

ON THE SECULAR UNIVERSITY AND THE CHURCH:

Reconsidering Newman's Philosophy of Education Today

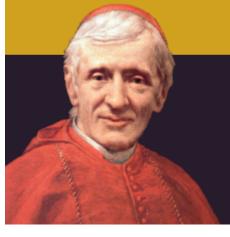
INAUGURAL JOHN HENRY NEWMAN LECTURE

Cor ad cor loquitur

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October 13, 2016 Penn Newman Catholic Center



Named for John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801–1890), the founder of the Oxford Movement and one of the foremost Catholic intellectuals of the modern era, this annual lecture series marks the legacy of the University of Pennsylvania as the site of the first ever Newman Club in America and explores Newman's thought in relation to contemporary academic life.

October 13, 2016 Address at Penn Newman Catholic Center

This evening I would like to reconsider Newman's understanding of the deepest purposes of a university education, consider the implications for the contemporary university, to reflect on his argument that the university depends on the Church in order to fulfill its intellectual mission and finally to consider briefly the implications of these questions for the work of Collegium.

In the preface to the *Idea of a University*, Newman argued that the university is a place of *teaching* universal *knowledge*, and as a result its object is intellectual rather than moral for its principal aim is knowledge and not virtue. Second, because its primary work is that of teaching, its fundamental concern is with the diffusion of knowledge rather than its advancement. Finally, he insists that the university cannot "fulfill its object duly... without the Church's assistance, or, to use the theological term, the Church is necessary for its integrity."

Let me consider each of these arguments. Newman assumed that a university by definition is primarily a place of teaching universal knowledge and as a result the work of the advancement of knowledge was secondary to that of teaching. He noted that in his own time there were various specialized academies committed to scholarly research and suggested that there was no need for students at all if research were in fact the primary object of a university's work. Nonetheless, he encouraged faculty scholarship, founded an academic journal, and proposed a university press.

Of course, today we are aware that teaching is no longer understood to be the primary end of the university but rather the research interests of its faculty and its utilitarian applications. The result has been a profound shift from an emphasis on undergraduate education to the priority of specialized graduate study and research. As the former dean of Harvard College, Harry Lewis, has noted, the university has become a "research institute – a place where distinguished scholars gather for extended periods of time to think great thoughts, unfettered by the obligations of classroom teaching." In such a context, he suggested, "the undergraduate was significant... only as a guest in a house belonging to others."¹

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¹ Harry R. Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 41.

Newman argued that the primary object of the university was to form a certain habit of mind in its students, a habit which he called philosophical, one which would enable them to see things in relation, to form judgments about complex realities, to overcome self-indulgent prejudice and narrow self-interest. In this sense, a university education could not be understood as a means to something beyond itself, but is its own end, and as such is a good in itself. Such knowledge, he argued, is liberal rather than servile, and it is not immediately useful or practical. The university invites students into a "pure and clear atmosphere of thought," in which "... he apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that his education is called liberal. A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom..." Nonetheless, he argued, such an education would fit its students for any position in life.

In order to achieve this formation of mind, the university must be committed not merely to the transmission of information but to that wisdom which arises from a commitment to a unity of knowledge in which each discipline, in a tension of relations with all others, would develop its insights and methods with a recognition not only of its unique strengths but also of its inherent limitations. In this way, the circle of knowledge will be secured and the integrative task of the university realized. To clarify this emphasis on the interdisciplinary character of the university, Newman appealed to the study of the human person, noting that one might offer an economic, or a biological, theological, chemical, psychological or sociological account. Each account might be true but it is inevitably partial, and as such is not merely incomplete but false if one does not critique and complement it with a variety of other disciplinary perspectives. And so he insisted that no discipline could be excluded from a university's concerns, for the result would not be merely a vacuum but rather the disordering of the relations of all of the other disciplines which would inevitably overstep their competence by moving in to fill the missing element. His principal concern was with the increasing exclusion of theology from the university curriculum.

