

Providence College DigitalCommons@Providence

Philosophy Department Faculty Publications

Philosophy

Fall 2015

Politics After MacIntyre

Philip E. Devine

Providence College, pdevine@providence.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/philosophy_fac



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

Devine, Philip E., "Politics After MacIntyre" (2015). *Philosophy Department Faculty Publications*. Paper 8.
http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/philosophy_fac/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Department Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact mcaprio1@providence.edu.

Politics After MacIntyre

Philip Devine
Providence College

“I give my political loyalty to no program.”
—Alasdair MacIntyre (K p. 265)¹

1. Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre is known for his root-and-branch rejection of liberalism (which includes many of the political philosophies called conservative).² Neatly synthesizing Left and Right critiques of liberalism, he has observed:

Liberalism, while imposing through state power regimes that declare everybody free to pursue whatever they take to be their own good, deprives most people of the possibility of understanding their lives as a quest for the discovery and achievement of the good, especially by the way in which it attempts to discredit those traditional forms of human community within which the project has to be embodied. (K p. 258)

It is the poor and the ill-educated, as well as marginal groups such as Native Americans,³ who have the greatest need for tradition in the guidance of their lives. In one sense at least MacIntyre is a radical; he is not concerned only with questions of distribution of acknowledged goods, but also with challenges to prevailing understandings of well-being that condition what are thought to be benefits and burdens.

¹ K = Kelvin Knight, ed., *The MacIntyre Reader* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

² I use “liberal” to refer to the political tradition that begins with John Locke; “Liberal” refers to the Left wing of the American Democratic Party.

³ Jeffery L. Nichols, *Reason, Tradition, and the Good* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), esp. pp. 14-15, 146-47, 155-56, 162-63, and 207-10, fills a gap in MacIntyre’s account of tradition by appeal to the Lakota Sioux. Unfortunately, institutions designed to protect Native American traditions have been cynically exploited to support casino gambling.

In this essay I will accept MacIntyre's Aristotelianism and the critique of liberal society he uses it to support, and examine how his views can be translated into practice. It is true that American liberalism is often hegemonic: It devotes itself to achieving by indirect means the de-Christianizing aims of the French Enlightenment revolutionaries, which corrupts our understanding of human well-being by the resulting commercial society.⁴ It is also true, though, that our tradition of religious freedom is strong and can accommodate MacIntyrean communities of virtue—at least if they define themselves as religious. It is my contention that, despite MacIntyre's trenchant critique of liberalism, a liberal political system and only a liberal political system, has the resources needed for nonstate communities of virtue to survive and flourish. Since MacIntyre rightly holds that understanding a philosophical problem requires examining its history, the first step in my inquiry will be a look at his Marxist past.⁵

2. MacIntyre as Marxist

MacIntyre's present position as a Catholic both preserves important features of and attempts to correct perceived inadequacies in his Marxist past. His Marxism had the following features:

- (1) A constant theme in the development of MacIntyre's philosophy, both in his Marxist and his post-Marxist periods, is that it is not a mere theoretical reflection, but requires translation into practice (see, e.g., E pp. 103, 422, and 424).⁶
- (2) MacIntyre's Marxism was democratic, regarding the bureaucratic collectivism that prevailed in the former Soviet Union as a profound betrayal of the Marxist cause.
- (3) It was international, opposed to any version of "socialism in one country" (E chap. 26).
- (4) It was anti-reformist, arguing that the capitalist system had the power to absorb and pervert any change (E chaps. 19, 23, 30, and 32).
- (5) It rejected the construction of utopian enclaves, whether socialist (E chap. 9) or Christian (E chap. 18) in inspiration.

⁴ See Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much Is Enough?* (New York: Other Press, 2012).

⁵ I am indebted to the editors of *Reason Papers* for pointing out my need to explain this point.

⁶ E = Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds., *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2009).

(6) Putting the previous three points together, it was committed both to transforming the whole world and to transforming it wholly. In jargon, his was a “maximalist” version of Marxism; in this, he followed Leon Trotsky.

(7) He regarded the socialist project as a historical failure. He concluded: “The central question about socialism is whether the tragedy sprang merely from local circumstances . . . or from deeper and more permanent factors in the life of the working class and of socialist parties and groups” (E p. 393).

