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Alasdair MacIntyre's Hermeneutics of Tradition

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It may well be that, as the eminently terrestrial, Hebrew philosopher Qohelet says, “there is nothing new under the sun” and that “what has been is what will be” (Eccl 1:9 RSV). Nevertheless, we are perennially enraptured with newness and captivated by the thought that to whichever bleak and otherwise intellectually sterile stock we may owe our provenance, the horizon still promises that at least some of that may finally be left behind. History may repeat itself in the lives of others, but not in mine. Nobody, it seems, wants to think that everything we do has been done before, or at least, not in this particular way, with this particular emphasis, motivation, and so on. Yet neither will it do brazenly to assert our absolute freedom from the past, particularly as such assertions are only the thinly veiled reachings of desperation. It is true that Qohelet magnificently and commendably lacks the starry-eyed optimism of the modern spirit, but every honest description of the human situation must surely locate us in the same place: under the sun.¹

Our situation is always somewhere in the middle. To be middle is simply to be creaturely: less than God and yet dependent on God and others; it is to have a past that will not easily be discarded but also to participate in the hope that not all time is past to us, which is to say that the future will

¹. I am grateful to Dan Olson for this concept.
not easily be postponed (it quickly becomes present). The middle status of Christians reflects this. It is a matter of identity and task and both of these are known, transmitted, enabled, and brought to flourishing through the ways that the church inhabits (and thereby simply is) a tradition in good working order. We ineluctably inhabit the middle space carved out by an active and ongoing dialectic between the future-oriented exercise and meaning of freedom and the constraining identity-granting presence of the past.

Still, as Alasdair MacIntyre notes, we only know how to describe what a tradition is by looking back on it. We are in the middle but also forward of our forebears in the same tradition and thereby better able to see and name the challenges they faced as challenges to the tradition we share with them. Likewise, those of us in the present who live by and in a tradition are in the middle of our own challenges that it will be up to future generations to identify with better precision than we are now able to do. A tradition’s identity-forming aspect is therefore prominently confirmed by honesty, which is to say, by the recognition that who I am is larger than my present actions and other attempts at self-definition. It recognizes that how I now act, if it is to be intelligible to me as an action of one sort as opposed to another, owes to connections (linguistic and otherwise) that others have made before me. My acting in these intelligible ways, then, also demands that I honestly identify the continuities between these others and myself. I am one of them, I then say, through nothing more than the tacit belief that what I do and say has some continuity with the other things that I do and say.

I have begun this way in order to emphasize how the ways we conceptualize the self will be most genuine when we neither seek to evade the traditions of which we are a part, nor shrink from the active life of inhabiting them. Hannah Arendt defined tradition in the strong sense of enabling identity: I know how I am because I come from a people who have thought of and known themselves in this particular way. MacIntyre’s use of tradition involves with greater emphasis the agent in the tradition’s present-tense hermeneutical activity. In order for a tradition to be living, it must be in dispute. It must be able to be identified as that which has produced ways of thinking, doing, and living that are themselves challenges to the tradition’s

2. MacIntyre, God, Philosophy, Universities, 165.

3. Arendt worried about “repetition” of the past, a quality she adduced ought to be absent from politics, thus in a sense opposing the vita activa to tradition (see The Human Condition, chap. 1). Max Weber relied on a similar understanding when he typologized, as three bases of political legitimacy, tradition, faith, and enactment. In this case, tradition appeals to something’s validity as “that which has always been” and frequently enforces conformity to it through superstition and psychological inhibition. Weber, Economy and Society, 36–37.
self-identity. These are the most significant pressures that will be exerted against the outer edges of what constitutes a tradition. The internal critic does not simply ask, “What lies beyond?” Instead, she asks, “How can what lies beyond be brought inside?” Like the ever-expanding universe, a tradition that is at the height of its health and in sheer command of its critical faculties will be actively renegotiating its boundaries. It will, paradoxically, refuse to take for granted the absoluteness of its inheritance for the sake of the debt it owes to that very inheritance; it will rebuff every suggestion that a word uttered ought to be the last word.

MacIntyre refers to this dynamism and draws attention to the ongoing nature of a tradition by defining it as “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: whose with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.” The ability to name one’s ongoing participation in a tradition as participation in a living tradition will depend on the extent of the tradition’s own success in addressing things as counterintuitive as the very means it employs to determine success.

II

Alasdair MacIntyre’s well-known and influential recovery of tradition within the discourse of moral philosophy serves as a prominent counterpoint to the dominant modes of reasoning that the Enlightenment produced as well as the ones that its heirs only half-heartedly discarded when they thought they were well rid of them. For the broader aims addressed by the essays in this volume, MacIntyre’s account may neatly be divided heuristically according to three sets of related questions. In the remainder of this essay, I will focus mostly on the second and third. First, there are questions relating to what a tradition is, particularly when viewed from the outside. What distinguishes movement and activity within the tradition from movement and activity independent of it? How much change can a tradition bear and still be recognizable as the same thing? These questions are commonly asked of a tradition when it is fragmenting or, for whatever reason, is in poor working order.

Second, there are questions about how a tradition engages itself from within. How much rests on the tradition’s ingenuity in producing satisfactory responses to its most trenchant challengers? What, in short, are the hermeneutical options that govern maneuvers amidst a tradition’s assorted self-understandings? The second set of questions relate most directly to the virtues, those classic marks of character chiefly associated with Aristotle and, in Catholic moral thought, with Thomas Aquinas. MacIntyre’s recovery of virtue in the late twentieth century initiated a distinct challenge to the dominant philosophical options: Kant and his best-known critics, universal moral codes and their despisers, moral duty and those whose ethic grandiosely repudiates such things. It was a calculated attack on the Enlightenment’s imposing assemblage of clique-morals (universality, autonomy, individuality) that only benignly paraded themselves as all-encompassing but are now roundly acknowledged to have been harboring all along a most insidious violence encoded in the outliers’s irrationality and savagery. Yet it was just as much an exposé directed against the Enlightenment coterie’s celebrated opposites (particularity, subjectivism, relativism) which befall MacIntyre’s reprimand just to the extent that their vaunted status trades in merely reproducing in mirror images the very supply of options they purport to rebuff.

