The Concept of Tradition: A Problem Out of MacIntyre

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The Concept of Tradition: A Problem Out of MacIntyre

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“NATIONAL REVIEW . . . stands athwart history, yelling Stop.”
—William F. Buckley

1. Introduction

Tradition is one of those words whose sense, reference, and evaluative force depends on who uses it and why. The concept of tradition is conspicuous in contemporary debates, both among those who reject traditional marriage or education as well as among those who affirm it. It is also central to Alasdair MacIntyre’s work both as an educator and a cultural critic, and an essential resource for the development of whatever answer his admirers may give to the question, “What is to be done?” Many a revolution has been spurred by the desire to restore a tradition that the pursuit of external goods such as wealth has corrupted, but it remains to be seen whether MacIntyre’s philosophy supports this sort of revolution or any other form of political practice.

MacIntyre, like Karl Marx, is proposing a philosophy of practice; the context of his philosophical investigations is the difficulty experienced by followers of Leon Trotsky in finding grounds for condemning Stalinism, and more broadly finding a point of purchase for their moral judgments in history. There is more to MacIntyre than the concept of tradition, but his turning away from the politics of the nation-state to that of the local


3 For MacIntyre’s Trotskyist background, see Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds., Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2009). On the need for a philosophy of practice, see especially ibid., pp. 103, 422, and 424.

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community does not help matters here. Such communities will have to make
decisions concerning both their internal policies and their external relations,
as well as the issue will arise concerning how much flexibility they can
find in their governing traditions. Hence, MacIntyre’s inability to answer
questions of application would mean that his philosophy had failed. How
much guidance MacIntyre, or any philosopher, is required to supply is a
complicated question; the demand that social and political philosophy should
translate immediately into a political program is unreasonable, but detached
contemplation of our social and political life is not an option either. It would
be a severe problem for MacIntyre’s view if he ended up returning us to
politics as usual.\

2. The Ambiguity of the Concept

As one commentator has put it, MacIntyre holds the following view:

We should steer a middle path between the conservatism of Edmund
Burke, who exalts tradition over and against rationality, and the
liberalism/radicalism of a Condorcet and other Enlightenment
figures, who exalt abstract rationality over and against tradition.5

The question I am asking here is whether such a middle ground exists.6

Advocates of tradition argue that it is an inescapable part of our
reasoning about both theoretical and practical matters. Yet the concept of
tradition on MacIntyre’s view suffers from an ambiguity, one that often
appears in similar theorists, such as Cardinal John Henry Newman7 and,
despite MacIntyre’s hostility to them both, David Hume8 and Edmund Burke.9

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4 I address this question further in my “Politics after MacIntyre,” 2012, accessed online
at: http://philipdevine.wordpress.com/2012/02/01/politics-after-macintyre-2/.

5 Thomas D. D’Andrea, Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006),
p. 67.

6 My colleague Michael O’Neill has suggested that Robin George Collingwood, Georg
Hegel, Marx, and Yves Simon can fill the gaps in MacIntyre’s account of historical
rationality. This suggestion needs to be spelled out.

7 On Newman, see Owen Chadwick, From Bossuet to Newman, 2nd ed. (Cambridge,

8 Julia Annas queries MacIntyre’s rejection of Hume as a traitor to the Scottish
tradition in her “MacIntyre on Traditions,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 18, no. 4
(Autumn 1989), pp. 392ff., unfortunately relying too much on Hugh Trevor-Roper’s
hostile account of pre-Humean Scottish culture.

9 Even critics from the Left have faulted MacIntyre for undue hostility to Burke; see
Jeffrey Stout, Democracy and Tradition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,
2003), p. 320, n. 25. For a briefer version of Stout’s critique of MacIntyre, see his
In *Oedipus Rex* Laius, fearing that his son will displace him, has him exposed to the elements. Regardless of how powerful and ruthless fathers may be in suppressing their children, though, they always end up displaced. The same is true of the status quo, however abstractly considered, for no set of rules, however detailed, can provide for all possible conflicts. The open-texture of our concepts means that our rules will always require interpretation, and the clashing interests and outlooks that exist in any society imply that we will always face divergent interpretations of our inherited ideas. (An illuminating counter-example is the rules of chess; an illuminating counter-example to the counter-example is the rules for conducting chess tournaments.)

