

Thoughts about University after J. H. Newman

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Abstract: J. H. Newman announced the theology of tolerance a century before others did. He said: I do not think that everybody should be convinced or engaged as all depends on the will of the individual. Now I am going to pick out only one of his works: “The Idea of a University” and deal with it in details.

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“Academical system without
the personal influence of teachers
upon pupils is an arctic winter;
it will create an ice-bound,
petrified cast-iron University”

(J. H. Newman)

John Henry Newman was born in London in 1801 and died in 1890. On his epitaph the following can be read: “ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem” that is: “from obscurity and dimness to truth”. And really, during all his life his activity as theologian, a teacher and a writer shines like a comet and his career spans almost the whole 19th century looking for the truth. He says: We can find quietness only in peace, trust and

devotion; that is why every human being, even without thinking of religion, strives for having a home to create the only calmative for his human nature, and if he has not got one, he is unhappy (Newman, 1958, p. 278).

Pope Benedict XVI announced the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman on 19th September 2010.

Over two centuries passed since he was born. Now I would like to mention only some biographical data in connection with our topic – and mainly about his pedagogical work. At the beginning of his career he became a lecturer at Oriel College in Oxford. It is well-known that the teachers of Oxford University opposed to some ideas of the Anglican High Church at the end of the first one third of the 19th century. A reform movement was organized by the lectures to renew their Church. In the frame of this movement “Tracts for the Times” was written by Newman. And it was very popular with young people. Seeing that the state of public life remains unchanged and as a result of seriously studying theological literature Newman became converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845, then later he was ordained priest and Oratorian in Rome. From 1851 he was the Rector of the Catholic University in Dublin for a few years. Later he founded a congregational boys’ school of which he became the principal.

Though, it was two hundred years ago that Newman was the rector of a catholic university, still it is worth considering some of his thoughts, as his ideas might be valid even nowadays in this modern world. Namely, Newman consequently believed in the essence of progress. He said, if Christianity is a universal religion and suits not only a certain geographical place and certain period, but it meets all time and places, it is only possible if its relation to the surrounding world and its methods are changing. – That means it is always in progress (Dessain, 1976).

It is well-known how rich is the literature dealing with Newman. But now I am going to pick out only one of his works: “The Idea of a University” and deal with it in details. First I learnt about Newman and his works when I spent some time in Canada where I was invited by my fatherly friend Brian W. Taylor. Dr Taylor was a professor at Fredericton University in New Brunswick. His subject was the History of

Education. In 1996 participating in a conference in Pécs, organised by our university, he gave an excellent lecture about Newman and his activities. It was his influence that I started me on the way of discovering Newman. Newman's pedagogical activity is primarily practice-oriented rather than theoretical. In the first place he was a theologian and never created a system of education (as never did the Italian Don Bosco). He announced the theology of tolerance a century before others did. He said: I do not think that everybody should be convinced or engaged as all depends on the will of the individual (Newman, 1998, p. 65).

It is not the aim of this paper to deal with Newman's theology; still it is important to know that he basically followed St Augustine's conception but without one-sidedness. He always emphasized the complementary character of direct experience and conceptual knowledge following the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas (Kecskés, 1943, p. 623). According to Newman the system of liberal arts should be considered as the basis of university education as it is suitable for training educated people of morally high standard (Fatsar, 2003, p. 73).

Before starting to enter into details I would like to underline again that despite the fact that Newman's idea and experience as a rector were born in the frame of a catholic university two hundred years ago, some of his ideas, methods and activities might be considered or adopted by some universities and not only by those maintained by different Churches. Some of Newman's ideas seem especially significant compared to some the announcements by Pope John Paul II, according to which: at universities efficient dialogue should be carried on with people living in different cultures.

In his first speech at the university Newman describes truth as transferable and parallel seeking activity and defines the transferring and seeking function of the truth in higher education. He says: One important condition of finding the truth is seeking for it. The truth is too sacred and it is a fact of religion, to be sacrificed to fantasy, or spiritual fulfilment, the interest of political parties or the prejudices of education or the human opinions of teaching. Not only modesty, patience and caution are necessary for scientific research but seriousness and sincerity as well (Newman, 1998, p. 23).