This kind of critique must, of course, always be on its guard lest it succeed more in being clever than in being true. For MacIntyre, both the Enlightenment and its strident detractors have in common one thing that unites them more than they realize: their disdain for tradition. It is a disdain both of particular traditions and of tradition simply as such. Immanuel Kant famously asked, “What is enlightenment?” to which he supplied his own answer: “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” and the courage “to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.” Sapere aude!—Dare to be wise! This self-confident contempt for all things traditional not only undergirded the massive Enlightenment project with its unprecedented value for doubt and novelty, its notoriously sweeping claims about the capacities and inferences of reason, and its coolheaded political achievement of distance from every medieval (or worse) petty superstition. It also lies at the heart of the subsequent claims on the same topics, the postmodern fear of commitment that sets in with such force once the old, conquering hopes of reason have been dashed. And what of the final set of questions?

Third are questions about how traditions relate to each other. What must traditions share in order to have a debate over the nature of goods

and the means of achieving them? Must they have in common a critical mass of background beliefs in order to make claims on each other? These are questions of communication and have particular interest to Christian thought so long as Christianity can never rest content with a superior tradition (rationally or otherwise) that merely serves those whose it is. If the Christian tradition (and here the plurality of Christian traditions must be recognized, to be addressed later on) is bearer of the good news by which it is constituted, then its primal impulse will always be drawn on as one of extension and engagement, which means that a gospel that is intrinsically already 

communication—God’s to the world in Christ; Christ to the world in and as the church—then Christianity’s outward forces will be most genuine and true to its task when they refresh and enliven rather than threaten and imperil the tradition of which they are a part.

Until now, I have avoided explicitly naming the false choice between conservative and progressive. MacIntyre disagrees with Edmund Burke’s politically invested appeals for tradition over against reason—new thinking—and the peace and stability of tradition over against conflict.⁶ Burke was doing with the idea of tradition what he saw that a people ought to do

⁶. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206. There is some question over how to read Burke in this regard. In some ways, MacIntyre seems closer to Burke when it comes to natural rights. For Burke, such “pretended rights” are not the “real rights of men” (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 58). The question of what we understand rights to be cannot be answered through appeals to what is self-evident and natural but “it is a thing to be settled by convention.” Therefore Burke asks, “how can any man claim, under the conventions of civil society, rights which do not so much as suppose its existence? rights which are absolutely repugnant to it?” (58). Burke prefers the conventions of civil society to the stridently sure metaphysicality of natural rights theorists since they are morally and politically closer to the kinds of balances and compromises that he thinks ought to characterize such societies: “the rights of men are in a sort of middle, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned” (61, emphasis original). Though antidemocratic, Burke in this kind of appeal seems to be a classic liberal for rejecting appeals to a natural and eternal order, and if so he is not very far from MacIntyre, who famously claimed of natural rights that “there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns” (*After Virtue*, 69). MacIntyre does qualify this statement to ensure that he is not misunderstood as dispensing with all rights whatsoever: “By ‘rights’ I do not mean those rights conferred by positive law or custom on specified classes of person; I mean those rights which are alleged to belong to human beings as such . . . as natural rights or as the rights of man” (68–69). Christopher J. Insole argues that Burke only seems to be “modern” in his efforts to tie rights only to convention and that these efforts really grow out of Burke’s more fundamental judgment that convention is the politically most appropriate way to encode and root a society in eternal law (*Politics of Human Frailty*, chap. 1). If, therefore, MacIntyre is consistent in his distancing from Burke’s account of tradition, he does so as one who is as much a historicist as he is one who longs for the premodern, which, while leaving more to say about how MacIntyre negotiated the options, nevertheless goes some distance toward explaining why progressive and conservative for him represent a false choice.
with and to their own tradition: appeal and adhere to it. But to MacIntyre, this serves a truncated and falsely attenuated function. The reason is simply that the dialectic between adherence and activity is not only a characteristic of every living tradition, but may even be said to be nothing other than the tradition itself, the confrontation of new realities only recognizable as such because of the depth of a commitment to what is not new.

For MacIntyre, “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition.” As an example, in its founding documents, a university may state its reasons for existing and its mission. Over time—and very quickly, in fact—these things will create a tradition and part of what it will subsequently mean to live and work as part of that tradition is to argue about the university’s existence as times change and new challenges arise that were not spelled out by the founders. Life in the university’s tradition will thereby be a hermeneutical life. The living tradition’s life is, by definition, a contested life; it is a life of contestation over definitions, simple descriptions, and monolithically patent propositions. When that life ceases to be a hermeneutical life, the tradition that purportedly makes the institution an institution will cease to be vital to it. “Indeed, when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead.” People will ask, but will have no way of answering, “What are these buildings here for?”

Now, how can one tell whether disagreements are salutary and point to a tradition’s vibrancy and health or whether they are a sign of its decline or even absence? After all, we would easily be misled if we assumed that every debate signals that a tradition is in good working order. Indeed, in a characteristically powerful excess of rhetoric, MacIntyre diagnoses the modern moral predicament as one that we know to be “after virtue” because of the interminability of contemporary debates over war, abortion, and so on, drawing, as they do, on fragments of the ruined moral traditions of the past. A people may deceive themselves into feeling quite moral, in fact, on account of their engagement in such debates when what is really going on is the exchange of a lot of hot air generated by loose rational associations and sheer personal preference. Still, as Jeffrey Stout observes, just because ethical debates are still going on does not mean that they are interminable—the nineteenth-century debates over the abolition of slavery came to an end.

8. Ibid.
9. The extended metaphor of this “disquieting suggestion” animates the first two chapters of *After Virtue*. 
and presumably their doing so points to the work of one or more moral traditions. Another answer to the question about debate actually side-steps it by adducing that the real importance lies not with the tradition but with the story that can be told of harmony and disharmony across time (and not with the coherence of embodying it).

Disharmony and discontinuity are the watchwords of much postmodern discourse but they still depend conceptually on their opposites. Put simply, the discontinuities stand out against a more fulsome background of continuities. The flux can only be said to be “flux” because not everything is in flux; most of the time, most things are not. One of the metaphysical tensions in Nietzsche’s thought is precisely the unintended conservatism implied in the eternal recurrence of everything; the ability to name change disappears from meaningful vocabulary when change is all that there is: change as a groundwork of all existence is very difficult to specify as what exists.