(8) His evaluation of the historical situation led to some difficult moral and political judgments (see, e.g., E pp. 43, 52, 61-62, and 67). For example, exactly what was wrong with the political justice employed by the victorious Soviets after the Hungarian Revolution, and right about that of Fidel Castro (K p. 48)?

(9) The upshot of his argument was that “those who make the conquest of state power their aim are always, in the end, conquered by it” (E p. 416).

Nonetheless, phenomena such as wealth polarization; the shameless marketing of expensive, unneeded goods⁷; the disproportionate political power of the top one percent; the collapse of law into the use of judicial power in defense of the privileges of the rich⁸; the extrajudicial killing of foes of the regime, even of an American citizen⁹; and anti-terrorist measures that go beyond what the (admittedly chaotic) laws of war can be stretched to justify¹⁰—all suggest that Marxism retains its relevance. The recent best-

⁷ See Pamela Danziger, *Why People Buy Things They Don't Need* (Chicago, IL: Dearborn Trade, 2004).

⁸ The controversial case of *Citizens United v. FCC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010), seems to me worse than its critics suppose. Neither the majority nor the dissenters understood the, to me, elementary distinction between a group of citizens supporting a common cause and a business corporation donating to both sides of an election so as to have friends in office whoever wins.

⁹ On the killing of U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, see Tom Leonard, “Barack Obama Orders Killing of US Cleric Anwar al-Awlaki,” *Telegraph* (April 7, 2010), accessed online at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/7564581/Barack-Obama-orders-killing-of-US-cleric-Anwar-al-Awlaki.html>.

¹⁰ Chris Woods and Christina Lamb, “Obama Terror Drones: CIA Tactics in Pakistan Include Targeting Rescuers and Funerals,” *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* (February 4, 2012), accessed online at: <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/02/04/obama-terror-drones-cia-tactics-in-pakistan-include-targeting-rescuers-and-funerals/>; Chris Woods, “Over 160 Children

selling work by Thomas Piketty is not in the strict sense Marxist; it insists that economics be done in conjunction with the other social sciences rather than controlling their results,¹¹ and finds a useful and possibly irreplaceable role for private property and the market.¹² Yet it is close enough to Karl Marx in its central argument to preclude a requiem for Marxism. In Piketty's own words, "the primary purpose of the capital tax is not to finance the social state but to regulate capitalism."¹³

Moreover, Trotskyists have sometimes proved politically significant. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez described himself as a Trotskyist.¹⁴ Chávez's claim met with a mixed reception among the faithful,¹⁵ however, and in characteristic Latin fashion he returned to the Church before his death.¹⁶ On the other hand, his followers continue the tradition of replacing God with a political movement, at the risk of emperor worship.¹⁷

Reported among Drone Deaths," *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* (April 11, 2011), accessed online at: <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2011/08/11/more-than-160-children-killed-in-us-strikes/>; Chris Woods, "Drone War Exposed—the Complete Picture of CIA Strikes in Pakistan," *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* (August 10, 2011), accessed online at: <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2011/08/10/most-complete-picture-yet-of-cia-drone-strikes/>. On the legal issues, see David Kretzmer, "Targeted Killing of Suspected Terrorists," *European Journal of International Law* 16, no. 2 (2005), pp. 171-212. On the efforts of the United States to evade accountability for such actions, see Philip Alston, Jason Morgan-Foster, and William Abreach, "The Competence of the UN Human Rights Council and Its Special Procedures in Relation to Armed Conflicts," *European Journal of International Law* 19, no. 1 (2008), pp. 183-209.

¹¹ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 32. He writes, "I see economics as a subdiscipline of the social sciences, alongside history, sociology, anthropology and political science" (p. 573). Celia Wolf-Devine pointed out to me the importance of this departure from Marx.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 531-32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

¹⁴ Nathalie Malinarich, "Chavez Accelerates on Path to Socialism," *BBC News* (January 10, 2007).

¹⁵ See Jorge Martin, "'What is the problem? I am also a Trotskyist!' Chavez Is Sworn in as President of Venezuela," *In Defense of Marxism* (January 12, 2007), accessed online at: <http://www.marxist.com/chavez-trotskyist-president120107.htm>; and "Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez Calls for Fifth International," *League for the Fifth International* (November 25, 2009), accessed online at: <http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/venezuelas-president-hugo-chavez-calls-fifth-international>.

