancient educational tradition: to uphold the past by securing the knowledge of humanity, to reflect on how this knowledge interacts with the present condition of humanity, and to apply the combined investigations of past and present to improve humanity's future. If theology is one of those subjects necessary to link mankind's past and future, then so be it. Secularists who complain can be ignored, for those who work in religious colleges and universities have the important task of continuing to research those subjects which have perennial value for humanity, among them the theological.

Second, the diametric of the preceding, engage the secular. If the secular world is doing something immoral, then point out its error. I appropriate Pope John Paul II's

admonition—the preceding term, I think, which best summarizes his entire Crossing the Threshold of Hope (1994)—that we should not be afraid to confront secular society. It takes courage to tell someone that he or she is engaging in an immoral bioengineering practice when he or she is killing embryos for the sake of purported stem cell research, no matter what the law or administrative regulation says. (Stamina and patience may be required more than courage for the often less controversial clarification that embryonic stem cell research is a moral violation while adult stem cell research is not, unless stem cell advocates are intransigent and willfully maintain their ignorance of this crucial distinction because they want tax funding for their immoral purposes.) It takes courage to tell someone that he or she is engaging in an immoral civil engineering practice when he or she collaborates in the construction or (for electrical engineers) the outfitting of an abortion clinic. The necessity of pointing out error is the great challenge of this century; fortunately, intellectual arguments which can assist the unveiling of error, written in the nineteenth century, are available to inspire us to be bold in the twenty-first.

Third, understand how secular colleges and universities operate. If controversial issues are investigated, they are done so irrespective of a moral base such as that which firmly grounds Catholic thinking and, to a lesser degree, mainstream Protestant philosophy. (Judaism, whose moral base spans three more millennia than that of Christianity, operates on some different moral principles since Judaism departed from patristic Christianity over moral principles in scriptures which it could not uphold.) For example, when abortion is discussed in the community college or secular university classroom, the instructor must be open to both sides of the issue, must be respectful of diverse views on the issue, and must defer to students regarding the resolution of the issue. The exploration of the issue stops there, for no instructor at a community college or secular university would dare to suggest that such a controversial issue like abortion can be adjudicated in favor of one camp. Religious colleges and universities engage in the same methodology: understanding the views of both sides and arguing the positions thoroughly. However, these religious colleges and universities transcend the myopic view of the secular institutions by claiming what many Americans find difficult: that the moral "problem" of abortion can be resolved given the scriptural evidence and living tradition of Judaism's five and Christianity's two millennia of solid teaching and practice.

By now Americans should be extremely tired of politically-correct thinkers in the academy, those who seem to be "fair" and "balanced" when discussing controversial views, but who lack the courage to decide which side of such an issue is right or wrong.

The multitude of denominations within Protestantism testifies to the divergent thinking that often operates within Protestant colleges and universities. Similarly, I realize that many Catholics are more accurately American Catholics, that is, people who may identify themselves as members of the Catholic Church only culturally, or those who are "C and E" Catholics, or those who, for whatever reason, can't accept calls to study, teachings, or pronouncements that come out of Rome—as though what comes out of Rome is not the same as that which comes out of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, DC, or which comes out of any diocese,

or that which comes out of their own parish church. Such lukewarm persons must be invited to join in the Judeo-Christian conversation that has gone on for five millennia. America, with its mere two hundred years, has need of such intellectual stimulation. Newman's comments on the purposes of university education can help to move the stagnant world of the academy mired in its life-denying amorality.

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