MacIntyre therefore finds in the postmodern “genealogists” (Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze) a particular version of the dialectic between change and stasis, though with this twist. “From the genealogist’s standpoint the problems are not ones of discontinuities within continuities so much as of continuities within discontinuities.” To MacIntyre, this reversal evinces a lack of honesty and gratitude toward the continuous since even though Foucault, for example, never claimed to enact or cause discontinuity but only to identify such ruptures in history, Foucault himself was engaged in a criticism whose continuity is partially extended and strengthened in direct proportion to its success in finding discontinuity. So by taking for granted the priority of discontinuous things (and whether this taking-for-granted evinces a metaphysical faith in it remains an interesting question to debate), Foucault can be said even to weaken his own method of investigation. Says MacIntyre: “For if the genealogist is inescapably one who disowns part of his or her own past, then the genealogist’s narrative presupposes enough of unity, continuity, and identity to make such disowning possible.” These are all aspects of one of the questions with which we began: how a tradi-

10. Stout, Democracy and Tradition, chap. 5. Stout points out that, as much as MacIntyre rejects liberalism for being a tradition founded on disdain for tradition, it is nevertheless still a tradition (see Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, chap. 17: “Liberalism Transformed into a Tradition”). For Stout, liberalism is best exemplified as democracy and by a set of proper names (Emerson, Dewey, etc.) that do not appear in MacIntyre’s genealogy of liberalism.
11. MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions, 214.
12. Foucault theorizes about discontinuity in Order of Things, chap. 7.
tion engages itself from within. The owning and disowning are part of that engagement.

III

It is therefore possible, on MacIntyre’s critique, that these thinkers are quite simply fooling themselves and just so are falling into a trap that was set before they got there. They cannot finally be “post-” to the traditions they think they are rejecting since their very mode of rejecting them employs skills afforded by them. What is the meaning of this? MacIntyre famously tells a modern declension narrative in which the nadir is a very deliberate and decisive trap-setting by the eighteenth-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. A principal goal of Kant’s philosophy was to argue that morality is independent of religion and cannot be derived from it. He reasoned that claims such as “Jesus Christ is perfect,” while sounding as if they carry the force of revelation nevertheless depend rather more prosaically on prior rational notions of perfection. Attributing perfection to Jesus Christ, then, lays a religious claim athwart a moral one that was independently and previously conceived.

By this strategy, though, Kant thought he was doing Christianity a favor by saving it (or at least “its” morality) from the charge of subjectivism. Religion is piety and the subjective experience of God via nonrational encounter, Kant happily allows; but this is no threat to morality. It is not possible to know whether something is morally right because God commands it. And when revealed religion also accords with rational (prior, independent) morality, so much the better for revealed religion; but such accordance is never anything more than icing on the metaphysical cake.14

From what, exactly, did Kant think he was saving Christianity? The answer is that he saw the need to save it from becoming a form of speaking, living, and acting that was perpetually turned in on itself, providing for itself at every turn the sufficient reasons for everything that it does and claims.

14. As Gilles Deleuze observes, “Kant often reminds us that the moral law has no need at all for subtle arguments, but rests on the most . . . common use of reason. . . . We must therefore speak of a moral common sense. . . . Moral common sense is the accord of the understanding with reason, under the legislation of reason itself. We rediscover here the idea of a good nature of the faculties and of a harmony determined in conformity with a particular interest of reason.” Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, 49–50, cited in Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist, 172. Kant’s universalizing was just the overreaching assertion of the particular, hence his reliance on “we” and “common,” concepts that have come under extreme ridicule in recent years as evidence of his failure.
But this will quickly be written off as an utterly meaningless religion caught up in tautologies about God’s goodness and every other claim it wishes to make:

A: “God is good.”
B: “What does ‘good’ mean?”
A: “We know what good means by looking at what God is like.”
B: “Then you are just claiming ‘God is what God is like.’ Pathetic.”
A: “Darn.”

Kant’s way out guards against this fatal disappointment and it is, quite literally, a “way out”: what is outside to religion is the realm of moral and other reasoning that owes nothing to religious confessions in order to be true. MacIntyre is a characteristic critic of this kind of reasoning: “In so endowing moral rules with objectivity one is in danger of deifying them, of setting them up as standards by which God himself can be brought under judgment. Kant does not flinch at this prospect; but even a casual reader of the Bible ought to be aware of the blasphemy involved.”15 It is the surest way to encourage the worship of idols. In fact, in accepting Kant on this score, the only way to say anything true and non-idolatrous of God (“God is good” clearly will not qualify) is to say nothing at all.16

It is almost certainly pointless to ask whether, in all of this, Kant remained Christian. He certainly thought he did. A more fruitful question is to ask what kind of modification to the Christian moral tradition Kant represents. It is fair to say that the independence of Kant’s morality created something other than Christian morality—but this was not its precise goal. Its precise goal was not the creation of an alternative morality but the demonstration that all morality is necessarily independent of religion. It only takes, then, the existence of a rival to blow the entire enterprise wide open and to expose its pretentious neutrality and universality. This is not the place to detail how this has been done (to do so would in some sense simply be to recount the history of philosophy since the Enlightenment). Nevertheless, this very point describes a great deal of MacIntyre’s lifelong project: arguing that reason cannot be the way out of particular traditions since reason itself is always constituted by traditions, even those traditions against which reason sets itself most doggedly in the attempt to be free of them.

15. MacIntyre, Difficulties in Christian Belief, 105.
16. The contemporary revival of negative theology certainly represents a way of refusing this alternative.
With considerable irony, we may observe that the greatest threat to Kant’s universalizing does not even come from “outside” in the sense that anthropology, for Kant’s own day, was soon to make plain. Rather, there is a considerable Christian inside to Kant’s outsiding. As William Connolly summarizes Gilles Deleuze, “From this alternative perspective Kant can now be interpreted first to project persisting elements of a Christian culture into a ‘common sense’ projected as a constitutive universal and then to invoke this projected accord of the faculties to justify a Christian-inspired rendering of the moral life. Common sense is projected as an unschematized universal; it then functions to place beyond critical review a particular interpretation of morality.” Kant’s solution was merely a bluff waiting to be called, a stop-gap amidst early modernity’s flight from yet another bluff (Kant thought)—the dogmatic and insular medieval period. But the way forward can prove difficult when its breaking free of the past really only reintroduces the old particulars in shiny new (universally rational) garb. Kant’s most critical failure was lack of gratitude toward the moral rationality he dressed up.

Kant’s crucial mistake, according to MacIntyre, was assuming that the moral tradition he had inherited (Christianity) needed to be rescued from what others would later call relativism (or nihilism). Reason was summarily exalted above not only the Christian tradition, but over every tradition whatsoever. Its superiority and priority over tradition lie precisely in its not owing anything to it so as to be immune to the fates traditions inevitably face as they develop through time. What makes appeal to tradition dangerous is both its inherent instability and its temporality. If a rational argument only makes sense in terms that have been employed by a particular tradition and that are therefore terms with their own flux-history, then Kant reasoned that the argument’s conclusion is no more stable than the history to which it has united itself for its intelligibility.

