

John Henry Newman, Dublin, and Notre Dame

Professor Kevin Whelan

Professor Emeritus Mary Katherine Tillman

John Henry Newman (1801-1890), son of a London banker, was educated at Oxford and ordained an Anglican clergyman. This shy, sensitive man remained at Oxford from 1816 to 1845. He was leader of the Oxford Movement, established to revitalise a sluggish English Anglicanism. His two most famous works are *The Idea of a University* and *Apologia pro Vita Sua* [A Defence of My Life] in 1864 – an account of his life as an Anglican until 1845, the reasons for his conversion to Catholicism in 1845, his ordination as a Catholic priest in Rome in 1847 and his lucid defence of his intellectual integrity. Among his other works were the well-known hymn 'Lead Kindly Light' and *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865), a poetic meditation on old age later brilliantly set to music by Elgar in 1900. He was elevated to cardinal in 1879 and canonised in 2019.

Newman belonged to the British reaction to the enlightened rationalism of the French Revolution. He sought to reconnect with the older roots of European thought and its heritage in religion, art and architecture, as opposed to the corrosive effects of excessive rationalism: 'Wonder is not religion or we should be worshipping railroads'. He wanted to reconnect England with the Greek virtues much more than the Roman ones – the practical, getting and spending imperial values, which had corrupted the splendour of the early Republic, and that now hung like the sword of Damocles over England as a warning to the materialist rapacity and acquisitiveness of the British Empire. Newman wanted his Catholic University in Dublin to be the intellectual center of the Catholic English-speaking world, which was growing rapidly in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and the anglophone world that was established on the coat-tails of the British Empire, and in which the Irish emigrants were a core component. At the time of the American Revolution, Catholicism was an exotic fringe religion with no indigenous roots that had snuck up from Mexico (San Francisco, San Diego, San Jose) or sank down from French-speaking Quebec. Prior to the Great Famine of the 1840s, Catholics were a curiosity in America, numbering about half a million. There was only one Catholic chapel in New York City in 1800 but twelve new chapels were added in the 1840s, another ten in the 1850s and by 1860, one in four of New Yorkers was Irish-born. By 1900, Catholicism had become the biggest single religion in the USA, at 12% of which half were Irish or of Irish descent. It was the Irish that injected Catholicism into the American mainstream. Irish bishops took over from the earlier dominance of French and German bishops, who favoured ethnic congregations. By 1880, Irish bishops controlled the major dioceses of New

York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, St Louis, Chicago and Baltimore.¹ At Notre Dame, sixteen of our seventeen Presidents have been Irish or Irish-American. When it was founded in 1842, the idea (as the name suggests) was to cater to francophones from Quebec but the Irish tsunami of emigrants after the Famine dyed Notre Dame indelibly green. While Notre Dame identified as Irish, its Catholic character is much more embedded in the identity of the university.

Newman founded the Catholic University in Dublin in 1852 and was its Rector from 1854 to 1858. His superb series of lectures in 1852 set out the principles by which a Catholic University should be governed became the *Idea of a University*. This was first published in Dublin in 1852 as *Discourses on the scope and nature of university education addressed to the Catholics of Dublin*. In 1873, Newman added the crucial second part of his book, actually longer than the *Discourses*. Included now were 'University Subjects discussed in Occasional Lectures and Essays'. The title was changed to *The Idea of a University defined and illustrated*.

It is not only the professors that teach in Newman's university, but the students too; the residential system plays a crucial role for Newman, as he believed that students should and did learn from one another. He argued that a university should not just be an academy (dedicated solely to research) or a seminary (devoted to technical training). The university should meld theology and philosophy into its curriculum, and educate the whole person. It should teach both knowledge and wisdom (applied knowledge), and not just be the smooth purveyor of practical or professional training for mercenary purposes:

The man who has learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyse, who has refined his taste and formed his judgement and sharpened his mental vision will be ... placed in that state of intellect in which he can take up any one of the sciences or the callings I have referred to or any other, with an ease, a grace, a versatility and a success, to which another is a stranger.

Newman commissioned the University Church as a signature building to symbolise 'the great principle of the University, the indissoluble union of philosophy with religion'. He worked on the design with his Professor of Fine Arts, John Hungerford Pollen. When the church opened on 1 May 1856, Newman was pleased: 'The church is the most beautiful one in the three

¹ The Irish also largely replaced Scots bishops in Canada, Portuguese and French in India, English Benedictines in Australia, French Marists in New Zealand, and even tried to supplant native-born Scottish bishops in Scotland.

Kingdoms': it is one of the few Greek-inspired Catholic churches at a time when Catholicism was besotted with Roman models.