Some of these interpretations will be innovative or even radical. John Locke, while a key figure in the libertarian side of our tradition, can be interpreted as a social conservative, but arguments drawn from his writings can also undermine his traditional views, and thus make the prohibitions on suicide and infanticide that inform his political theory entirely arbitrary. In Newman, the true course of development of doctrine is discerned intuitively in a way that gives no guidance in cases of real doubt. In any case, a tradition could not guide its adherents if it did not also constrain them; if it did not rule out some possibilities it would be useless.

3. Understanding Tradition

MacIntyre draws on the thought of Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos to define tradition as an element of an ongoing practice of inquiry, which...
might include large revisions of inherited theory and practice. Another model for understanding a tradition is that of a craft; crafts, like traditions, can develop or degenerate. And similar issues arise: Does Andy Warhol develop the visual arts, or does he represent their degeneration? (Even Warhol’s admirers might draw the line at rural lawn sculpture.\(^{15}\))

Yet another model for tradition is a natural language, and so the possibility that a person might become an adherent of, or at least understand, two different traditions is analogous to the possibility of his becoming bilingual. The canons of religious orthodoxy, the rules of law, and the kinship structures that designate some forms of sexual relation as incestuous, are all analogous to the rules of grammar. We learn a tradition as we learn a language, that is, by authoritative teaching and by imitation of practice. In both cases, the two sometimes diverge. Ludwig Wittgenstein provides an enlightening picture of language, and hence also of the broader tradition carried along with it:

> Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions made from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.\(^{16}\)

Our city includes not only the stable elements Wittgenstein mentions, but also regions under construction, zones of conflict, and burnt-out districts not yet rebuilt. It also includes regions in decline. As Simon Blackburn puts it, “To paraphrase Wittgenstein, when we start to abandon a way of thought, the lights do not go out one by one, but darkness falls gradually over the whole.”\(^{17}\)

MacIntyre’s philosophy requires that we find a middle ground between ideas in Platonic heaven and entrenched social habits. Traditions in the relevant sense involve claims to truth, but they also must inform the lives of their adherents. They are historical-cultural facts as well as systems of belief, and they could do what they do for human beings were they otherwise. All of them have to be transmitted from generation to generation, and the process of doing so is emotionally fraught. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were ancient Greeks looking for a common human nature, with equal emphasis on both sides of this proposition. Thus, those features of our existence that liberals dismiss as accidents of birth, such as birth on a certain territory or from certain sorts of parents, retain their relevance.

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\(^{15}\) Such sculpture is too tacky to be found even on the World Wide Web; a typical example depicts a young boy urinating and showing the crack in his buttocks.


In any event, we can distinguish two kinds of inquiry. One consists in the attempt of adherents of a tradition to understand it more deeply and apply it to problem situations. The other form of inquiry steps, at least to some extent, outside of the rival traditions and asks whether some tradition has exhausted itself and whether some other tradition can solve the resulting problems more adequately.

At this point in the argument, we can exclude some forms of radicalism. Some people claim that they can stand over and above the Western tradition and judge it as a whole to be a failure. (Such a claim is itself characteristically Western; Marx was never guilty of radicalism in this sense.) In MacIntyre’s sage words, however,

[c]laims about hallucinations, illusion, distortion of thought, and the like can be made only from the standpoint of claims that the contrast can be clearly drawn between hallucinatory, illusory and distorted modes of perception or thought, on the one hand, and genuine perceptions of reality or rigorous or undistorted reflection and deliberation, on the other. Hence, to identify ideological distortion one must not be a victim of it oneself. The claim to a privileged exemption from such distortion seems to be presupposed when such distortion is identified in others.  

Yet our problems arise not from outside agitators, but within the practice of our society, and lead to disputes among those usually considered conservative. What may be called the “integralist” impulse tries to rid a cultural tradition of extraneous elements, but at the risk of eliminating important truths. On the other hand, the “cafeteria” approach to intellectual issues, which picks and chooses among inherent ideas according to need or even mood, gives one every opportunity for adapting one’s beliefs to one’s purposes, even in the most cynical way.

