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Intimately Knit: Religious Knowledge in College Education

BLESSED JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

Soon-to-be Saint John Henry Newman, set to be canonized on October 13, 2019, converted from Anglicanism to the Catholic Church in 1845. Anglicans and Catholics alike hail him as one of the greatest thinkers of the 19th century. Famous for his sermons, Newman also wrote major influential works on central themes such as truth, the Church, dogma, the development of doctrine, university education, and the relationship between faith and reason. Reflecting his own deep sense of the presence of God, Cardinal Newman's works invite us into a vital and personal relationship with God in the communion of the Church. Newman had a high view of how we can come to know God through reason, because of how He implicated himself in creation; he also had a high view of the Church as the "pillar of the cloud" that leads us with the kindly light of truth revealed in Jesus Christ. For Newman the light of truth is dogmatic and forms the context for coming to know God. As his motto said, "heart speaking unto heart."

*The following excerpts are taken from *The Idea of a University* and reflect a positive view of our natural capacity for knowing God as our Creator and the claim this knowledge has on us. This passage also expresses the fatherly goodness of God in creating a world full of His many "impressions." For Newman, God is central to all knowledge. Thus, seeking the truth and loving all that is good and beautiful is a pursuit that opens us toward a life of faith so that we may know, love, and serve God and gain happiness with him in this world and the next.*

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...I lay it down that all knowledge forms one whole, because its subject-matter is one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together, that we cannot separate off portion from portion, and operation from operation, except by a mental abstraction; and then again, as to its Creator, though He of course in His own Being is infinitely separate from it, and

Theology has its departments towards which human knowledge has no relations, yet He has so implicated Himself with it, and taken it into His very bosom, by His presence in it, His providence over it, His impressions upon it, and His influences through it, that we cannot truly or fully contemplate it without in some main aspects contemplating Him....(38)

...For instance, I mean, for this is the main point, that, as in the human frame there is a living principle, acting upon it and through it by means of volition, so, behind the veil of the visible universe, there is an invisible, intelligent Being, acting on and through it, as and when He will. Further, I mean that this invisible Agent is in no sense a soul of the world, after the analogy of human nature, but, on the contrary, is absolutely distinct from the world, as being its Creator, Upholder, Governor, and Sovereign Lord. Here we are at once brought into the circle of doctrines which the idea of God embodies. I mean then by the Supreme Being, one who is simply self-dependent, and the only Being who is such; moreover, that He is without beginning or Eternal, and the only Eternal; that in consequence He has lived a whole eternity by Himself; and hence that He is all-sufficient, sufficient for His own blessedness, and all-blessed, and ever-blessed. Further, I mean a Being, who, having these prerogatives, has the Supreme Good, or rather is the Supreme Good, or has all the attributes of Good in infinite intenseness; all wisdom, all truth, all justice, all love, all holiness, all beautifulness; who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent; ineffably one, absolutely perfect; and such, that what we do not know and cannot even imagine of Him, is far more wonderful than what we do and can. I mean One who is sovereign over His own will and actions, though always according to the eternal Rule of right and wrong, which is Himself. I mean, moreover, that He created all things out of nothing, and preserves them every moment, and could destroy them as easily as He made them; and that, in consequence, He is separated from them by an abyss, and is incommunicable in all His attributes. And further, He has stamped upon all things, in the hour of their creation, their respective natures, and has given them their work and mission and their length of days, greater or less, in their appointed place. I mean, too, that He is ever present with His works, one by one, and confronts everything He has made by His particular and most loving Providence, and manifests Himself to each according to its needs: and has on rational beings imprinted the moral law, and given them power to obey it, imposing on them the duty of worship and service, searching and scanning them through and through with His omniscient eye, and putting before them a present trial and a judgment to come.... (46–47)

...All that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful, all that is beneficent, be it great or small, be it perfect or fragmentary, natural as well as supernatural, moral as well as material, comes from Him. (50)

...I say then, if the various branches of knowledge, which are the matter of teaching in a University, so hang together, that none can be neglected without prejudice to the perfection of the rest, and if Theology be a branch of knowledge, of wide reception, of philosophical structure, of unutterable importance, and of supreme influence, to what conclusion are we brought from these two premises but this? That to withdraw Theology from the public schools is to impair the completeness and to invalidate the trustworthiness of all that is actually taught in them.

...I say, then, secondly:—if this Science, even as human reason may attain to it, has such claims on the regard, and enters so variously into the objects, of the Professor of Universal Knowledge, how can any Catholic imagine that it is possible for him to cultivate Philosophy and Science with due attention to their ultimate end, which is Truth, supposing that system of revealed facts and principles, which Constitutes the Catholic Faith, which goes so far beyond nature, and which he knows to be most true, be omitted from among the subjects of his teaching? In a word, Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general

knowledge. To blot it out is nothing short, if I may so speak, of unraveling the web of University Teaching. It is, according to the Greek proverb, to take the Spring from out of the year; it is to imitate the preposterous proceeding of those tragedians who represented a drama with the omission of its principal part. (52–53)

Excerpted from John Henry Newman, The Idea of a University (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907). Available online through The National Institute for New Studies.

Blessed John Henry Newman (1801–1890) was a renowned British theologian and convert to Catholicism. He was created a cardinal in 1878.

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