Again, MacIntyre’s crucial claim, if correct, is a disaster for Kant: all reasoning is tradition-constituted. Kant’s reasoning is no different from anyone else’s in this respect. Its universality was scrupulously ornamental but it did not go all the way down. In a cruel twist of history, his fantastic failure has probably been more responsible than anything else for the currently fashionable false humility and monotonous reduction of morality to mere taste and preference in today’s society. But there is also no reason that


18. MacIntyre asks, “Of what did the Enlightenment deprive us? What the Enlightenment made us for the most part blind to and what we now need to recover is, so I shall argue, a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition . . . ?” (Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, 7).
the alternative to Kant ought to be his mirror image. MacIntyre notes that the crucial decision we now face on this side of the Enlightenment’s collapse is “Aristotle or Nietzsche?” MacIntyre himself has developed considerably as a distinctively Christian philosopher since he asked that question and presumably now would ask, “Thomas or Nietzsche?” But why Nietzsche?

Nietzsche is one genealogist who was keenly aware of some critical facts that MacIntyre accepts: not only that Kant did not do Christianity any favors, but also that Kant’s independent and autonomous morality remains deeply associated with Christianity, even for those who, unlike Kant himself, at least ostensibly want nothing to do with it. Nietzsche’s appeal for a revaluation of morality, for example, was a response to what he perceived to be the atheists’ loss of nerve, the refusal finally to take leave of everything god-like, the failure to greet the idols’ twilight with ardent anticipation of their replacements. MacIntyre begins *The Religious Significance of Atheism* by observing how much a great nineteenth-century radical atheist like Ludwig Feuerbach, in his careful refutation of Christianity, nevertheless sought to retain its core moral principles and yet without its transcendent metaphysics. Feuerbach was just a pagan version of Kant, but still too Christian to be a good pagan. To Nietzsche, any philosophy that holds on to notions like Christian justice without God or ethics without metaphysics is not only insincere or cowardly; it is also in obvious cahoots with its enemy and so cannot help talking out of both sides of its mouth. Untrue to itself, it lacks the philosophical abandon appropriate to the whole of life conceived according to utter faithfulness to temporality and terrestriality (and that pervades Nietzsche’s inimitable style of writing). When Zarathustra repeatedly counsels, “Be faithful to the earth,” his target audience is never the serene religious who are content with their faith in otherworldly assurances and goals, but always the tortured and schizophrenic irreligious who, having conceived of a space without God, nevertheless withhold their lives from it. Nietzsche’s gospel to them is the perfectly hard truth but poison to their ears: that space is really nothing other than the earth itself and you constantly betray it by your half-hearted embrace of God’s death.


20. MacIntyre and Ricoeur, *Religious Significance of Atheism*, 4. Interestingly, MacIntyre goes on to suggest that in our time (the late 1960s), such dependence on and confusion over the task of atheism has disappeared. There is a great deal of irony and certainly a historical argument to be made in the fact that this dependence has re-emerged in recent years with a vengeance in the quasi-serious writings of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. For critique of Sam Harris, in particular, see my *What Makes Us Moral*?
By staring into the void and confidently walking forward, Nietzsche presents, for MacIntyre, the only genuine alternative, not only to tradition-as-such (itself an extremely problematic notion as I will soon show), but to the god-tradition that prizes morality itself. Nietzsche understood the way that great traditions work and he sympathized with people’s desire to be part of them. The way that the West has never ceased to venerate Ancient Greece, however, did not please him at all. In fact, such veneration only masqueraded itself as respect for tradition; it was really just a cover-up for a fundamental timidity, a root anxiety that life might ever ask us truly to be a part of it. Nietzsche claimed that the Ancient Greeks—in their noblest moments—never gave a thought to their legacy, nor concerned themselves with fidelity to their past. Instead, their life was staunchly present-tense. They were creators rather than protectors. Their only care was in knowing whether present acts maximize the creative impulse. Subsequent generations appeal to these Greeks in direct proportion to their effete resignation to pasts that will almost certainly be more glorious than the future. They sustain and cultivate only the most tenuous and plain connections with this heritage but they cannot endure it as their own. They forsake the moves that would truly make them Greek-kin: a blithe disregard and utter contempt of tradition. That is the only way to share in it.

Greek tradition exhibited for Nietzsche what political philosopher, William Connolly, describes as a “politics of becoming.” With such a politics, new political possibilities—ways of life—are thrust into being through discordance and in particular through disturbance of the old laws and identities. As such, any commensurate ethic will lack the simplicity that Kant sought; instead there will be ambiguity and the most prominent mark of the use of reason will not be agreement and stability but debate and reformulation. For Nietzsche, “We can destroy only as creators.” A Greek disregard for unity may have ironically produced a united nobility, but if it did so, then is was because of an ironic attachment to the goods that that tradition would produce, which is to say, its primary concern with living a discordant life,

21. Nietzsche therefore remarks that “we moderns have nothing whatever of our own” in contrast to the Greeks who “kept a tenacious hold on their unhistorical sense” (Un timely Meditations, sec. 4). This is the ultimate paradox for a people who want to claim to be free of tradition and yet constantly assemble fragments of others’ pasts for want of knowing who they actually are. Nietzsche continues: “Only by replenishing and cramming ourselves with the ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions, discoveries of others do we become anything worthy of notice, that is to say, walking encyclopaedias, which is what an ancient Greek transported into our own time would perhaps take us for.”

of overcoming the self-deception that leads to prematurely assuming that disparate things display a greater degree of organization than they actually do. Instability was not the goal but the given. The attendant ethic is one that is determined to live and create in the face of it. And while this kind of ethic may give the appearance of staid greatness, it is only an appearance afforded by the ethic's refusal to stop moving lest it become the "gravedigger of the present."24

IV

It should be obvious now why Nietzsche represents an improvement over Kant and a striking difference—not only of degree or emphasis, but of real content. Nietzsche is unafraid to extol a particular tradition; he even thinks he is being exceedingly more faithful to it than his contemporaries. The tradition furnishes him with thoughts about how to inhabit, live within, and thereby extend a tradition—granting the deep ironies that this holds. He in fact cares very little for theorizing about tradition-as-such since the primary function of a tradition is to enable a kind of life and Nietzsche famously had scant patience for the distances created by philosophical inquiry into the nature of things that are most properly to be exercised rather than talked about. Even when true, talking gets in the way of living, though it will always be less true the more it is only talked. Put simply, Nietzsche does not need a theory about the superiority of tradition as a mode and resource for moral reasoning because he has something better: a superior tradition.