In the following I am going to choose four topics of the conception of the Newman University. They are not in the order of importance.

1. The aim of university is education

To create educated spirit, unprejudiced unbiased and serious mind, attentive and generous behaviour in the everyday way of living – these are the aims of the university (Newman, 1998, p. 378). If the everyday tasks at the university serve to fulfil these purposes during the period of input; the output in young people will probably be a way of thinking characterised by liberty, fairness, calmness, restraint and wisdom (Newman, 1931, pp. 101–102).

2. The faiths of different religions do not exclude one another

According to Cardinal Newman the university assigns the place, the limits, the rights of all accepted disciplines, creates and realises the mutual connections of disciplines. The disposition of the Second Vatican Council about the Catholic Church, the *Gaudium et Spes* Pastoral Constitution refers to Newman's above-mentioned account of the university. The Pastoral Constitution says that universities should be the living allies of all organizations devoted to seeking the truth. They should work to achieve a high synthesis of knowledge to make it possible to fulfil the desire for the truth which is deeply engraved in the human soul.¹

Newman's opinion about science and faith was expressed and strengthened further more in another part of *Gaudium et Spes* Pastoral Constitution. Twenty years later his point of view is unmistakeably clear: "while reason and faith surely represent two distinct orders of knowledge, each autonomous with regard to its own methods, the two must finally converge in the discovery of a single whole reality which has its origin in God" (1983, p. 690) Pope John Paul II referring to Newman's conception of establishing universities, emphasizes that "methodical research within every branch of learning, when carried out in a truly scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, can never truly conflict with faith. For the things of the earth and the concerns of faith derive from the same God."²

3. The above-mentioned apparent contradiction can be solved by realising morality in life. In this respect it might be worth examining the already mentioned document, beginning “Ex Corde Ecclesiae”, especially in connection with the analysis of the concept of culture. Here again in the “Gaudium et Spes” the culture-interpretation is remarkable.

- a) In the document the concept of culture is defined in general sense, as containing attributions for refining and accomplishing people’s various intellectual and physical features.
- b) Secondly, culture means the effort to build the world around by knowledge and work. This activity might be considered as concrete action.
- c) Culture can be interpreted as a process as well. During this process social life, both in the family and society, is being made more human by developing custom and institutions. This might be one of the most important parts of humanitarian process.
- d) Finally, here is a quotation from the encyclical letter: “Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family.”

4. Newman’s another significant idea places the individual in the centre of all university activities. “A university is an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill.” (Newman, 1983, p. 53) Prof Taylor also refers to Newman when saying that the essential task of the university is to advance personality and to form a world concept which reveals coherence teachers, researchers and students as well. These goals can be achieved by avoiding impersonalization and taking human factors into consideration.

According to the *Magna Charta Universitatum* created in Bologna and signed by the rectors of the universities in Europe; universities should serve the whole society.

In the following I am referring to only some of the principles of *Magna Charta Universitatum*, briefly.

1. The university is an autonomous institution...; ... it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching...; ... must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.
2. Teaching and research in universities must be inseparable...
3. Freedom in research and training...; ... always open to dialogue, a university is an ideal meeting-ground for teachers capable of imparting their knowledge and well equipped to develop it by research and innovation and for students entitled, able and willing to enrich their minds with that knowledge.
4. A university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition; its constant care is to attain universal knowledge.

Reading and comparing certain parts of *Magna Charta Universitatum* (1988) and *The Idea of University* (1853–1859) they seem to be synchronous; as if the one-time rector of Dublin University would participate with his ideas, reflections and wise advice in forming the conception of today universities. So it might be worth comparing these documents. Studying them we will understand that Cardinal Newman's motto "cor ad cor loquitur" (heart to heart) is still valid for modern universities as well.

Notes:

- ¹⁾ *Gaudium et spes*, 1966.n. 61:AAS 58.
- ²⁾ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* – Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities

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