4. MacIntyre’s Contribution

As MacIntyre has observed, “traditions are defined retrospectively,” often because some challenge makes their adherents aware that all of them, whatever their differences, are contributing to the same enterprise. Tradition is then further defined by granting authoritative status to some documents of the past, as the New Testament accorded authority to what Christians call the Old Testament and St. Thomas called Aristotle “the Philosopher”;

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19 Alasdair MacIntyre, God, Philosophy, Universities (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 165.
contemporary scientific naturalists adduce Galileo and Charles Darwin and literary modernists look back to James Joyce and T. S. Eliot.

Tradition is a feature of a community that unites author and reader, but there is also a long-standing practice of “unorthodox” reading. In consequence, the most important issues for a tradition arise from disagreements among adherents of the tradition itself, who are at least presumed to be able to apply its governing concepts competently. When adherents of a tradition disagree, they look for core elements in the tradition immune to change in terms of which disputes on the periphery can be adjudicated. However, different adherents often find the core in different places, in which case we have two or more traditions where we previously had one—in other words, a schism. Two sorts of situation can be distinguished: A set of rules and principles fails to determine a result in some case, so that competent representatives of the same tradition reach different conclusions. And a tradition divides into two or more sub-traditions, which differ systematically in their conclusions. These two situations are but different sides of the same phenomenon.20

MacIntyre’s most important contribution to this debate has been to forge a link between rationality and tradition. He points out that it is possible for a tradition to fail by its own standards, and thus encounter an incurable epistemological crisis. Adherents of such a tradition might discover that some other tradition better solves its problems than the tradition itself can do. Hence, he has hopes of avoiding relativism.

Reflective traditionalism admits the need for change while insisting on the demands of continuity—after all, Burke was a Whig, not a Tory. Yet Burkean traditionalism threatens to become an empty rhetorical form, casting “decent drapery” or a “politic veil” over the results of power politics, whatever they might be.21 A revision of Buckley’s quotation at the opening of this article that is sometimes proposed—“The dominant strain of conservative thought has stood athwart history, yelling ‘Slow Down!’”22—keeps us on a slippery slope on which we might find ourselves, even that from Weimar to Adolf Hitler, albeit going down slowly. Standard conservative and progressive accounts of tradition lack the resources to offer us a change of direction.

Jeffrey Stout reads MacIntyre as demanding a highly structured tradition as the only alternative to conceptual and moral chaos:

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20 I am here indebted to conversations with Josef Velazquez.


Equally essential to the rationality of a practice, according to MacIntyre’s account, is its embodiment in institutions that are capable of securing agreement on a doctrine of the human good (presumably by means of catechism directed at newcomers and a combination of magisterial suasion, discipline, and excommunication directed at dissidents).  

Citing Susan Moller Okin’s “incisive” critique of MacIntyre, Stout observes that feminism, though not a tradition in the sense of being defined by authoritative texts, is a tradition in the sense of being “a not yet completed narrative,’ an argument about the goods that constitute the tradition.”

This argument, however, confuses traditions in general with the particular tradition MacIntyre has embraced or even with a relatively stringent version of that tradition. And it is false that feminism lacks an authoritative core. Just try defending a pro-life position on the abortion issue around contemporary “mainstream” feminists, and you will discover that the concept of heresy is alive and well. This is not to say that the present situation among feminists is necessarily permanent; there are pro-life feminists and they might prevail in subsequent discussions within the tradition. As Stout observes, “All discursive practices involve authority and deference to some extent. . . . The difference is a matter of how, when, and why someone defers or appeals to authority, not a matter of whether one does so at all.” Heresy, let us recall, is not just any error, but an error by a purported adherent of a tradition that puts him or her outside its boundaries. Even the most loosely structured traditions can make it clear that someone has committed heresy. All traditions have their canons of orthodoxy and their internal debates, including debates between hard-liners and soft-liners. Yet traditions behave

23 Stout, Democracy, p. 136.


25 Patrice DiQuinzio, “Feminist Theory Reconfigured,” Reason Papers 18 (Fall 1993), pp. 17-29, praises the “instability” of feminist theory, but does not meet the point made in the text.