MacIntyre acknowledges that Kant has laid a trap that has an extremely strong gravitational pull. Kant's implicit challenge to every would-be opponent is to meet him on his own turf: Show me a universally demonstrable morality that defeats my universally demonstrable morality. It is, of course, a setup since Kant's real agenda is to show the superiority of the rational-as-universal. Even if Kant loses on these grounds, he has still won. This setup has led many to assume that the thing that Kant saves us from is inevitable once his scheme ceases to save. Nietzsche knew otherwise and so discharged a full-scale attack on nihilism. MacIntyre's way out shares some characteristics with Nietzsche, although also some great differences. It shares a certain flippancy toward Kant's rigorous neutrality. This must be the way of proceeding in order to evade Kant's trap. Any claims about the superiority of tradition must themselves arise from a particular tradition, otherwise the claims are self-defeating: they fail the more they succeed. For

this reason, MacIntyre cannot be said to proffer tradition-as-such, although book titles can be misleading on this point.

This is also the reason why MacIntyre cannot be said to be a relativist. A relativist knows something that a relativist is not finally entitled to know: that no scheme, moral or otherwise, is superior to another. MacIntyre describes the “relativist challenge” this way: “Every set of standards, every tradition incorporating a set of standards, has as much and as little claim to our allegiance as any other.” It is never a descriptive claim; it is always normative and therefore (in utter contradiction) absolute—the very thing it supposes it avoids. In truth, the relativist is an ironist, a master of detachment. But the relativist does not need great knowledge of anything. Perhaps we have therefore come too far in this essay without describing how the specifics of Christianity justify appeals to this tradition (again, rather than tradition-as-such). MacIntyre’s history of Catholic moral thought is the description of reasoning within an Aristotelian-Augustinian-Thomistic tradition of the virtues.

Whereas holding on to fragments of moral traditions may give one the impression that she is engaged in moral justification, fragments are the free-floating snippets that they are due to their disassociation from questions about what life is for. Virtues in the tradition MacIntyre extols are ordered to precise answers to such questions. What drops out in modernity is—and this is by Kant’s design—the telos of human life: life yearning and stretching after God, participation in whose life constitutes the final consummation of all motion, desire, and hope. Nietzsche too and much more famously sought an ethic purged of teloi, instead claiming that “the goal of humanity cannot lie in its end but only in its highest exemplars.” This modern disdain common to Kant and Nietzsche obviously cannot be shared by Christianity for which union with God completes the kind of life that human life is. In MacIntyre’s words:

In Kant’s morality, the divine commandments can play no role because to do right is to abide by certain standards whose validity is independent of religious belief; in Christian morality God must play a role because he created our nature and he alone knows what in the end will make us happy. And thus the Kantian arguments show not that morality as such is independent of religious belief, but that the morality which is so independent is an alternative to the morality which is not. To attempt to capture

It may sound as though in affirming the existence of multiple “moralities” that MacIntyre is adopting a neutral standpoint with respect to all of them. But he intends the exact opposite. The other moralities can be recognized as moralities precisely because of his adherence to a particular one in the same way that religious people will generally be more skilled at knowing what a religion is than those who are outside to all of them. It is worth reflecting on how contrary this is to the spirit of modernity, both with regard to moralities and religions. MacIntyre sharpens the point even more: “Certainly we can and do affirm that Christian morality is more adequate than non-Christian; but in doing this we rely on Christian standards of judgment. We merely affirm in another way our adherence to Christian morality.” In other words, to claim that there are moralities out there that are not Christian and to call them by their appropriate name are, for MacIntyre, but one and the same movement of a Christian avowal.

What MacIntyre is describing is a process of naming, of calling things by the right name. “Morality” is one such name that can only ever be as absolute as the willingness of an adherent to one morality to be so closely identified with it that she stakes her account of the rest of them on it. Consider the magnitude of such devotion: it forsakes all ground of ironic detachment in declaring that this morality cannot simply be a choice among many since it is also the means by which one goes about claiming that one knows what a morality is. To lose that devotion is therefore to be thrust into a vertigo worthy of Nietzsche—“What did we do when we unchained this earth from its

27. MacIntyre, Difficulties in Christian Belief, 107. Playing with words in this exact sense is what John Milbank does in “Can Morality Be Christian?” MacIntyre, of course, wants to avoid setting morality over against Christianity as much as setting Christian morality against whatever we agree to call Kant’s program once we have decided it is something other than morality for its not being Christian.

28. And this can be done without essentializing religion but by exercising the skill of noticing what Wittgenstein called “family resemblances.” What the academy knows under the label “religious studies” is, after all, a thoroughly modern, essentializing construction. See, for example, Fitzgerald, Ideology of Religious Studies, which argues that “there is no coherent non-theological theoretical basis for the study of religion as a separate academic discipline” (3).

29. MacIntyre, Difficulties in Christian Belief, 108. Elsewhere, MacIntyre specifically says as much regarding the virtues; their content as particular virtues with normative application precedes the concept of virtue: “To understand that generosity or courage or thrift is a virtue is to understand that one ought to be generous or brave or thrifty, and this ‘ought’ has a force prior to any choice of moral standards that we make” (such as the choice to be virtuous, presumably). MacIntyre, Secularization and Moral Change, 51.
sun?"30 But it is not and cannot be, however conceived, a giddy slide among morality’s variety pack ironically festooned with hangers-on to which one, however unentitled, nevertheless holds on to for expedience sake. This morality may certainly be contested—and it is the activity of the tradition that does not let it be immune from this for too long—but one cannot be free of it and then search for a better one since “morality” has lost its meaning if the moral object of devotion is truly discarded.

Therefore, MacIntyre is not only proffering conclusions about the nature of moral and rational traditions. He is doing these things from within a particular tradition and is frank about the necessity that he do so. It cannot be enough to adduce arguments such as “there can be no rationality as such”31 since in claiming that rationality is tradition-dependent we are just as surely presented with the fruits of some kind of reasoning which would simply and automatically refute themselves if they did not plainly display the tradition to whose debt they owe. Here, the temptation to regard tradition with contempt—shared by the thinkers of the Enlightenment as much as the genealogists—is fraught with incoherence.

