



## John Henry Newman: *The Idea of a University*

(1875)

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Domain: Education. Genre: Essays/ Lectures (any). Country: England.

*The Idea of a University* by John Henry Newman is a collection of two books, derived from a variety of source materials, that are famous for their interrogation of three primary themes pertaining to university life: 1) the nature of knowledge; 2) the role of religious belief in higher education; and 3) a defense of liberal education for university students (Tierney, 2016). The date of publication for *The Idea* is frequently listed as 1852, the year in which Newman first presented five lectures to a Dublin audience from 10 May to 7 June (McMannus, 1994). Those lectures, along with five others that were never publicly read, were immediately published under the title *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education: Addressed to the Catholics of Dublin*. In total, ten discourses, along with a preface, constitute the first book of Newman's *Idea*.

The second book of *The Idea of a University*, which largely expands on the concepts and themes of the first book, is attributed to ten occasional writings that Newman completed for university audiences as the inaugural rector of the Catholic University of Ireland (which is today referred to as University College, Dublin). Once Newman had an opportunity to edit these occasional pieces, they were bound in a volume entitled "Lectures and Essays on University Subjects" and published in 1859. Both books were integrated in a single volume in 1873, and the complete text of *The Idea* was continuously reprinted in a series of editions through Newman's death on 11 August 1890. Due to the scattered provenances of the individual lectures and writings that make up *The Idea*, some readers have been frustrated by its contradictions and seeming lack of coherency (Barr, 2015). However, the text also sheds considerable light on the evolution of Newman's thoughts, from the 1850s to the 1880s, regarding the relationship of religious life to university research and teaching. It also reflects the paradoxical nature of Newman's own life. He was a well-known conservative religious leader who championed the revival of Catholic liturgical rituals that had been discarded during the English Reformation, yet he believed in liberal scientific inquiry free from suppression or censorship. He was also a Catholic priest and cardinal who embraced a life of seclusion and introspection, yet he was a willing and skilled orator. *The Idea of a University* embraces these tensions, and, in fact, makes a compelling and indelible argument — namely that the university is a valuable institution allowing individuals to question dogma, build on previous knowledge, and make sense of the paradoxes between faith and reason.

### Historical and Cultural Context

Born on 21 February 1801 in London, England to a father whose career was in the banking industry and a mother descended from Huguenot refugees, John Henry Newman was already introduced to the works of philosophers like David Hume and Thomas Paine by the time he converted to Anglicanism at the age of fifteen.

One year later, in 1817, Newman enrolled at Trinity College, Oxford, where he struggled with examinations and graduated with a Bachelor's degree "under the line". Oriel College offered the young Anglican a fellowship in 1822 and an opportunity to study in a more liberal theological setting than he had previously experienced. Over the next two decades, Newman became entrenched in Oxford life as a Chaplain of Oriel, Vicar of the University Church, and editor of the *British Critic*. He used his platform to openly question the doctrinaire beliefs of many of his evangelical peers, arguing that intellectual analysis, combined with Thomas Aquinas's depiction of the conscience, should take precedence over papal dogma. With each new published theological tract, Newman's association with the Anglican church became increasingly tenuous. Most distressingly (to his peers), Newman began to openly question if the true ecclesiological identity of the Anglican Church was Catholic, rather than Protestant, in orientation. In 1842, Newman left Oxford to lead a semi-monastic life in the nearby town of Littlemore. By 1845, he had converted to the Roman Catholic faith, and in October 1846 Newman was ordained as a priest in Rome.

Anti-Catholic sentiment was still evident in mid-nineteenth century England, and the effects were felt in neighboring Ireland. Similar to other colonial relationships, England had deprived Ireland's predominantly Catholic population of educational opportunities ever since its conquest of the island in 1691. In fact, any pupil admitted to Trinity College in Dublin was required to convert to Protestantism. Newman's conversion to Catholicism, however, roughly coincided with the events leading to the Great Irish Potato Famine from 1845 to 1849, in which approximately one million Irish died and between one and a half to two million emigrated to other countries. As a result, England was willing to entertain a major policy change that would allow for the establishment of three secular institutions in Ireland, including a Catholic university, in hopes of alleviating Ireland's stark poverty and crippled labor market.

In 1854, Newman was invited to not only become the first rector of the newly-established Catholic University of Ireland, but also to envision the creation and development of Catholic higher education. Most Catholic clergy, like Paul Cullen, then Archbishop of Northern Ireland, hoped Newman would outline a vision of a university that would reinforce Catholic beliefs while training young Irish men in real-world skills that would directly lead to jobs and an emergent middle class. Newman, however, was already disposed to think more deeply about the multifaceted interactions between religion and research. Moreover, as he composed the lectures that would form the basis for *The Idea of a University*, his ideas about teaching within the university setting would not be solely focused on job skills.

## **Narrative Themes**

As mentioned at the outset of this article, three themes in *The Idea of a University* have had a lasting and profound impact on higher education. These themes involve 1) the nature of knowledge; 2) the role of religious belief in higher education; and 3) a defense of liberal education for university students.

First, Newman (1852) embraced an inclusive and holistic view of knowledge, arguing in Discourse Two of the first book that "the very name of University is inconsistent with restrictions of any kind" (p. 22). Directing his appeal to a presumably skeptical Dublin Irish Catholic audience that, nonetheless, had been historically excluded from education, Newman noted that "if certain branches of knowledge were excluded, those students of course would be excluded also, who desired to pursue them" (p. 23). Newman's view of the nature of knowledge was not solely influenced by England's historical exclusion of Catholic students, but it also revealed a desire to have different "branches of knowledge" — such as religious studies and various areas of science — inform each other's work, rather than existing in silos. Additionally, Newman felt that argumentation was vital to the lifeblood of a university. He found doctrinaire thought that dutifully passed knowledge down from generation to generation objectionable to the pursuit of "Truth" and hoped that universities would instead encourage reasoned debate. In Discourse Eight of book two, Newman asserted that "to erect a University ... [it] is pledged to admit, without fear, without prejudice, without compromise, all comers, if they come in the name of Truth; to adjust

views, and experiences, and habits of mind the most independent and dissimilar” (p. 303).