Liberal education is that form of knowledge which made possible this formation of a habit of mind and I would like to explore with you Newman's understanding of the Church's relation to that education. On the one hand, he stressed that the universal and comprehensive character of liberal education

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² John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976), 96.

could not be attained by the study of a wide number of disciplines that would result in a mere smattering of disconnected ideas. He argued that the "perfection of the individual intellect is not knowing all branches of knowledge but simply is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence." To insure that comprehensiveness, the circle of knowledge within the University required the presence of theology for it must include the intellectual claims of faith.

Nonetheless, although Newman thought that theology had a critical role to play within the University as a discipline he did not think that it had, any more than engineering, a central role in that formation of mind on which he insisted. He noted that in the middle ages the faculty of arts in which literature played a predominant role had steadfastly resisted the incursions of the new graduate disciplines of law, medicine and Scholastic theology because, as Ian Ker pointed out, the arts continued to be acknowledged "... as before, to be the best instruments of mental cultivation, and the best guarantees for intellectual progress." He particularly stressed the importance of the study of the classics that had a proven ability to form the imagination, unlike theology or the natural sciences. As Ker has pointed out Newman held that theology was more important than literature "qua branch of knowledge but this did not prevent him from holding that [literature] is more important qua study for liberal education."⁴

It is here critical to understand Newman's distinction between the University and the College and the respective roles of the University Professor and the College Tutor. He argued that the role of the Church in each was essential but in different and more or less direct ways.

For Newman the perfection of the University depends upon the rightly-ordered relations of the college and university systems. The University, the seat of the professorial lecture is the place of abstract reflection and the negotiation of the claims of the various disciplinary perspectives; the work of the college, on the other hand is achieved in the personal influence of the college tutor and has as its primary aim the formation of mind and character of its residents. The College depended upon the University in important ways for it had to secure its own work within the larger pursuit of the unity of knowledge made possible by the professorial system. Newman argued that "...

101u., 122-23

³ Ibid., 122-23.

⁴ I. T. Ker, "Editor's Introduction, *The Idea of a University*, lxiii.

the University is for the philosophical discourse, the eloquent sermon, or the well contested disputation; and the College for the catechetical lecture. The University is for theology, law, and medicine, for natural history, for physical science, and for the sciences generally and their promulgation; the College is for the formation of character, intellectual and moral, for the cultivation of the mind, for the improvement of the individual, for the study of literature, for the classics, and those rudimental sciences which strengthen and sharpen the intellect." Of course, we have lost this sense of the central importance of the college within the university and it is impossible to understand Newman's sense of the promise of liberal education unless we recover it. He assumed that the philosophical habit of mind was made possible far more directly by the work of the college tutor rather than the university professor. In "Elementary Studies," he described the nature of this work of formation but he first noted two primary obstacles to its achievement. The student who is self-taught through private reading will not recognize what he has ignored and so will be marked by an idiosyncratic and subjective view. On the other hand, the student whose primary education results from attendance at lectures will be marked by a tendency to conform to the arguments passively received. What is needed is personal influence exercised by the tutor who develops a sustained personal relationship with the minds and character of each student. But this is the basis not merely of private attachments but of the community that is formed in the interpersonal friendships and relations of students and faculty alike.

Newman noted that "a man may hear a thousand lectures, and read a thousand volumes, and be at the end of the process very much where he was, as regards knowledge. Something more than merely admitting it in a negative way into the mind is necessary if it is to remain there. It must not be passively received, but actually and actively entered into, embraced, mastered." 6

He argued as well that dependence on private reading and public lectures tends to form habits of mind in which one is prone to see objections more clearly than truths for there is an inevitable focus on information without a view of its larger implications and mutual relations. This critical habit was inevitably prone to induce a habit of skepticism for it privileges objections over truth claims and promotes the ideal not of a community of conviction but rather of the autonomous critical thinker freed from the authority of tradition.

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⁵ John Henry Newman, "Abuses of the College. Oxford," in *Rise and Progress of Universities and Benedictine Essays* (Leominster: Gracewing Press, 2001), 228-29. ⁶ Idea, 393-94.