V

Genealogy is a distance-preserving form of storytelling. It simultaneously seeks explanation while abjuring the pretense (and traps) of making a priori definitional claims. But doesn’t genealogy therefore simply want to have it both ways? According to MacIntyre, a serious problem arises in the way that genealogy undergoes its work. On the one hand, its story rests on a radical disjunction or rupture. Perhaps the new discovery fateful codifies disgruntled past failures into exalted values in which the slaves now revel. On the other hand, with supreme irony, there is surely something profoundly slavish about the genealogist’s story in this regard since it is always told against (in MacIntyre’s nomenclature) the self-images of the age. The telling is all that is needed to subvert what it tells; and its ability to tell such a story, in practice, undermines the triumphant story it wants so badly to tell.

The genealogist has up till now characteristically been one who writes against, who exposes, who subverts, who interrupts and disrupts. But what has in consequence very rarely, if at all, attracted explicit genealogical scrutiny is the extent to which the

30. Nietzsche, Gay Science, sec. 125. This is what MacIntyre terms an “epistemological crisis.” See his “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science.”

genealogical stance is dependent for its concepts and its modes of argument, for its theses and its style, upon a set of contrasts between it and that for which it aspires to overcome—the extent, that is, to which it is inherently derivative from and even parasitic upon its antagonisms and those toward whom they are directed, drawing its necessary sustenance from that which it professes to have discarded.\(^{32}\)

It is one thing to make this accusation and another to demonstrate it. MacIntyre approaches a demonstration of this problem by showing that an agenda burdened to show discontinuity and to disown a past by identifying rupture nevertheless relies on ways of naming the discontinuities as such that in turn depend on continuity of identity and concepts, at least so as to enable the disowning. Even though the genealogist tells a story, it is not meant to be the kind of story that tells me who I am. It may tell me who I \textit{was} as one who accepted and believed and acted according to norms that the genealogy has now disclosed were not fixed but were merely features of a particular history parading themselves as absolutes and attended by a convenient loss of memory. But MacIntyre adduces that the genealogist’s successes are more apparent than real since the very act by which it reveals one thing covers up another, namely, any continuity of the self, the continuing presence of this past to myself in and as my own identity.

Practically speaking, this means that the genealogist cannot truly own up to a terrible past and certainly cannot admit to a guilty one. (MacIntyre’s example of this is Paul de Man and attempts by his apologists to exculpate his anti-semitic leanings in the early 1940s.)\(^{33}\) No genealogy will help you live with your past. Nor is this its purpose, which is precisely the opposite: to enable distance from the past that the genealogy tells. Likewise, absent from the genealogist’s toolkit is any ability to narrate those multifarious changes that a tradition undergoes short of rupture and discontinuity but after the decisive break that it is the genealogy’s primary function to illuminate—its evolutionary and plastic elements of which the genealogist herself is a part. (This helps MacIntyre explain Nietzsche’s early departure from Basel and presumably also his henceforth non-traditional mode of contact with academia as an outsider.)

Still, the genealogist is not therefore simply left without an identity. Rather, as a consummate writer of histories as fictions, the genealogist can make of his own past whatever he wishes and optionally and masterfully speak of it in the dulcet tones of irony. After all, “We are creators!” And,

33. Ibid., 212.
at that, our creating into the future will always, as necessary, involve the creation of a commensurate past. This is because the noble and triumphant will governs both. Yet can anyone live with a past that is morally their own creation? It is only at the cost of a will, not to truth, but to self-deception. Nietzsche recognized this as a question of what we take pride in: Pride presides over memory: “‘I have done that’ says my memory. ‘I cannot have done that’ says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually memory yields.”

The most basic problem MacIntyre finds here has to do with the way that a thoroughgoing genealogy project is self-defeating (meaning it can never truly be thoroughgoing). It faults Kant and other moderns for solidifying and codifying much older moralities of ressentiment but in doing so confidently invokes the power of narrative against it at the cost of losing all narrative ability to hold onto anything.

For MacIntyre, one of the major contributions of any tradition is found in its language. Every tradition attempts to describe the world as well as our acting within it. And it is common now to acknowledge that we exist dialectically within the world we linguistically inhabit. Iris Murdoch typified this with her assertion that we can only act in the world that we can see; and our seeing is a function of what we are enabled to say. A tradition’s speech is its linguistic inheritance, and as such what counts as the tradition involves the ability to speak on behalf of it, within it, and on account of it. One’s linguistic encounter with the world is therefore as much world-constituting as it is world-representing; in fact, the former is more fundamental than the latter since I can represent using language only the reality that the linguistic resources of my tradition allow me to see.

If this is so, then it is of little use attempting to evaluate the suitability of a linguistic tradition by matching it up against a reality that is conceived independently of the way that that reality comes to us linguistically. Interpretation of things and events, rather than things and events in themselves, ascends to the place of primary concern. Reality mediated through language parallels with and merges into the cultural sanctions that supervene on a

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35. A number of questions remain for me that must be left unanswered in this essay. Is this necessarily the case for genealogy or has it merely happened to be the case for the inheritors of Nietzsche (e.g., Foucault, Deleuze)? After all, MacIntyre happily concedes that a time may come when genealogy may either discover or put to use resources it has thus far neglected. Moreover, if much of this is MacIntyre’s own refutation of nihilism, then is it a fair critique of Nietzsche himself? Or was Nietzsche, in fact, able to anticipate a postmodern ressentiment of subversion?

people’s memory, which is to say what counts not only as *their* history but of any history so long as they are the ones who remember and tell it. Marshall Sahlins no doubt speaks for all of modern anthropology in claiming that “an event becomes such as it is interpreted. Only as it is appropriated in and through a cultural scheme does it acquire historical *significance*.”37 Events only have meaning if they can be granted significance, and both of these can only happen if there is some larger complex of significations that a people use to interpret what they do and what happens to them.

The recognition that this is so is thoroughly Nietzschean, especially when it attempts to face with honesty the reality of cultural (tradition-linguistic) mediation without doing so in order to evade it. Nietzsche responds to the positivism “which halts at phenomena” and which declares the mere and root existence of facts. “No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.”38 There is always an interpretation behind facts, including facts like “Everything is subjective” and even “there is always an interpretation behind facts.” Knowledge has no meaning apart from the desire of power to dominate and still the ambiguity though bold assertion—Kantian confidence!

