

John Henry Newman and the Modern University

The context of this article was the appointment of Professor Roberts to the John Henry Newman Chair at Newman University College, Birmingham in the academic year 2008–09.

In 2008, Newman University College in Birmingham decided to celebrate its fortieth anniversary in a very unusual way: not with a plaque or even a party but by creating a very unusual job. The brief for the John Henry Newman Chair was as wide-ranging as it is unorthodox. It involves helping to develop research in the arts and humanities, to work with local and national partners on educational projects and – here’s where the man himself really enters the equation – to contribute to public debate about higher education in the context of Newman’s own thinking, most famously expressed in the lecture series first published in 1852 *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*. In the world of modern universities, awash with targets, PR speak and bureaucracy, nothing could be more timely. After many years of running a large department in a huge urban university, I accepted the offer to become the first John Henry Newman Professor with a mixture of pride, humility, pleasure and relief.

Why is *The Idea of a University* such an important text for our times? Largely because it gives us the best definitions of a term many of us treasure, and which is in danger of falling into disrepute. When Newman defined ‘liberal education’ he set out a network of ideas about people, knowledge and intellectual communities that are increasingly under threat as more universities resemble, in his ringing words, foundries, mints and treadmills. Not for Newman a system in which universities are in a state of constant paranoia about the whims of government; only if they are configured as self-governing communities can they fulfil their essential purpose of being a genuine ‘Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one’. In his fine 1996 Yale edition of *The Idea of a University*, Frank M. Turner throws down the gauntlet for Vice Chancellors who think they can ignore this canonical work: ‘At their peril those concerned with modern university life – students, faculty, trustees, alumni and parents – may ignore Newman’s volume, but if they read it and think seriously about it, whether in agreement or disagreement, they cannot remain indifferent to what he wrote – unless they are fundamentally indifferent to higher education to begin with.’

We shouldn’t infer that reading Newman is easy for the modern student or Vice Chancellor. Turner’s a fine gauntlet to throw down when his edition includes five modern scholarly essays detailing all the excuses there are for remaining indifferent to Newman. ‘Virtually every circumstance surrounding the conception, the character and the contents of *The Idea of a University*,’ Turner writes in one of them, ‘apparently works against its ongoing claims to relevance.’ It’s easy – correct, facile – to show why. At the time Newman was an Oxonian exiled to Dublin and among the questions that did not concern him were public funding, government regulation, assessment, research, female students, careers advice, cultural relativism, widening participation, the internet, not to mention the possibility that compulsory theology might not be the best way to up your UCAS applications or top the league table for student satisfaction. Even in the 1850s, Turner points out, Newman was globally speaking ‘in an academic time warp’, since in 1862 the Morrill Act would pave the way for non-religious, research-based US universities such as John Hopkins and Cornell.

Even the table of contents for *The Idea of a University* may be enough to persuade secular readers that taking up Turner’s gauntlet and actually reading the book will not do much for their understanding of universities today. Of its nine chapters or ‘discourses’, one defines theology as a branch of knowledge, another two the relation between theology and broader knowledge, and a further two the relation between knowledge and religious belief and institutions – not, on the face of it, the stuff of mission statements for any educational establishment except a seminary.

Turner’s gauntlet lies there all the same. Canonical texts are by definition not slaves to their contexts, and to object that Newman couldn’t imagine the internet or junior colleges is no better than accusing Shakespeare of being an incompetent aviator. *The Idea of a University* has a stubborn core of interest for today’s ‘students, faculty, trustees, alumni and parents’ and it is largely to be found in Discourses 5 and 6 (‘Knowledge Its Own End’ and ‘Knowledge in Relation to Learning’). For indifference to the questions they raise there really is no excuse.

To take one example among many, the opening of Discourse 5 marks the point where Newman moves from ‘Studies’ to ‘Students’, from the curriculum to its benefit for individuals. Although Newman’s idea of the curriculum has little to do with ours, the fact that he raises it as a primary concern for universities and their students presents a challenge since the student, not the subject, is the explicit focus of today’s dominant discourse of higher education. Students are choosers in a market and through individual development portfolios and checklists of skills we make them, systematically, the objects of their own attention. With the exception of professionally accredited courses we try to give them what we think they want or can cope with, in whatever combinations we can manage. It is harder than ever before to design a course around the principles of a subject and to fail students because they can’t prove they understand them. In learning outcomes, mere ‘knowledge’ is a dirty word; among criteria for a bare pass, a ‘fragmentary’ grasp of the subject will do.

It follows that university mission statements rarely mention the idea of the curriculum except to signify that desirable quality, up-to-dateness. An unintentionally hilarious example is drawn from the website of an institution that is 'striving to become a world-class regional university' by having a curriculum 'refreshed by running streams of insights, expertise and creativity', qualities that didn't extend to the drafting of its mission statement. Instead, there is a pervasive appeal to a 'whole person' composed of tolerant social attitudes and the desire to 'make a difference'.

Radically in the current circumstances, Discourse 5 of *The Idea of the University* argues both that the 'whole person' emerges through knowledge and that knowledge is modified in the process: 'the drift and meaning of a branch of knowledge varies with the company in which it is introduced to the student' - not an easy idea to square with any apparatus of common learning outcomes and criteria. It is no contradiction to say that knowledge is also 'an intellectual tradition ... independent of particular teachers', since it is there for any student to engage with and be guided by. The object is not, in the usual misunderstanding, to acquire knowledge 'for its own sake', but what Newman calls 'habits of mind', defined as 'freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom'.

If those habits stick, they can't be reduced to an 'accidental advantage ... which we can borrow for the occasion, carry about in our hand, and take to the market'; not just a set of skills with a price tag. Newman has in mind the far richer transformation of learning that makes it, for each and every student, 'an acquired illumination' and 'an inward endowment'. Those phrases remind us that he was above all else a religious thinker but they also invite comparison with the miserably impoverished, instrumental way in which universities often characterize a process that for every student should be made not just of skills, or compliance, or even tolerance. For if we are not to be fundamentally indifferent to higher education, we should learn again to conceive of it as Newman did: in the double sense of the term, a process of wonder.

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