The College, however, promotes a positive understanding of the role of tradition for it makes possible an "intimacy and sincerity which can only be when none others are present, obscurity of thought, difficulties in philosophy, perplexities of faith, are confidentially brought out, sifted and solved, and a pagan poet or theorist may thus become the occasion of Christian advancement. Thus the tutor forms the pupil's opinions, and is the friend, perhaps the guide, of his after life."⁷

In describing the specific implications of these views for the Catholic university of Ireland, Newman stressed that "In the idea of a College tutor, we see that union of peculiar intellectual and moral influence, the separation of which is the evil of the age. Men are accustomed to go to the Church for religious training but to the world for that cultivation both of their hard reason and their susceptible imagination. A Catholic university will but half remedy this evil if it aims only at professorial, not at private teaching. Where there is private teaching, there will be real influence."

The work of the Professor is a noble one for it involves a commitment to the mastery of the science or learning he has undertaken. In doing so, "his main office is to expound and illustrate it; to deepen its principles and to enlarge its stores; and to erect what may be called a real, objective image of it, such as may have value in itself, as distinct from the accident of the day." But this work will not in itself directly contribute to the formation of that integrative habit of mind that Newman has argued is the direct aim of the university for such lectures, however "admirable in themselves, and advantageous at a later stage of his course never can serve as a substitute for methodical and laborious teaching."

He noted that "Boys are always more or less inaccurate, and too many, or rather the majority, remain boys all their lives." ¹⁰ The remedy to this inaccuracy is not through a science of logic for students do not learn accuracy of thought by any manual or treatise. Newman stressed that in his own time, as indeed in our own, "When a speaker declaims about 'large and enlightened views,' or about 'freedom of conscience,' or about the 'Gospel,' or any other popular subject of the day, "there is a danger that these household words,

⁷ John Henry Newman, *My Campaign in Ireland* (Memphis: General Books, 2010), 88.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 84.

¹⁰ *Idea*, 273.

"may stand in a man's mind for a something or other, very glorious indeed, but very misty." ¹¹

What course of tutorial study then might be pursued to attain this accuracy of thought, this habit of mind "that is a habit of order and system, a habit of referring every accession of knowledge to what we already know, and adjusting the one with the others, and moreover as such a habit of mind implies, the actual acceptance and use of certain principles as centres of thought, around which our knowledge grows and is located." He mentions specifically the importance of the translation of languages and the study of how language and thought cohere; the importance of the "getting up" of any one chapter of history, that is of entering into and grasping not only its particularities but also its larger implications; the importance of classification and the ability to understand the proofs of Euclidian geometry; and the subtle and complex analysis of a speech and the criticism of a poem.

He acknowledges the importance of the new sciences but insists that "the question is not what department of study contains the more wonderful facts, or promises the more brilliant discoveries, and which is in the higher and which in an inferior rank, but simply which out of all provides the most robust and invigorating discipline for the unformed mind." ¹³

In addition to literature, tutors would oversee the encounter with general religious knowledge indispensable to the search for the unity of knowledge and the complementarity of faith and reason. Students should know history generally and that classical as well as divine. They should know the "great primitive divisions of Christianity, its polity, its luminaries, its acts, and its fortunes, its great eras and its course down to this day. "¹⁴ They should as well know "its great figures, apologists, martyrs, bishops, critics, the nature of its opponents' claims, including the major heretics, the main religious orders, the crusades, the inquisition."¹⁵ He also thought it essential that they should know Biblical literature, to understand the canon, its history, the Jewish canon, St. Jerome, the Protestant Bible, the languages of Scripture, the contents of its separate books, their authors and their versions.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 494.

¹³ Ibid., 222.

¹⁴ Ibid., 305.

¹⁵ Ibid., 306.