All of this is a political contest that Nietzsche precisely names:

> It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.39

Likewise, Foucault built a career around the insight that knowledge and power operate together. Yet language trades in something more subtle than knowledge since it is possible to speak things like confessions that admit unknowing as much as knowing and that, like Augustine’s magisterial account of the Trinity, are humbly only ways to keep from being completely silent.40 Genealogy is subversive in the literal sense of attending to what lies beneath the dominant, often ahistorical accounts in order to tell a historical story of how it came to be this way and what has been excluded along the way.

39. Ibid.
40. “Silenced” is the lot of those who lack power rather than those who lack knowledge. Yet Foucault’s insight is that what passes for knowledge is what can go unchallenged by the alternate accounts of those who either gain no hearing or who have held their tongues for so long they have forgotten what they knew.
VI

Where does this leave those who want to talk about the Christian tradition? And what is there to say about how one tradition relates to others? If genealogy tells stories in order to subvert the substance of the story it tells, then Christianity is at odds with it, not only given its sanguine dwelling within and as a tradition of discourse. Christianity is also charged with more complex story-telling than the genealogist. It is surely the mark of a degenerate way of speaking if one only has something to say when there is something to overcome and—lest we sidestep an element that constantly accompanies these discourses—someone to conquer. Nietzsche is right that Kant clings to a subtle but very real violence. It is true that the encounter of one tradition with another will be one of conflict since each will tell narratives that are grander than the stories of one tradition. They are not just accounts of reality that are “true for me” since only a callow and fantastic ironist could actually live with this kind of thoroughly undernourished, suburban jingle. The fact that many people do in fact live with it ringing in their ears only means that they are hiding something, a more basic set of commitments to which they feel they are not entitled. These commitments are therefore usually unreflective, conservative, deeply entrenched, and malevolently absolutist. “True for me” is the product of postmodern, fascist sloganeering. Postmodern nations still conquer traditional ones.

One reason Burke favored his static account of tradition lies in what he took to be its ability to achieve social stability and peace. The dreamers of the Enlightenment who disagreed with Burke about tradition nevertheless also dreamed of peace. If modernity promised peace through reason, then a century of one unbridled monstrosity after another tempered that hope. Modernity exchanged one form of carnage for another—that of tribes for that of nations—while vastly expanding the scope of its justification. Yet postmodernity makes nearly-equivalent promises, only this time in the wake of the devastating legacy of the Enlightenment. If unity through essentialist accounts of what it means to be human is really only a cuddly, modern affectation, then the diversity of such accounts—indeed diversity of everything—surely stands as the renewed, if postponed, promise of peace.

41. MacIntyre discusses this postmodern attitude in the nomenclature of emotivism. In an early work, he writes, “It is quite clear that when I use moral concepts I do at least try to make a claim which goes beyond the expression of my choices or feelings” (Secularization and Moral Change, 52). Any attempt to apply moral concepts to others (“You ought to do this”) assumes a shared moral vocabulary within a moral community. When that moral community is lost, other communal commitments rush in to take its place even though they will not readily be acknowledged as such.
An ironic people will always lack the discipline that true peace requires since they afford themselves the luxury of holding all of their commitments at arm's length. Such commitments are easily discarded (and the ones that remain will not admit to self-conscious acknowledgment). What is the alternative?

The inverse of a traditional identity that can only with great difficulty be discarded without considerable loss is the discipline that remaining with the tradition entails. It is surely a sign of our postmodern times that “true for you too” connotes ultimate domination and elicits suspicion of all encounters. And yet the conflict of traditions can only be avoided through insularity or disdain for traditions. Such conflict may be a genuine alternative promise for peace; and it may not. Whatever it will be will quite simply depend on the tradition itself. What then will be the marks of a peaceable tradition? I propose two and appeal to Christianity’s local language in doing so.

1. Paradoxically, it knows that the identity of those who embody it is at stake but also they are not prepared to ensure its victory at all costs. Only a tradition that contains within itself a determined dependence on a source other than itself will be willing to sacrifice what is known for what is promised. This requires the theological virtue of hope. It will not equate survival with life because it believes that its life must be cross-like, freely yielding up survival for the hope of the life that resurrection brings. The martyrs die joyfully, knowing that it was never up to them to secure the future that might have been brought by a greater willingness to compromise with their obdurate killers. The future is God’s especially for the people God has created and who look back over this tradition and can attribute its most genuine victories to a kind of success and faithfulness so counter-intuitive that it requires a knowledge brought by God that would not be available otherwise. the church’s memory of martyrs also reminds it that “victory at all costs” is a pagan slogan if ever there was one.42

42. I confess that I do not know what MacIntyre would make of this set of comments. However, Jonathan Lear, whose Radical Hope is obviously profoundly influenced by MacIntyre, provides a clue. Lear’s account of the Crow Nation in its final years is part real history and part thought experiment about what happens when one tradition encounters another. It is also about the virtues necessary for entertaining the thought “change or die” when the change required by a people can only be imagined in vague generalities, but the specifics are literally unimaginable. Lear’s counterpoint in the story he tells of the Crows’ successful change through the leadership of their chief, Plenty Coups, is the Sioux and their chief, Sitting Bull, who held on to a kind of “messianic” hope of deliverance from the American conquerors. Lear writes, however, that “the point here is not whether one was for or against working with the white man or learning from him. Rather, it is that Sitting Bull used a dream-vision to short-circuit reality
2. It believes that its truth is universal but that it has not seen nor heard the end of it, has not yet fully grasped it, and fully expects unheard parts of it to appear in the mouths of even its most dogged enemies. Its love for truth expresses itself in a perpetual movement that seeks after the truth’s depths and that mines it for greater and greater fullness. It no more distrusts true accounts it has inherited any more than it can live without them. But its living with them and by them unlocks the way that there is more to life because there is more to the truth than we now know. This points to an important way that faith precedes knowledge (as for Anselm, famously, credo ut intelligam): greater faith will mean a greater confidence to look and listen for God apart from the usual places and people and outside the church; less faith will mean that what we now know is all that there is and where there is more to find, we already know where to look. The way of peace is therefore paved with a willingness to accept the ambiguity of things, a ready confession that my ego (my subjectivity) entitles me only to interpretations of reality, a prompt release of the power to control and still with violence the chaos of competing accounts.