¹⁶ "Hugo Chavez Died 'within the Church'," *ACI Prensa* (March 6, 2013), accessed online at: <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticiaf.php?url=hugo-chavez-murio-en-el-seno->

In any event, the number of Marxist true believers falls far below their aspirations, for their insistence on doctrinal purity keeps Marxist groups small. No one has explained, except by an appeal to Providence smuggled in through G. W. F. Hegel, how if capitalism collapses, anything but Stalinist (or other) barbarism will ensue. The question of the legitimacy of social power, manifested among other places in the rivalry between political and economic elites, is in any event crucial.

The key theoretical text here is the third of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The materialist doctrine that men are the products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating. Hence the doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.¹⁸

The word "men" here is generic; there are many women who take a fiercely elitist approach, especially concerning issues such as sexuality, sexual difference, and family structure.

Workingmen and women have understandably preferred the relief of present distress to long-term goals; they have also preferred national or other sectional solidarities to solidarity with all workingmen and women everywhere. Thus arises the dilemma of socialist leadership: whether the socialist elite should regard itself as above the working class and manipulate them or immerse themselves in the working class and attempt to give voice to their interests as workingmen and women themselves understand them. In neither case will the perspective of Marxist intellectuals and their working class constituency be identical. In either case they will water down or betray the socialist project.

For those Marxists who could not swallow Stalinist orthodoxy, it turned out that "Marxism is only a theory, only an idea, it lacks any material incarnation" (E p. 320). Yet from his Marxist past MacIntyre retains both a critique of liberalism (hence also a critique of capitalism) and a demand for a

de-la-iglesia-12000/#U5oKolvdWSo.

¹⁷ See "Venezuela: Catholic Church Denounces Lord's Prayer to Hugo Chavez," *Euronews* (September 7, 2014), accessed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5qMvtjKNhA>.

¹⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), p. 244. For MacIntyre's comments on this thesis, see K pp. 229-30; for further discussion see Christopher Stephen Lutz, "MacIntyre's Tradition-Constituted Inquiry," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Summer 2011), pp. 396-97.

philosophy capable of guiding political practice. However frustrated it may be in practice, or even in theory, his radicalism is an important element of his outlook.¹⁹

3. The Social Contract

MacIntyre's argument against liberalism can be explicated in terms of the perennial problem of the transmission of the social contract. Liberalism—which vaunts consent—can maintain itself as a socially embodied tradition, persisting from generation to generation, only by methods that are by liberal criteria questionable. The rising generation needs to be attached to liberal society before its members can make up their own minds about the merits of liberalism and “sign” a metaphorical contract binding them to adhere to its rules. The resulting contract is constantly renegotiated as the relationship between politically active groups changes. Out-groups have to struggle for acceptance; when they succeed, they are transformed in the process—sometimes becoming oppressors in their turn. Children, the elderly, and future generations lack bargaining power independent of the conventions of liberal society and thus are always at a disadvantage.

In his response to this situation, MacIntyre looks for virtuous communities governed by their own traditions of excellence, though not, as we shall see, completely isolated from other communities. In my evaluation, I shall neither ignore nor be bound by MacIntyre's political positions; though MacIntyre may know his own thought better than anyone else does, he is not infallible concerning its interpretation and application. The key issue is what the relationship is between such communities and a larger society whose standards are defined by contract among people who may share little or nothing in their concept of the good.

4. Catholic Separatism

Benjamin Smith and Thaddeus Kozinski respond to MacIntyre's argument by using his philosophy to revive the political theology or theological politics defended by St. Thomas Aquinas in a different historical context.²⁰ In practice, this appears to mean, in Smith's words:

Contemporary Christians should advocate radical political decentralization, so that practical political life can be relocated onto

¹⁹ I am indebted to Celia Wolf-Devine for pointing out the need to clarify my line of argument here.

