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John Henry Newman

Excerpt

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DISCOURSES

ON

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION.

DISCOURSE I.

INTRODUCTION.

IN addressing myself to the consideration of a question which has excited so much interest, and elicited so much discussion at the present day, as that of University Education, I feel some explanation is due from me for supposing, after such high ability and wide experience have been brought to bear upon it in both countries, that any field remains for the additional labours either of a disputant or of an inquirer. If, nevertheless, I still venture to ask permission to continue the discussion, already so protracted, it is because the subject of Liberal Education, and of the principles on which it must be conducted, has ever had a hold upon my mind; and because I have lived the greater part of my life in a place which has all that time been occupied in a

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series of controversies among its own people and with strangers, and of measures, experimental or definitive, bearing upon it. About fifty years since, the Protestant University, of which I was so long a member, after a century of inactivity, at length was roused, at a time when (as I may say) it was giving no education at all to the youth committed to its keeping, to a sense of the responsibilities which its profession and its station involved; and it presents to us the singular example of an heterogeneous and an independent body of men, setting about a work of self-reformation, not from any pressure of public opinion, but because it was fitting and right to undertake it. Its initial efforts, begun and carried on amid many obstacles, were met from without, as often happens in such cases, by ungenerous and jealous criticisms, which were at that very moment beginning to be unjust. Controversy did but bring out more clearly to its own apprehension, the views on which its reformation was proceeding, and throw them into a philosophical form. The course of beneficial change made progress, and what was at first but the result of individual energy and an act of the academical corporation, gradually became popular, and was taken up and carried out by the separate collegiate bodies, of which the University is composed. This was the first stage of the controversy. Years passed away, and then political adversaries arose, and a political contest was waged; but still, as that

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contest was conducted in great measure through the medium, not of political acts, but of treatises and pamphlets, it happened as before that the threatened dangers, in the course of their repulse, did but afford fuller development and more exact delineation to the principles of which the University was the representative.

Living then so long as a witness, though hardly as an actor, in these scenes of intellectual conflict, I am able, Gentlemen, to bear witness to views of University Education, without authority indeed in themselves, but not without value to a Catholic, and less familiar to him, as I conceive, than they deserve to be. And, while an argument originating in them may be serviceable at this season to that great cause in which we are just now so especially interested, to me personally it will afford satisfaction of a peculiar kind ; for, though it has been my lot for many years to take a prominent, sometimes a presumptuous, part in theological discussions, yet the natural turn of my mind carries me off to trains of thought like those which I am now about to open, which, important though they be for Catholic objects, and admitting of a Catholic treatment, are sheltered from the extreme delicacy and peril which attach to disputations directly bearing on the subject matter of Divine Revelation.

What must be the general character of those views of University Education to which I have alluded, and

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of which I shall avail myself, can hardly be doubtful, Gentlemen, considering the circumstances under which I am addressing you. I should not propose to avail myself of a philosophy which I myself had gained from an heretical seat of learning, unless I felt that that philosophy was Catholic in its ultimate source, and befitting the mouth of one who is taking part in a great Catholic work ; nor, indeed, should I refer at all to the views of men who, however distinguished in this world, were not and are not blessed with the light of true doctrine, except for one or two special reasons, which will form, I trust, my sufficient justification in so doing. One reason is this : It would concern me, Gentlemen, were I supposed to have got up my opinions for the occasion. This, indeed, would have been no reflection on me personally, supposing I were persuaded of their truth, when at length addressing myself to the inquiry ; but it would have destroyed, of course, the force of my testimony, and deprived such arguments, as I might adduce, of that moral persuasiveness which attends on tried and sustained conviction. It would have made me seem the advocate, rather than the cordial and deliberate maintainer and witness of the doctrines which I was to support ; and while it undoubtedly exemplified the faith I reposed in the practical judgment of the Church, and the intimate concurrence of my own reason with the course she had authoritatively sanctioned, and the devotion with which I could promptly

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put myself at her disposal, it would have cast suspicion on the validity of reasonings and conclusions which rested on no independent inquiry, and appealed to no past experience. In that case it might have been plausibly objected by opponents that I was the serviceable expedient of an emergency, and never could be more than ingenious and adroit in the management of an argument which was not my own, and which I was sure to forget again as readily as I had mastered it. But this is not so. The views to which I have referred have grown into my whole system of thought, and are, as it were, part of myself. Many changes has my mind gone through ; here it has known no variation or vacillation of opinion, and though this by itself is no proof of truth, it puts a seal upon conviction, and is a justification of earnestness and zeal. The principles, which I can now set forth under the sanction of the Catholic Church, were my profession at that early period of my life, when religion was to me more a matter of feeling and experience than of faith. They did but take greater hold upon me as I was introduced to the records of Christian Antiquity, and approached in sentiment and desire to Catholicism ; and my sense of their truth has been increased with the experience of every year since I have been brought within its pale.

And here I am brought to a second and more important reason for introducing what I have to say on the subject of Liberal Education with this refer-

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ence to my personal testimony concerning it ; and it is as follows : In proposing to treat of so grave a matter, I have felt vividly that some apology was due from me for introducing the lucubrations of Protestants into what many men might consider almost a question of dogma, and I have said to myself about myself : “ You think it, then, worth while to come all this way, in order, from your past experience, to recommend principles which had better be left to the decision of the theological schools !” The force of this objection you will see more clearly by considering the answer I proceed to give to it.