In other words a student must know the basic claims and history of the Christian faith, the facts of that history, particularly those bearing on controversies. The formation must be at once historical catechetical and apologetic. He explicitly excluded academic theology from collegiate tuition. Instead, he said that he was "professing to contemplate Christian knowledge in what may be called its secular aspect, as it is practically useful in the intercourse of life and in general conversation, and I would encourage it as far as it bears upon the history, the literature and the philosophy of Christianity." ¹⁶

Newman was persuaded that "half the controversies which go on in the world [and especially those which touch on religion] arise from ignorance of the facts of the case; half the prejudices against Catholicity lie in the misinformation of the prejudiced parties." As a result the college needed to inform the students of the history and doctrines of the faith and to prepare them to serve as apologists in the world. He noted that in the first age of the Church its apologists were commonly laymen and he lists Tatian, Athenagoras, Minucius Felix and Lactantius among them. In the same way in the 19th century "the most prominent defenses of the faith are from laymen: as De Maistre, Chateaubriand, Nicholas, and Montalembert and others." ¹⁸ These lay apologists were not theologians and the same is true of the great 20th century apologists among whom one might mention Belloc, Chesterton, Lewis, Dawson, Tolkien, and Eliot.

Newman draws upon a great intellectual tradition found in classical as well as Christian thought in which *Sapientis est ordinare*, to be wise is to know the ordered relations and ends of all things. Ryan Topping recently defined the three ends of liberal education in the thought of St. Augustine. The first immediate end is "the acquisition of moral and intellectual virtue: these are the skills and dispositions that enable a student to think, feel and act in ways that promote the flourishing of human life." Of course for Newman as for Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, the development of the intellectual virtues presupposed the complementary acquisition of the moral virtues. One cannot make progress in the intellectual life without the development of a set of moral habits of discipline, obedience, charity, perseverance, courage, temperance and prudence. Aquinas noted that the mind is moved to

¹⁶ Ibid., 307.

¹⁷ Ibid., 307-08.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ryan N. S. Topping, *Happiness and Wisdom: Augustine's Early Theology of Education* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012) 8.

admiration or wonder at the recognition of the order and coherence of creation. The implications for education are critical. But Newman noted the modern tendency to substitute for education, this holistic and integrative formation of mind, mere instruction, the "delivery" of information and applied practical skills.

The second end of liberal education is "the formation of a community of pious learners," which encourages the life of friendship and shared inquiry. We are not autonomous knowers since all knowledge is at once interpersonal and communal in character. As Christopher Blum has recently noted, the time of university study is particularly attuned to the needs of friendship and those university teachers who "find it difficult to cultivate friendship and practice it as a high ideal are unlikely to be able to understand, much less shape the lives of their students, whose whole collegiate lives are engulfed in friendship's concerns."²⁰

The third end of liberal education is to direct the mind to its ultimate end, to that beatitude for which we were made, union with God.

Aquinas recognized that knowledge of creaturely things without knowledge of the creator was not merely incomplete but finally subversive of the wisdom for which we are made. And so he warns against the vice of 'curiosity,' that immoderate desire for the knowledge of things without the context of their final end. He insisted that the task of 'studiousness' is to restrain that unbridled desire for knowledge without a grasp of its ordered relations and final end.

In contrast, the 17th century scientific reform and later Enlightenment stressed precisely the primacy of curiosity, the restless desire for new explanations of empirical facts and the mastery of information in order to extend the range of human powers. We see now a new emphasis on data and encyclopedic knowledge that provoked Coleridge's contemptuous observation that it was a strange abuse to organize all knowledge under the accident of its initial letters. The new knowledge required the overthrow of metaphysics as Hume made clear when in affirming the rejection of non-scientific thought he urged the need to purge libraries of the older disciplines: "If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school of metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning

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²⁰ Christopher O. Blum, *Rejoicing in the Truth: Wisdom and the Educator's Craft* (Front Royal: Christendom University Press, 2015) 163.

concerning matters of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."²¹

Newman insisted on the older vision in which the task of the university was not simply to display a variety of perspectives, each autonomous and discrete as in a caravanserai but rather to bring into ordered relation all disciplinary perspectives and in doing so to enable the student to take a view of the whole. In order to do this three things were necessary.

- 1. Students must achieve an accuracy of mind, must really know what they know and do not know.
- 2. They must achieve universality, must know everything to know anything for all things are interconnected.
- 3. They must integrate their knowledge in a unified vision.