²⁰ Benjamin Smith, “Political Theology and Thomas Aquinas,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 84 (2010), pp. 99-112; Thaddeus J. Kozinski, *The Political Problem of Religious Pluralism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011). For a contrary view, see John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); and John Finnis, *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

the local level where it is more likely that we will find—or be able to create—communities of organic Christian solidarity capable of naturally developing and supporting forms of Christian politics.²¹

In other words, Christians should secede from a pluralistic society, or form autonomous enclaves, and develop Christian laws and institutions within its autonomous sphere. We thus encounter the question of secession, which has received a great deal of contemporary discussion,²² but which I will not pursue further here. In practice, there will have to be some standards governing the relationship between Catholic communities and the non-Catholic world (and likewise for intentional communities founded on other principles).

In any case, MacIntyre does not accept Thomistic restorationism and its counsel to separate Catholic communities from the larger society. In a recent article, he has written:

Newman as a historian remarked on the fact that political establishment of the church has been bad for the church, often very bad indeed. [If so,] . . . then we have strong theistic reasons for holding that in political society [no religious association] . . . should be established. So, although for a very different reason from the secularizers, theists can and should be in favor of political forums in which a variety of theistic and other voices can be heard.²³

²¹ Smith, “Political Theology,” p. 111 n. 33.

²² The most important theoretical discussion is Allen Buchanan, *Secession* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991). For discussion from a variety of contemporary perspectives, see David Gordon, ed., *Secession, State, and Liberty* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998); Margaret Moore, “The Ethics of Secession and Postinvasion Iraq,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 2006), pp. 55ff.; Don H. Doyle, ed., *Secession as an International Phenomenon* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Brion McClanahan, “Is Secession Legal?” *American Conservative* (December 7, 2012), accessed online at: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/is-secession-legal/>; Scott Malone, “Exclusive: Angry with Washington, 1 in 4 Americans Open to Secession,” *Reuters* (September 20, 2014), accessed online at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-secession-exclusive-idUSKBN0HE19U20140920>; Susan Eaton, “How a ‘New Secessionist’ Movement Is Threatening to Worsen School Segregation and Widen Inequalities,” *The Nation* (May 15, 2014), accessed online at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/179870/how-new-secessionist-movement-threatening-worsen-school-segregation-and-widen-inequal#>; and Jonathan Rauch, “The Great Secession,” *The Atlantic* (July/August 2014), accessed online at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/the-great-secession/372288/>.

²³ Alasdair MacIntyre, “On Being a Theistic Philosopher in a Secularized Culture,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 84 (2010), p. 25.

In other words, the situation of a church which dominates a mini-state will be spiritually unhealthy; awareness of, and interaction with, communities founded on different principles will help the community pursue its understanding of the good life. We here have an analogue of a standard liberal point about the individual: we define ourselves by sometimes learning from and sometimes resisting the influence of others, including those of whose way of life we deeply disapprove. This doctrine is not, however, as tolerant as it appears.²⁴ One's initial response to the Other is likely to be hostile, and further acquaintance may either refine or intensify this response. Americans of my generation were taught to define our national identity in contrast with Nazis. Though Protestants and Catholics have lived together for centuries in Ulster, as late as 1988 Ian Paisley denounced the Pope as the anti-Christ in the European Parliament.²⁵ Of course, not all examples involve such stark hostility. I can exist on friendly terms with representatives of the Other, but some distance is still implied. Familiarity with members of an alien group may lead a person to view them as individuals, but not necessarily to liking them more when they act together as a group.²⁶

5. Communities of Virtue

MacIntyre's solution is at least to modify his earlier anti-utopianism and to call for the creation of virtuous—or as I sometimes call them, “intentional”—communities. Each such community is founded on what John Rawls has called a comprehensive view,²⁷ and each has its accompanying tradition and array of virtues and practices. These communities, though, will inevitably interact with other communities and with the larger society. MacIntyre goes further to argue that some such interaction is necessary to their health. Some jurists suggest a “rizomorphic” process of interaction among these communities.²⁸ (The word “rizomorphic” is taken from Gilles

²⁴ For an example of confusion on this point, see Andrew Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally,” in Eugene F. Rogers, ed., *Theology and Sexuality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), p. 286: “Extinguishing—or prohibiting—homosexuality is . . . not a virtuous necessity, but the real crime against nature, a refusal to accept the pied beauty of God's creation, a denial of the way in which the other need not threaten, but may even give depth and contrast to the self.”

²⁵ “Ian Paisley Heckles the Pope” (March 31, 2012), accessed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlbmIMbKZa4>.