Let it be observed, then, that the principles I would maintain on the subject of Liberal Education, although those as I believe of the Catholic Church, are such as may be gained by the mere experience of life. They do not simply come of theology—they imply no supernatural discernment—they have no special connection with Revelation ; they will be found to be almost self-evident when stated, and to arise out of the nature of the case ; they are dictated by that human prudence and wisdom which is attainable where grace is quite away, and recognized by simple common sense, even where self-interest is not present to sharpen it ; and, therefore, though true, and just, and good in themselves, though sanctioned and used by Catholicism, they argue nothing whatever for the sanctity or faith of those who maintain them. They may be held by Protestants as well as

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by Catholics; they may, accidentally, in certain times and places, be taught by Protestants to Catholics, without any derogation from the claim which Catholics make to special spiritual illumination. This being the case, I may without offence, on the present occasion, when speaking to Catholics, appeal to the experience of Protestants; I may trace up my own distinct convictions on the subject to a time when apparently I was not even approximating to Catholicism; I may deal with the question, as I really believe it to be, as one of philosophy, practical wisdom, good sense, not of theology; and, such as I am, I may, notwithstanding, presume to treat of it in the presence of those who, in every religious sense, are my fathers and my teachers.

Nay, not only may the true philosophy of Education be held by Protestants, and at a given time, or in a given place, be taught by them to Catholics, but further than this, there is nothing strange in the idea, that here or there, at this time or that, it should be understood better, and held more firmly by Protestants than by ourselves. The very circumstance that it is founded on truths in the natural order, accounts for the possibility of its being sometimes or somewhere understood outside the Church, more accurately than within her fold. Where the sun shines bright, in the warm climate of the south, the natives of the place know little of safeguards against cold and wet. They have, indeed, bleak and

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piercing blasts; they have chill and pouring rain; but only now and then, for a day or a week; they bear the inconvenience as they best may, but they have not made it an art to repel it; it is not worth their while; the science of calefaction and ventilation is reserved for the north. It is in this way that Catholics stand relatively to Protestants in the science of Education; Protestants are obliged to depend on human means solely, and they are, therefore, led to make the most of them; it is their sole resource to use what they have; "Knowledge is" their "power" and nothing else; they are the anxious cultivators of a rugged soil. It is otherwise with us; *funes ceciderunt mihi in præclaris*. We have a goodly inheritance. The Almighty Father takes care of us; He has promised to do so; His word cannot fail, and we have continual experience of its fulfilment. This is apt to make us, I will not say, rely too much on prayer, on the Divine Word and Blessing, for we cannot pray too much, or expect too much from our great Lord; but we sometimes forget that we shall please Him best, and get most from Him, when we use what we have in nature to the utmost, at the same time that we look out for what is beyond nature in the confidence of faith and hope. However, we are sometimes tempted to let things take their course, as if they would in one way or another turn up right at last for certain; and so we go on, getting into difficulties and getting out of them, succeeding

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certainly on the whole, but with failure in detail which might be avoided, and with much of imperfection or inferiority in our appointments and plans, and much disappointment, discouragement, and collision of opinion in consequence. We leave God to fight our battles, and so He does ; but He corrects us while He prospers us. We cultivate the innocence of the dove more than the wisdom of the serpent ; and we exemplify our Lord's word and incur His rebuke, when He declared that "the children of this world were in their generation wiser than the children of light".

It is far from impossible, then, at first sight, that on the subject before us, Protestants may have discerned the true line of action, and estimated its importance aright. It is possible that they have investigated and ascertained the main principles, the necessary conditions of education, better than some among ourselves. It is possible at first sight, and it is probable in the particular case, when we consider, on the one hand, the various and opposite positions, which they enjoy relatively to each other ; yet, on the other, the uniformity of the conclusions to which they arrive. The Protestant communions, I need hardly say, are respectively at a greater and a less distance from the Catholic Church, with more or with less of Catholic doctrine and of Catholic principle in them. Supposing, then, it should turn out, on a survey of their opinions and their policy, that in pro-

portion as they approach, in the genius of their religion, to Catholicism, so do they become clear in their enunciation of a certain principle in education, that very circumstance would be an argument, as far as it went, for concluding that in Catholicism itself the recognition of that principle would, in its seats of education, be distinct and absolute. Now, I conceive that this remark applies in the controversy to which I am addressing myself. I must anticipate the course of future remarks so far as to say what you have doubtless, Gentlemen, yourselves anticipated before I say it, that the main principle on which I shall have to proceed is this—that Education must not be disjoined from Religion, or that Mixed Schools, as they are called, in which teachers and scholars are of different religious creeds, none of which, of course, enter into the matter of instruction, are constructed on a false idea. Here, then, I conceive I am right in saying that every sect of Protestants, which has retained the idea of religious truth and the necessity of faith, which has any dogma to profess and any dogma to lose, makes that dogma the basis of its Education, secular as well as religious, and is jealous of those attempts to establish schools of a purely secular character, which the inconvenience of religious differences urges upon politicians of the day. This circumstance is of so striking a nature as in itself to justify me, as I consider, in my proposed appeal in this con-