For without this three-fold formation, "nothing has its place in their minds. They locate nothing. They have no system. They hear and they forget, or they just recollect what they have once heard, they can't tell where. Thus they have no consistency in their arguments; that is, they argue one way today and not exactly the other way tomorrow, but indirectly the other way, at random. Their lines of argument diverge, nothing comes to a point, there is no one centre in which their mind sits, on which their judgment of men and things proceeds."²²

The College provides a community in which intellectual formation might flourish for such a community would

"At least recognize that knowledge is something more than a sort of passive reception of scraps and details; it is a something, and it does a something, which never will issue from the most strenuous efforts of a set of teachers, with no mutual sympathies and no intercommunion, of a set of examiners with no opinions which they dare profess and with no common principles, who are torching or questioning a set of youths who do not know them and do not know each other, on a large number of subjects, different in kind, and connected by no wide philosophy, three times a week, or three times a year, or once in three years, in chill lecture rooms or on a pompous anniversary."²³

²¹ Cited in David Arndt, "Liberal Education in Crisis," Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture, Summer 2016, Vol. 19:3, 65.

²² Idea. 272.

²³ Ibid., 131.

And so Newman argued that although it is possible to establish a university without a collegiate system, such a university could not achieve its primary end of liberal education and would substitute for it an education at once more narrow and more utilitarian.

He further argued that the Church had a necessary relation both to the University and to the College. In the University the Church was necessary for it alone secured a place within the circle of knowledge for theology and had the necessary authority to order its relations to the other disciplines. He acknowledged that divine truth "differs in kind from human, but so do human truths differ in kind from one another. If the knowledge of the Creator is in a different order from knowledge of the creature, so in like manner metaphysical science is in a different order from physical, physics from history, history from ethics. You will soon break up into fragments the whole circle of secular knowledge if you begin the mutilation with divine."²⁴

The exclusion of theology from the contemporary university introduces what C. John Sommerville described as a secular inhumanism, a purely naturalistic system that is fundamentally hostile to religious language and in doing so excludes the deeper questions of meaning and purpose from its concerns. But is this sustainable? He notes that "when we say that 'human' is a religious term, we mean that it has coherent meanings in a religious discourse. It relates grammatically to other concepts like 'purpose,' 'creation,' 'evil,' 'equality,' 'concern,' 'beauty,' and 'wealth which will bog down any naturalistic analysis. All these terms have recognized uses within religious discourse. If we want to use them at all (and clearly we must), it will be hard to avoid religious associations. If universities rule out all such discussions as soon as we recognize them as religious (involving even Plato, for instance) then serious discussion will migrate to some other venue." As indeed they have.

At the same time, the Church is necessary to the College for without it there can be no integral formation of mind embodying the ordered relation of the intellectual and moral virtues. In an 1856 sermon preached in the University church in Dublin, he argued that the object of the Church in founding universities was to

²⁴ Ibid., 38.

²⁵ C. John Sommerville, *The Decline of the Secular University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 31-32.

...reunite things which were in the beginning joined together by God and have been put asunder by man. Some persons will say that I am thinking of confining, distorting, and stunting the growth of the intellect by ecclesiastical supervision. I have no such thought. Nor have I any thought of a compromise, as if religion must give up something, and science something. I wish the intellect to range with the utmost freedom and religion to enjoy an equal freedom; but what I am stipulating for is that they should be found in one and the same place and be exemplified in the same persons. I want to destroy that diversity of centres, which puts everything into confusion by creating a contrariety of influences. I wish the same spots and the same individuals to be at once oracles of philosophy and shrines of devotion. It will not satisfy me. what satisfies so many, to have two independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labor and only accidentally brought together. It will not satisfy me if religion is here and science there, and young men converse with science all day and lodge with religion in the evening. It is not touching the evil to which these remarks have been directed, if young men eat and drink and sleep in one place and think in another. I want the same roof to contain both the intellectual and the moral discipline.... I want the intellectual layman to be religious and the devout ecclesiastic to be intellectual."26