²⁶ I am here indebted to Celia Wolf-Devine.

²⁷ See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

²⁸ Andreas Fischer-Lescano and Guenther Tuebner, “Regime Collisions: The Vain Search for Legal Unity in the Fragmentation of Global Law,” *Michigan Journal of*

Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and refers originally to the branching roots of certain fungi.²⁹) Outsiders will not consider all of them virtuous; some of them will be considered cults or criminal conspiracies, and some of these rightly so.³⁰ Sometimes, the relationship between an intentional community and the larger society has ended in blood. While virtuous communities need not be religious in the usual sense, I shall discuss faith-based communities here, since they represent most of Americans' relevant experience.

MacIntyre has recommended that a virtuous community should be "wary and antagonistic in all its dealings with the state and the market economy" (K p. 252), but he has not explored the necessities of a politics of self-defense. Even if the members of an intentional community were to gain control of a nation-state or some part of one, they would still have to deal with the pressures of the European Union on its constituent states,³¹ American imperial power on all states other than the "hyperpower," and the global market economy on everyone.

In America, the ways in which the larger society impinges on a virtuous community go well beyond the Health and Human Services mandates and prohibitions on sexual-orientation discrimination that have received a great deal of press. Limiting ourselves to state action for the time being, the federal privacy regulations for health care have a serious impact on religious communities' access to their seriously ill members. In order to fend off threats from the larger society without bloodshed, virtuous communities will have to develop a constitutional apologetics, invoking such stock liberal ideas as freedom of association and freedom of religion and conscience. It will also be necessary to support the rule of law: If controversial religious and political figures can be executed or detained indefinitely without trial, let alone tortured, the most scrupulous constitutional protections will be futile.³² One issue that needs to be considered is the rights of dissident members. It seems that they must have at least a right to exit, and there are those who question

International Law 25, no. 4 (2004), pp. 999-1046.

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 3-25.

³⁰ For a relatively unknown example, see Bruce Falconer, "The Torture Colony," *American Scholar* (September 1, 2008), accessed online at: http://theamericanscholar.org/the-torture-colony/?gclid=CNvEmKGgnq8CFScTNAodlyV_6w.

³¹ See my "The Concept of Europe," delivered at the 2010 meeting of the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry (Vilnius, Lithuania), accessed online at: <https://philipdevine.wordpress.com/2010/08/09/europe/>.

³² Pilate, as judge, acquitted Jesus; as governor, he ordered his crucifixion.

whether even this is sufficient.³³ The chief problems are two: (1) whether the departing member will have sufficient resources to live elsewhere, and if not, whether he or she has a right to a share of the community's collective property; and (2) whether it is possible to escape one's cultural formation. An ex-Catholic, an ex-Fundamentalist, and an ex-Mormon remain distinctive sorts of people.

Even if the state is scrupulously respectful and the problem of the dissident member is satisfactorily resolved, the economic and psychological pressures of the larger society will bear on the dissident community generation after generation. Hence, there is a constant need to persuade the rising generation that the enterprise is worth continuing, which will mean continuing to persuade the adult adherents also (since children can scent latent skepticism in their elders). Moreover, as MacIntyre has acknowledged, children require both stable family structures and enough to eat if they are to learn, both of which require a community to forsake virtuous poverty and secure adequate economic resources.³⁴

In brief, a community of virtue is doubly precarious, especially if it attempts to withstand not only permissive sexual *mores*, but also the all-pervasive solicitations of the consumer society. The larger society will persistently put formal and informal pressures on it. Its younger members will have to be taught to believe in the community's understanding of virtue and resist the ever-present allure of what the community considers vice.

There is a great need for dialogue between MacIntyre's admirers and those Jewish spokesmen who take their tradition seriously and can reflect on long experience as a minority culture. However, the one avowedly Jewish spokesman I know of who has addressed MacIntyre falsely accuses him of devotion to the status quo.³⁵ MacIntyre unfortunately feeds Jewish suspicions by his use of the Soviet Russian expression "rootless cosmopolitans" (K p. 135), which originated in a Slavophile campaign against Western influence but whose target was subsequently narrowed to Jews.³⁶ The same reasons that

³³ For example, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 77-79.

³⁴ See Alasdair MacIntyre, "How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary," in Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight, eds., *Virtue and Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), pp. 15ff.