Second, Newman considered the role of religious belief in higher education at considerable length. Whereas many might consider the combination of science and religion to create the conditions for epistemological incoherence, Newman felt that the two, by necessity, needed to be explored and extended in tandem for human progress to transpire. In the conclusion of the eighth discourse of book two, entitled “Christianity and Scientific Investigation,” Newman stated the following:

What I would urge upon every one, whatever may be his particular line of research — what I would urge upon men of Science in their thoughts of Theology, — what I would venture to recommend to theologians, when their attention is drawn to the subject of scientific investigations — is a great and firm belief in the sovereignty of Truth. (p. 316)

This belief in Truth as an attainable and aspirational goal for university faculty and students marks Newman as something of an early positivist. Indeed, much of his writing counsels patience in the search for Truth, acknowledging the necessity for trial and error in university research. From the same discourse, in fact, Newman advises that “a Science seems making no progress, but to abound in failures, yet imperceptibly all the time it is advancing, and it is of course a gain to truth even to have learned what is not true, if nothing more” (p. 317).

Third, Newman’s writings on education for university students are notable for their repudiation of the utilitarianism of Locke (1700) and Mill (1859), who argued that a primary objective of educational institutions should be the development of marketable skills in service of broader economic goals. In *The Idea of a University*, Newman shows considerable (and consistent) disdain for educational outcomes “which can be weighed and measured”, contending that the purpose of education needed to be conceived more broadly than student evaluation and specialization within a given discipline. While Newman was not necessarily against training for a vocational career, he wanted the university curriculum to encourage study in multiple fields so that students and scholars alike could identify connections and engage humanity’s most difficult philosophical questions, social issues, and scientific problems. Newman may have been disappointed to see the contemporary university, with its discrete colleges of business, education, engineering, fine arts, law, and the like — and the corresponding lack of communication between each of them. In Discourse Five in the first book, entitled “Knowledge Its Own End,” Newman expressed the following belief:

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. This I conceive to be the advantage of a seat of universal learning ... 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. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other (p. 76).

In short, Newman makes a twofold argument concerning the nature of education for students. He passionately defends a liberal education that prizes the development of individual intellect over institutional measurement and narrowly-defined skill development. He also believes in the potential of the university to bring together diverse perspectives and areas of expertise in service of greater understanding.

## Critical Reception

When they were first composed, both books of *The Idea of a University* were explicitly addressed to members of the Catholic church who were predominantly Irish. Moreover, the tone of Newman's writing might be distasteful to secularists who are uncomfortable with his idiosyncratic integration of religion with science. And while it is always perilous to critique the writing of previous generations by the accepted standards of the present, Newman's consistent use of masculine pronouns betrays an attitude that, for all its impassioned defense of diverse thought and experiences, implicitly excludes women from his vision of university life.

And yet, Newman's elegant prose, grand arguments, and meticulous logic in *The Idea of a University* seemingly maintain great resonance with readers well into the twenty-first century. Barr (2015), in fact, has estimated that, at a minimum, Newman's *Idea* exists in at least nineteen versions, with translations in a variety of European languages, including French, German, Italian, and Spanish. Numerous editions of the text have also been published in recent years by scholarly publishers, including Notre Dame and Oxford, as well as religious and secular presses.

Writers and scholars throughout the twentieth century have been drawn to ideas from *The Idea of a University* and made use of them in their work. One finds echoes of Newman in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when Stephen Dedalus protests the orthodox lessons and vocational emphasis of his professors (Muller, 1996; Pribek, 2004). Saïd's (1991) defense of argumentation and debate under the provision of academic freedom can be viewed as an extension of Newman's Idea. Both Joyce and Saïd, among other intellectuals, deeply respected Newman's prose.

Newman's depiction of university life and its potential for transformative learning has long been praised by educational administrators, policymakers, and scholars, especially in Australia and the United Kingdom. Today, researchers and practitioners frequently refer to Newman in criticisms of increased neoliberalism and corporatization in higher education, arguing in favor of a more holistic vision for the contemporary university (Blass, 2001; Craig et al., 1999; Deboick, 2010; Thornton, 2004). Teachers interested in promoting "whole-person" education, including aesthetic appreciation and critical thinking skills, also regularly cite Newman and engage with his conceptualization of "liberal education" (Christie, 2011; Gruenwald, 2011; McAllister, 2015; Sullivan 2015).

As the "Works Cited" section at the end of this article demonstrates, a healthy degree of criticism continues to analyze and dissect John Henry Newman's ideas, their potential shortcomings, and their significance for the contemporary university (Dunne, 2006; McIntyre, 2009). In 1996, a Yale University Press edition of *The Idea of a University* included five essays by prominent scholars detailing the cultural *milieu* around Newman in the 1850s, Newman's influence on post-World-War-II higher education, and Newman's continued relevance in the wake of increased secularization, multiculturalism, and digitization in higher education (Castro-Klarén, 1996; Garland, 1996; Landow, 1996; Marsden, 1996; Turner, 1996). Historical scholarship on Newman's life and influences also continues to be published (Cornwell, 2010; Ker, 2009). Since its publication, scholars have long utilized Newman's *Idea of a University* as a starting point for imagining and conceptualizing contemporary reforms of higher education, and the text may serve as inspiration decades into the future.

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