27 Stout, Democracy, p. 212.
more like drops of mercury than like organisms, merging and splitting almost at will.

Appeal to tradition is frequently appeal to the confluence of more than one tradition. In one of the stronger appeals to tradition in contemporary political argument, same-sex marriage opponents find it incredible that people at so many different times and places, whose beliefs and ways of life are in so many respects so different, could all have been wrong in their understanding of a crucial human institution. Greco-Roman pederasts did not marry their boyfriends. That the emperor Nero is reported to have “married” Sporus (whom he had had castrated) as a man and Doryphorus as a woman shows nothing about what was considered healthy or normal even in imperial Rome. The moral of the story is that, as emperor, Nero could do—or thought he could do—whatever he wished.

Some traditionalists appeal to a sacred tradition going back to the origins of humanity and existing, often in distorted form, in all cultures. But even this formulation gives us great liberty in distinguishing “sacred” tradition from its subsequent corruptions. There are aspects of “traditional marriage” that no one would now defend, such as use of daughters, and to a lesser extent of sons, as pawns in intra-familial politics. This practice persists in some communities, but is increasingly marginal even there.

Historically observable traditions change, or at least develop, often through an attempt to return to their origins. When we move from a more rigorous to a less rigorous rendering of the same tradition—say, from pre-Vatican II to post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism—there is both gain and loss. The advantages of a greater flexibility in dealing with the problems of human existence have been much celebrated, but the costs are increased confusion and, for any tradition faced with an aggressive cosmopolitan culture hostile to its understandings, the loss of the ability to resist externally generated pressure.

5. Development versus Degeneration

Some understandings of tradition, however, do not allow for the possibility of development. If we refuse the immobilist option, that is to say,


30 For an argument that raises this worry, see John T. Noonan, Jr., *A Church That Can and Cannot Change* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005).

31 For a contemporary example, see Pieper, *Tradition*, esp. chap. 2, p. 47.
that of resisting any change whatever, we face the urgent but difficult issue of distinguishing development from decadence. We cannot appeal to the verdict of history to resolve the question; as Jerome B. Schneewind puts it in a slightly different context, “If we must wait for it in order to know the solution to a problem, then that knowledge will have no role in the actual give and take of life.”

The American Revolution and the New Deal have been defended on traditionalist grounds. Even the French Revolution carried out the Bourbon tradition of the centralized absolute state: those of the revolutionaries’ decisions that Burke and his followers find most horrifying—the trial and execution of the king and the nationalization of the Church—followed English precedents. If before the modern period, the trial, as opposed to the murder, of a king was an unthinkable proceeding, credit or blame for the change must rest squarely on the shoulders of Oliver Cromwell. Likewise, it was Henry VIII, not the Jacobins, who took the lead in placing the goods of the state in the possession of the nation (though, in practice, it was Henry VIII and his cronies who did this). Burke would have had no more sympathy with the radical Protestantism of the Puritans and their forebears than with the Enlightenment Deism of the French Revolutionaries.

There is a gap in MacIntyre’s account between the concept of a practice and the concept of a tradition. This gap is most evident in his Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, in which he moves from tradition as inherited practice to three broad intellectual traditions, in which not all “plain persons” participate or are even aware of being part of a tradition. Granted, we must be initiated into a practice before we reflect upon it. We still, however, have to show how practices combine to form a tradition—whether a cultural tradition like that of the Sioux or a civilization-wide tradition like that of the Enlightenment—capable of regulating practice. Such traditions have to go back either to creative figures immune to the normal dependence of human beings on their cultural past or else to some deity.

What is needed to fill this gap is a philosophical ecclesiology—a philosophical understanding of the sort of historically embodied community that sustains a particular tradition. While attending to the historical data, the philosophical ecclesiologist will attempt to abstract conceptual and normative

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35 I am indebted to the editors of Reason Papers for probing this issue.
principles from this data, examining such concepts as *schism*, *fidelity*, *fundamentalism*, and the distinction between *development* and *decadence*.  

6. The American Legal and Political Tradition

   Traditions are historical entities that have founders, and which sometimes come to an end. I solve the problem of individuating traditions by citing traditions that are articulately defended as such in the contemporary world. Here I consider among self-identified traditions those with which I to some degree identify. As examples of the sorts of considerations that are relevant, I make some judgments on controversial matters, which I could not fully justify without going too far afield. Readers who disagree with my judgments will have to make similar judgments of their own. Further inquiry would require the study of the survival and break-up of a variety of other traditions, both religious and secular.  