³⁵ Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 185-86; for MacIntyre's reply, see K p. 25. For a Jewish spokesman open to dialogue with Catholics, though not specifically with MacIntyre, see Matthew Berke, "A Jewish Appreciation of Catholic Social Teaching," in Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley, and Robert P. Hunt, eds., *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), chap. 13.

³⁶ See Konstantin Azadovski and Boris Eगतov, "From Anti-Westernism to Anti-Semitism," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 66-80.

dictate dialogue with Jews also dictate dialogue with Muslims and Latter Day Saints. In every case, the communities face the same problem: maintaining and transmitting a cultural tradition in an uncomprehending and sometimes hostile social environment. All face the same temptations: capitulation or a repellent form of sectarian rigidity.

6. *Modus Vivendi* Liberal or Civic Republican?

So far we have politics as usual, though viewed from the angle of the ideal more than the material interests of competing groups. Politics as usual contains various forms of coalition, from single-purpose alliances to the sort of robust alliance needed to support core liberal institutions (free expression, regular elections, and the rule of law)—the sort of thing Rawls calls an overlapping consensus. It also contains more or less stable forms of enmity. In technical language, MacIntyre's argument ends up supporting *modus vivendi* liberalism, for which "civil peace" is not preceded by the adjective 'mere'.³⁷ Intentional communities will have to live together; though they are likely strongly to advocate their views, they are unlikely to convert all of the others. Even the seemingly narrow differences between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy persist. The alternative to dialogue is endless war.

Yet MacIntyre goes beyond *modus vivendi* liberalism, or in other words beyond the requirements of civil peace, to value dialogue among rival traditions. He favors a society that "will ask what is to be learned from . . . dissenters. It will therefore not only tolerate dissent, but enter into rational conversation with it and cultivate as political virtue not merely a passive tolerance, but an active and enquiring attitude toward radically dissenting views" (K p. 251). This remark balances the defensive drift of the argument so far and provides a useful counterweight to demands, which sometimes claim MacIntyre's authority, for universities dominated by their theology departments and in which intellectual rigor is subordinated to piety.³⁸

Such an approach does not help much, however, in dealing with the intellectual battles to which the culture wars give birth. What is lacking is training in argument of a sort that will not be instantly rejected by outsiders to one's political or metaphysical perspective.³⁹ Such dialogue is not merely part of MacIntyre's intellectual program; it is also a practical necessity.

I do not assume that tradition-transcending intellectual standards are available, only that there is some overlap between the standards of adherents

³⁷ Patrick Neal, "Vulgar Liberalism," *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (November 1993), p. 638. See also John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: New Press, 2000).

³⁸ A possible representative of this tradition is Reinhard Hütter, "The University's Cutting Edge—Sources of Its Flatness," *Logos* 15, no 4 (Fall 2012), pp. 36-56.

³⁹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

of one tradition and those of adherents of another. Some believers and some unbelievers can agree, for example, that one should engage an opponent as charitably as possible, at least until his bad faith is proved beyond reasonable doubt.⁴⁰

Some intentional communities will endeavor to transform the larger society in accordance with its conceptions of justice and the good for human beings. Since a MacIntyrean community is on all accounts very small, a “city on the hill” strategy—inducing others to imitate one’s community by one’s success in achieving one’s ideal—seems the only way of so doing.⁴¹ This will be especially true in marriage and family life, especially insofar as successful child-rearing will require grandparents, aunts and uncles, and celibate orders with a teaching mission (or their functional equivalent).⁴²

We therefore need a communitarian form of Civic Republicanism in which representatives of various intentional communities agree to co-exist under shared laws, provide at least for mutual non-aggression, and concur in valuing a free society so understood.⁴³ The core of Civic Republicanism is a shared understanding of reason that is thicker than Rawls’s “public reason,” but thinner than those embodied in his “comprehensive views.” Likewise, it includes an understanding of virtue more demanding than ethical minimalism, but not so rich as the ideals of sanctity to which adherents of religions and religion-like movements aspire. The usual liberal apparatus of courts will also be necessary in order to adjudicate boundary conflicts between various sorts of community. There is some reason to hope that the American judiciary can be moved in the desired direction, though the battle will have to be fought.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Readers tempted to despair about the possibility of dialogue across ideological boundaries should read Thomas Nagel’s recent review of Alvin Plantinga. See Thomas Nagel, “A Philosopher Defends Religion,” *New York Review of Books* (September 27, 2012), accessed online at: www.nybooks.com/articles/archives2012/sep/27/philosopher-defends-religion/?pagination=false#fnr-2. I am indebted to J. S. Ryshpan for this reference.