Clearly these are marks of Christianity, though just as clearly they are not universally present or everywhere nurtured within the church. Even so, they are present and nurtured in some respects and in some places. And one’s determination to discover them even to a small degree in every corner of the church is merely correlative of the determination to recognize when enemies speak and practice the truth, often despite themselves.

I have brought this essay to a place where Christian language presses to speak its own account of its tradition including what can be said of humanity’s status as middle creatures of the God of Abraham and Jesus Christ. If one tradition relates to the others through conflict, what are we to make of the particular peaceable shape that the gospel gives to those who inhabit its truth? Can we say that peace is the guiding hermeneutic of Christianity?
Peace hopes that history will make eschatological sense by trusting God and, to the exact same extent, doubting the absoluteness of every self-confident subjective claim to have captured meaning. Meaning is given; it is grace in story-form. But it is not a story that we can presume to tell, not least because it is a story we still inhabit as God’s creatures. All of creation is a story and the questions it lifts up are natural and good since even our inability to answer them fully in the present only confirms creation’s dependence on God for meaning. Even so, this is not the same thing as supposing that creation lacks intelligibility or rationality. Such things are merely wrapped up with the nonrational comportments to which stretching after them gives rise. Faith, that is to say, is appropriate to the lives of creatures whose exercise of it does not conflict with the reachings of reason. “The best so far” (which MacIntyre describes as the highest status that can ever be attributed to a living tradition) is therefore, for Christianity, anything but a defeated concession to the fact of mediated reality. Rather, it is nothing but the confession of middle-creatures whose place in their tradition is determined by a story that is too large to grasp and that is simply still on its way to completion by Jesus and the saints. It is nothing other than the honest reality of good news that still elicits hope.

Finally, what does this mean for Christianity’s own speech, its own linguistic inhabiting of tradition? The gospel makes and is the speech of the church just as it is simultaneously both an impulse to speak and an impulse to keep silent, dialectically moving between knowledge and ignorance, revelation and mystery. If it is right to refer to Christianity itself as a tradition, it is also right to grant that it has always been and, short of glory, always will be a tradition made up of lesser ones, of half-baked and half-hearted commitments to the gospel of Christ tempered by disciplines and practices that seep across from other lesser traditions and all with often very little conscious effort to tie them all together or make them rationally coherent. Even so, the fact that, for example, the church is somehow knit around its creeds, confessions, saints, and so on not only means that Christians should expect that there will continue to be new creeds as the gospel encounters new worlds in the world (which is to say new traditions), but the “somehow” that names the mystery by which the church is so knit is precisely the same mystery by which it expects the new forms. This is one of the lessons that

43. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 64.

44. As an example, I have in mind the remarkable creed produced by the Masai in Tanzania that includes the confession that Christ was “a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love” (cited in Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 148).
liberation theologians have been teaching the rest of the church in recent years.45

This is a startling reality against which the language of tradition no doubt strains considerably. The health of the Christian tradition is bound up with consistent pressure that even the most hard-won doctrinal debates throughout its history must be radicalized by those whose lives are part of the tradition’s newness in order that we be faced with a reality that we know surpasses our present knowledge, but which we cannot truly know with fullness unless we are faced with it. The reason for this is not, MacIntyre is clear to say, a historicist matter of the time-bound nature of all truth but a linguistic matter of particularistic formulations. The historical context of doctrine does not contextualize the truth but situates in time any timeless claims that doctrine makes. “It is [therefore] that such claims are being made for doctrines whose formulation is itself time-bound and that the concept of timelessness is itself a concept with a history, one which in certain types of context is not at all the same concept that it is in others.”46 The fact that timelessness itself has a history and that claims of timeless truth are made in time does not invalidate them; it only spreads the burden of proof and the nature of the engagement across a much wider canvas: not just implacable tidiness of the syllogism that dismantles opponents for being irrational and illogical (and, we may now assert, historical), but the attempt at resolving the tension in terms that the traditions will themselves recognize. The attempt may well fail, of course. But it may yield something unexpected to both—as Augustinian Christianity did with Platonism—a confession that nevertheless remains open to refutation so long as it continues to be confessed in time, which is surely the only way for middle-creatures to confess anything. In the meantime, the fact of diversity of traditions is not an indication that none of them can be true just as the fact of diversity of rationalities does not indicate that there is no such thing as rationality. Instead, such diversity is, for those who do not despise tradition, an opportunity for a genuinely specific form of engagement.47

45. “As part of the lived past of the living church, this [dogmatic] tradition is one manner—valid in itself—of coming to grips with the mystery of Christ. But the unfathomable riches of Christ are not exhausted in ecclesiastical formulas, be they ever so venerable. And this holds not only for the councils of Chalcedon or Constantinople, but even for the various christologies that are part of the New Testament” (Boff, “Images of Jesus in Brazilian Liberal Christianity,” 13).


47. “It is crucial that the concept of tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive rational enquiry cannot be elucidated apart from its exemplifications” (ibid., 10). I must therefore acknowledge that this essay is probably far too meta to make the kinds of claims it does. I must simply refer the reader to MacIntyre’s own exemplifications from the history of philosophy and theology.
The dialectic of tradition therefore re-emerges at the point of the Christian gospel’s surfeit of virtue, its ability—which is surely nothing other than God’s own ability—to sustain a people who are alternately grateful for and not yet fully satisfied with the truth of their tradition. Such virtues, I maintain, are themselves part of the communicative impulse of the gospel itself and an elaboration of its nagging inclination toward transcending and expanding the tradition of Christianity. I suspect this is the reason why the history of the gospel is so often fraught with conquering. An encounter of one tradition with another is conquering when it is a threatening encounter, however much the gospel’s communicative impulse stands above it. And a threat faced in a deficit of faith, hope, and love is supremely compensated when conquering strength overreaches them in order to ensure victory. The gospel in the church may, of course, cower instead in recognition of its lack of virtue. But it surely just as often makes up for its lack by employing a hodgepodge collection of lesser skills, some of which contradict its message and mission.

The virtues that sustain and animate the Christian life as a recognizably Christian life are the ones Thomas described as infused—the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love). It is essential that these three give shape to all of the other virtues and that they are the most basic marks of how the Christian tradition understands itself. Therefore the correlative of embracing tradition rather than disdaining it (in either its modern or postmodern styles) will be a combination of gratitude and a slightly chastened impatience—grateful for this “argument extended through time” and eager to join and extend it. Those who therefore speak about and on account of the Christian tradition are truest to its spirit when their critique is matched by love and their ecclesial navel-gazing is matched by impetuous engagements with strangers and enemies.

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