   I now offer a brief survey of the American legal and political tradition, whose outcome will support MacIntyre’s claim that we live among ruins. In the early 1980s, MacIntyre identified himself with the American political tradition that combines procedural justice with republican virtue.  

   By 1987, however, his question had become “How to Be a North American,” and Canadians and Mexicans, despite their very different political histories, were included in the community supporting the American tradition, along with the Founding Fathers, Southern rebels, African-Americans, Native Americans, and Japanese and other immigrants. Though the social embodiment of a tradition need not be a nation-state, I do not see why North

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36 For a historian of religion who foregrounds the conceptual issues, see Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995). Decadence, as I understand it, is a cultural phenomenon, that of a community that has lost the capacity to transmit itself, biologically and culturally.


America, as opposed to say Euro-America or the Western hemisphere, is a useful way of specifying the social embodiment of a tradition.

In any event, I here focus on the American political tradition and its important legal aspect, which is inevitably linked to the history of a particular nation-state. There are three major components of our political tradition: reliance on the U.S. Constitution as a legal document; the English-speaking liberal tradition founded by John Milton and Locke; and the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” on which we rely, as we once relied on “mainstream” Protestantism, when we emphasize the need for cultural continuity and public virtue.

If we treat Anglo-American liberalism as a tradition of dealing with value conflict, in a complex relationship with the “civil religion” tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, we can avoid the severity of MacIntyre’s judgment of contemporary moral discourse and political practice, and hence also the question concerning how, on MacIntyre’s showing, he could possibly write his books. Recall here the “catastrophe theory” defended in his After Virtue: “This time however the barbarians are not beyond the gates; they have already been governing us for quite some time.”

Neither MacIntyre nor anyone else, however, has found a way of bridging the gap between the Evangelical and the Enlightenment wings of the American tradition or addressing effectively the related conflict between the demand for a virtuous citizenry and our reliance on institutional checks and abstract rights to manage the corrupt nature of humanity. The libertarian side of our tradition limits the role of the state to maintaining public order, but relies on non-state communities to maintain the degree of virtue any functioning society requires. (In the case of a libertarian society, the most important social virtue is self-reliance.) The question is how to ensure that, when the state shrinks, sufficiently robust non-state communities arise.

Americans appeal to the law, and especially the Constitution, to resolve the ambiguities of our political tradition and make it possible for

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41 For this criticism, see Stout, “Homeward Bound,” who uses MacIntyre’s criticism of Herbert Marcuse against MacIntyre himself.


43 Ibid., p. 245. I am grateful to the editors of Reason Papers for probing this point.
adherents of divergent strands to live together. Even the least traditional elements in American society appeal to the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment, which they sometimes seem to regard as the entire Constitution. No one thinks that the U.S. Supreme Court is infallible, however, even setting aside the notoriously fraught issue of abortion. John Rawls, for whom the Court embodies “public reason,” finds some of its decisions “profoundly dismaying” and would find some of its more recent decisions even more so. Apologies for Supreme Court decisions can be as divisive as criticisms of them. Mark Graber defends the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, hitherto reprobated by Democrats and Republicans alike. Yet if just any Supreme Court decision can be rejected, then constitutional jurisprudence is a game without rules. However, if whatever the Court decides to do can be provided with decent jurisprudential drapery, we are faced with the collapse of constitutional jurisprudence into power politics.

Nativist constitutional lawyers now argue that the provision of the Fourteenth Amendment conferring citizenship on “all persons born . . . in the United States” does not extend to the children of undocumented aliens, whom such jurists think of as akin to an invading army. Authoritarian lawyers are prepared to argue that, as Richard Nixon once said, “When the President does it that means that it is not illegal.” A horrifying example of this doctrine is provided by John Yoo, who believes that the president has a higher-law right to torture children when he deems that national security so requires.


46 Mark Graber, *Dred Scott and the Problem of Constitutional Evil* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006); for a roster of critics of *Dred Scott* from every jurisprudential persuasion, see ibid., pp. 14-16.