⁴¹ Frances Fitzgerald, *Cities on a Hill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), provides thick descriptions of four radically different contemporary American communities, each of them in its own way disturbing.

⁴² For an account of education that emphasizes the extended family, see John O’Neill, *The Missing Child in Liberal Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

⁴³ On Civic Republicanism, see Philip Pettit, “Liberal/Communitarian: MacIntyre’s Mesmeric Dichotomy,” in John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds., *After MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

⁴⁴ The recent unanimous decision in *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 138 S.Ct. 694 (2012) and the narrowly decided *Hobby Lobby* decision, 134 S.Ct. 2751 (2014), are from a MacIntyrean perspective hopeful. A constitutional lawyer who supports a broadly MacIntyrean approach to religious freedom is Steven D. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

For the American tradition of religious freedom is strong and has shown itself willing to accommodate the wide range of different forms of religion that have always existed within its borders. Even the Mormons, who were at one time systematically persecuted, have done well eventually, in important part because they have had large numbers of healthy children. What needs to be emphasized is the communal dimension of religious freedom: the right to form, join, and maintain communities whose views may in important ways be different from the larger society. According to its own spokesmen, what first spurred the Religious New Right was governmental threats to Christian schools and, more broadly, “the realization that there are no enclaves in this society.”⁴⁵

The Christian Right appeals to the idea of Christian America. Some critics have emphasized America’s religious diversity, to the point where they find a chaos on which neither tolerance nor anything else can be built.⁴⁶ Others point to the Deism of many of the founding generation (in the process confusing Deism, pantheism, and atheism) and claim that the Declaration of Independence’s appeal to “Nature’s God” “really stands for the emancipation of the political order from God,” as if the British Empire were a theocracy.⁴⁷ That people in the eighteenth century were frequently guilty of confusing Deism, pantheism, and atheism, is no excuse for doing so ourselves.

Although relations between Catholics and conservative Bible Christians⁴⁸ have recently become friendlier, Fundamentalism is not in favor in the Vatican.⁴⁹ There are politically important tensions among

University Press, 2014), though he limits himself to the claims of the church, broadly understood (pp. 163-66).

⁴⁵ Edward G. Dobson, “Comments on Robert Wuthnow: ‘The Future of the Religious Right,’” in Michael Cromartie, ed., *No Longer Exiles* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993), p. 51; likewise Paul Weyrich, “Comments on George Marsden, ‘An Overview,’” in *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Peter Manseau, *One Nation under Gods* (New York: Little, Brown, 2015), makes this case; he writes at length of events in Latin America and elsewhere, which are not properly a part of the history of the United States; see *ibid.*, esp. chap. 2.

⁴⁷ Matthew Stewart, *Nature’s God* (New York: Norton, 2014), esp. pp. 5-7.

⁴⁸ I use “Conservative Bible Christians” to refer to Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and Pentecostals; and “Religious New Right” and “Religious Conservatives” to refer to the political movement some such people have launched, which some Roman Catholics and Jews have also joined.

⁴⁹ Pope Francis has said: “In ideologies there is not Jesus: in his tenderness, his love, his meekness. And ideologies are rigid, always And when a Christian becomes a disciple of the ideology, he has lost the faith: he is no longer a disciple of Jesus, he is a disciple of this attitude of thought For this reason Jesus said to them: ‘You have taken away the key of knowledge.’ The knowledge of Jesus is transformed into an

Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and Evangelicals—and Baptists cover the political, theological, and cultural waterfront. In brief, American history and demographics do not support a claim by Southern Baptists to be the legitimate rulers of the country. Nonetheless, American religion has been predominantly Christian, if often unorthodox.⁵⁰ The Deists among the Founding Fathers kept quiet for that reason. The alternative to Christianity for most Americans has been not some other faith, but hedonism and acquisitiveness.