One might argue that this ideal integration of intellectual and moral formation can be achieved within a sectarian university but that the modern secular university necessarily excludes it. This strikes me as less and less plausible and helps to explain the reduction, now pervasive, of education to career preparation and specialized research. The president of Arizona State University, Michael Crow has recently argued for what he calls the new American University. He points out that secular universities offer a very important resource for the country in providing a very good technical education. But that technical education is both their strength and their limit for they lack the ability, indeed the right, to seek that formation of mind that Newman described as being essential both to the common good and to personal human flourishing. As a result Crow has sought to establish strategic partnerships in which faith traditions might complement that technical education and assist in realizing that more comprehensive formation of mind. He has established partnerships with a number of religious intellectual traditions including a strategic partnership with my own institution, the University of Mary, in which students are able to take courses or concentrations in Catholic Studies and Catholic theology that can also fulfill

²⁶ John Henry Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1921) 12-13.

specific general requirements or electives at Arizona State University. So a student might take an individual course or pursue a joint degree. Both institutions retain their legitimate autonomy and identity but collaborate in creating the conditions for the attainment of that philosophical habit of mind we have been describing. Such a collaboration does not blur the essential distinction between secular and religious knowledge but provides a forum in which students and faculty can explore their mutual relations in an atmosphere at once voluntary and free. In other words, Churches once again might engage both the university and the college by bringing theology into the intellectual life of the university and establishing collegiate residential communities.

The modern university is increasingly complex in the audiences it serves, and increasingly expensive in its operations but its coherence and significance are now far from self-evident as a long series of descriptions of the education bubble disclose. As Sommerville pointed out,

If our universities are to become more than professional schools [and indeed if this is all they are it is not clear that such an education could not be offered entirely on linel their rationalism needs to be in dialogue with other 'traditions of inquiry.' For the most important matters in life include such matters as hope, depression, trust, purpose and wisdom. If secularism purges such concerns from the curriculum for lack of a way to address them, the public may conclude that the football tram really is the most important part of the university. But if they are taken up we will find ourselves using terms that seem to belong in a religious discourse. We have dodged this issue by saying that true, good, and just are all political, meaning that they can't be discussed but only voted on. [The irony here is acute for we live in a time in which the most fundamental of human questions, marriage, gender, identity, rights are presumed to be resolvable only on political terms at a time in which no one any longer believes in politics] But in fact they could be discussed if our discussions were to recognize a dimension of ultimacy. It will do wonders in drawing attention and respect to our universities. And it might make religion itself a less frivolous thing than it has become."27

In a series of letters to the Times of London in 1841 later published under the title, "The Tamworth Reading Room," Newman had critiqued the emerging assumption that science would provide the means of resolving the primary challenges to human flourishing. In an earlier letter to S. F. Wood in 1832 he had described the dream that "the intellect alone could with the aid of science

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²⁷ The Decline, 22.

develop mechanisms which without reforming the will would channel its existing drives into socially acceptable forms and in this way it could create the good society without going to the trouble of creating good individuals to compose it."²⁸

The myth that a technological education will be the means of organizing a just society without the attendant burden of forming virtuous people is simply no longer sustainable. Nonetheless, we cling to it for it seems to many the only way of negotiating differences and avoiding the fundamental demand to make moral distinctions. Newman's philosophy of education offers an alternate view, one that is conscious of modern concerns about pluralism and diversity and the necessary distinction between intellectual and moral formation but does not propose to escape their mutually interdependent claims. I would suggest that today we have new opportunities within secular higher education to insert within it institutes like Collegium which provide both collegiate formation for students and intellectual forums for the faculty in which the tensions of faith and reason and their ultimate complementarity might be freely explored. In doing so we might recover Newman's vision of university education, assist in overcoming that fragmentation of knowledge now such a characteristic feature of its life, and again create forums for bringing into sustained and ordered relation intellectual and moral reflection.

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²⁸ John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vol. III, ed. Ian Ker and Thomas Gornall, S. J. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), 90.