49 In a debate with Doug Cassell, Chicago, 2006; see “John Yoo Says President Bush Can Legally Torture Children,” accessed online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hz01hN9J-BM. The exchange went as follows:
A legal realist approach to such issues collapses not only the distinction between law and politics, but also that between politics and war. The only question then becomes: “Who gets to decide?” Moreover, issues like abortion, immigration, and war, as well as the use of judicial power to stigmatize certain moral and political positions as unconstitutional, all have to do with our relationship with outsiders, both within and without the boundaries of America. They engage the distinction between friends and enemies, and the sovereign power to draw the line between them. Thus Carl Schmitt defends the Night of the Long Knives from a legal point of view: “the act of the Leader was a genuine act of jurisdiction.”

It was the need to control payback violence that led to demands for the rule of law in the first place. We now observe the transformation of law into politics, of politics into war (the result of which is sometimes called “lawfare”), followed by the transformation of war into payback violence in the style of Rambo. This collapse of law into might has its correlates among elite scholars. Legal scholars across the jurisprudential spectrum now join the Critical Legal Studies movement in holding that American law is an incoherent system, from which any position you please can be persuasively

“Cassel: If the president deems that he’s got to torture somebody, including by crushing the testicles of the person’s child, there is no law that can stop him? Yoo: No treaty. Cassel: Also no law by Congress—that is what you wrote in the August 2002 memo. Yoo: I think it depends on why the President thinks he needs to do that.”


supported.\textsuperscript{54} Episodes such as the O. J. Simpson trial confirm the popular impression that American law is a farce, for many Americans rightly believed, before the verdict, both that Simpson was guilty and that he would get off.\textsuperscript{55}

The mutual tolerance that underlies the American constitutional order is not a transcendent requirement standing above all of our other beliefs. The reasons for holding that tolerance does not stand outside the other goods of social life are also reasons for holding that militancy is not a transcendent requirement either.\textsuperscript{56} Hence, the survival of our traditions of political civility is an open question.

7. Religious Traditions and the Development of Doctrine

A tradition can die, as MacIntyre rightly insists, because it degenerates into inarticulate prejudices or because—as has happened with some forms of Islamic and Thomist thought—it ceases to support further inquiry.\textsuperscript{57} In Islamic thought, the issue turns on the continued possibility of \textit{ijtihad}, or individual interpretation.\textsuperscript{58} When this happens, it becomes a treasured museum piece, which its supposed adherents ignore when it stands in the way of their important purposes. A tradition can also die because it loses its ability to harmonize the results reached by its adherents. Inquiry can mean anything from filling in tiny gaps to throwing the whole project into question (as MacIntyre does for some traditions).

Some traditions limit themselves to accumulated human wisdom, others claim divine revelation, and others, like Thomism, invoke a mixture of the two. Likewise, traditions sometimes speak about human nature and flourishing (and the requirements of justice among human beings), sometimes


\textsuperscript{55} I owe this point to Robert Huguenor.

\textsuperscript{56} This sentence is directed against Stanley Fish, e.g., \textit{There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It’s a Good Thing, Too} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Stanley Fish, “Mission Impossible: Settling the Just Bounds between Church and State,” \textit{Columbia Law Review} 97, no. 8 (December 1997), pp. 2255-2333.

\textsuperscript{57} I owe this point to O’Neill.

about divine revelation, and sometimes about both. The problems I have
found for the concept of tradition arise for both its human and its divine
aspects. I therefore now turn to religious traditions.

The two-sided character of the concept of religious tradition, as
MacIntyre explains it, reflects the concept of God: “theistic belief has a
double aspect, at once problematic and unproblematic. As the former, it
invites ruthless and systematic questioning. As the latter it requires devoted
and unquestioning obedience.” Dociline such as the Trinity are “to be
piously believed and not impiously questioned,” as St. Columban puts it.

Against those people who claim a patent or copyright on God, we must
maintain that He is greater than any conceptual and normative structure we
may be able to formulate. Yet God also addresses us—or at least is believed
to address us—with quite definite requirements of belief and practice. We
see this tension at work in the endless dialogue between creative, and
therefore dissident, Catholic theologians and the Church’s doctrinal
watchdogs (and consequently the “police court” theology assessing the
authority of various documents and the resulting limits on dissent). Catholic
authority is now searching for a “hermeneutics of continuity,” which avoids
both repudiation of Vatican II as heretical and the claim that the “spirit of
Vatican II” authorizes limitless departures from past belief and practice, but
it is not evident how this can be done.

We are not Platonic philosopher-kings (or -queens) creating
institutions de novo. Hence, the advice a philosopher can give theologians
and community leaders is limited. We need not only to reflect on our
traditions, but also to live them, and this means that interaction with human
experience in its many forms cannot be avoided. There is no algorithm to
distinguish legitimate developments of a tradition from degenerations of it,
but considerations drawn from the need of the adherents of a tradition to
maintain and transmit it to future generations can at least provide persuasive
arguments. The vitality of any tradition requires respectful attention to the
convictions of one’s fellow adherents, both living and dead.

Martin Luther’s “humanist” opponents, such as Erasmus and
Thomas More, were right to foresee that his theology entailed
fragmentation—since his day, the extreme fragmentation—of Christendom.
(Although Protestants do not view schism as gravely as do Catholics, even
many Protestants find the present chaos disquieting.) There is something
profoundly wrong, even apart from the issues of substance, about the way that


60 Sermons of Columbanus, Sermon I (Cork, Ireland: University College, 2004), accessed online at: www.ucc.ie/celt/published.

liberals in the Anglican Communion pursued the issues of the ordination of women and open homosexuals.

8. Conclusion

At this point, it is necessary to warn against the fundamentalist solution to the problem of fragmentation in tradition, namely, to find one authoritative source (the Pope, the Bible, or something else) and cleave to it through thick and thin. The identity, scope, interpretation, and methods of application of any authority all depend on the tradition in which the authority finds its place. This does not mean, as Liberal Protestants are accused of saying, that the Church wrote the Bible and can rewrite it. 62 Neither the authorities themselves, nor the way they are customarily received, supports such a reading.

It will not do to take the Zeitgeist as our authority, since contemporary people disagree about all of the pertinent issues and many phenomena are both characteristically modern and horrible. If we were Germans living in 1930, “getting with it” would be the last thing any sane person would do. There is also the mishmash or worse that results when an individual favors whatever bits of tradition happen to favor his mood, inclinations, or political program and he puts the bits together; such phenomena can range from secular bar mitzvahs to Visigothic blessings of same-sex unions conducted by Anglican bishops. One wonders whether even the authors of such concoctions take the results seriously; the rest of us are under no obligation to do so. Even here the criterion is pragmatic and aesthetic. Some people end up taking very gravely what others regard as campy jokes or examples of guerilla theater. (I here deal with postmodern developments within pre-existing traditions, not with postmodernism or genealogy as traditions in their own right.63)

One would like some way of knowing in advance the practical consequences of proposed innovations, but we inevitably judge by results in fact (in the Anglican case, high-profile secessions among its more traditional adherents and a loss of over one third of its membership).64 For the rest, we need to return to the rough ground of moral, political, and religious argument.

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62 I do not know of anyone who holds this view explicitly, though there are plenty of people who act as if they did.

63 On which, see MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry.

64 I calculate the decline of membership from 1968, when the House of Bishops declined to take action against Bishop Pike for his unorthodox theological views. For details on membership, see “Episcopal Church Reports Lowest Membership in 70 Years,” 2001, accessed online at: http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/episcopal-church-reports-lowest-membership-in-70-years/.

David Virtue, 2011, accessed online at:
Traditionalists need to defend their stances not only as venerable, but also as true or valuable in a way that can be recognized today. That long-standing elements of our traditions should not easily be set aside is an important consideration, but no more than that. Traditionalists about marriage, for example, cannot rely on the antiquity of heterosexual marriage alone, but will have to appeal also to our need for an institution making regular provision for the procreation and the rearing of the next generation, and to the danger that admitting rival forms of “marriage” will undermine this institution by inviting heterosexuals to regard their marriages as no more binding than gay relationships.  

65 This essay was read to a meeting of the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry at Providence College in July 2011. I am indebted to the participants at that meeting, especially my student Luis Pinto de Sa, and to an anonymous reader for their comments.