Speaking as an American rather than as a philosopher, I hope that Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist communities of virtue are entitled to a welcome on these shores. As for those eccentric groups called “cults,” the problems they pose need to be addressed case by case. The bloody climax of the drama of the Branch Davidians, including the deaths of many children whom the government was supposedly protecting against abuse, presents an exemplar of what must at all costs be avoided.⁵¹ Groups that refuse to be called religious, such as the Trotskyists with whom MacIntyre was once associated, can claim the substantial (but not necessarily identical) protections provided by freedom of speech and the press, provided that the government does not circumvent these protections by acting against them outside the law. (We are then talking not politics, but war.)

The framework that makes such mutual accommodation possible can expect wide though not universal support. (New Atheists and extreme Fundamentalists would not sign on.) Even America’s debilitated civil religion might lend support to freedom of conscience. For what distinguishes conscientious objection to war or abortion from emotional aversion is that it is either the voice of God in the soul or else that of some Reality that serves the function of God in the conscientious person’s life, even if the nature of this moral source has not received clear articulation. (There is no doubt that some atheists have powerful consciences.)

MacIntyre and his admirers need to choose between *modus vivendi* liberalism (which differs from the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes only in that the danger feared is not the war of each against all, but the even more destructive war of tribe against tribe) and Civic Republicanism. The form that

ideological and also moralistic knowledge, because these close the door with many requirements. The faith becomes ideology and ideology frightens, ideology chases away the people, distances, distances the people and distances of the Church of the people”; see Stephen D. Foster, Jr., “Pope Francis Takes Aim at Ideologically Obsessed Christians,” *Addicting Info* (October 21, 2013), accessed online at: <http://www.addictinginfo.org/2013/10/21/pope-francis-right-wing-christians/>.

⁵⁰ See Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

⁵¹ See James W. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco?* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Stuart A. Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and, in a more secular vein, David Kopel, *No More Wacos* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1997).

such Civic Republicanism would need to take is one in which dialogue across communal boundaries supports a form of public reason that legitimates liberal institutions and enables us to discuss their implications in practice.⁵² A shared belief in our need to discover what is for our good, rather than follow our present impulses whatever they may be, can unite people whose understandings of the good life are very different.

7. Rights-Talk

Some writers have attempted to reach an accommodation between MacIntyre's philosophy and the liberal language of rights.⁵³ Even MacIntyre, though notorious for his rights-skepticism, has moderated his position to allow for communally based claims of right.⁵⁴ Virtually any normative framework can support claims of right, though rights-skeptics are right to protest the habit of taking such claims as self-evident deliverances of moral consciousness.

The appropriate frame of reference for the resulting debates is a minimum-claim pragmatism, which sedulously refrains from asserting that practice-transcending claims of truth are impossible, while abstaining from such claims as well. It also argues for certain rights on this basis.⁵⁵ Yet this policy of abstinence will come to an inevitable end; metaphysical and religious issues can arise anywhere, though they need not arise everywhere. The greater the diversity of outlooks admitted to the conversation, the less reason we will have to expect convergence.

My argument has implications for the contested concept of the common good. The common good of an intentional community will be defined by its comprehensive view, which may contain elements derived from revelation as well as reason; if it does so, the community will find it easier to find protection from the pressures of the larger society in the American tradition of religious freedom. The common good of a pluralistic society will include the avoidance of civil war—of tribe against tribe rather than of individual against individual—that happens when civil conversation breaks down. MacIntyre offers something richer: He has observed that “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking the good life for man” (K p. 91).

⁵² This is a more latitudinarian version of Rawls's overlapping consensus.

⁵³ For example, Michael Baur, “The Language of Rights: An Aristotelian-Thomistic Analysis,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 84 (2011), pp. 89-98.

⁵⁴ See the passage from Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Return to Virtue Ethics,” in Russell E. Smith, ed., *The Twentieth Anniversary of Vatican II* (Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1990), pp. 247-48, quoted in Baur, “The Language of Rights,” p. 90.

⁵⁵ For a defense of pragmatic liberalism, see Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988); and Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Analogously, the common good of a pluralistic society includes a shared search for the common good.

Although these issues will require detailed discussion, MacIntyrean liberalism will fall closer to the Libertarian than to the Social Democratic end of the spectrum. Though MacIntyre shows no interest in either liberated morals or an alliance with the plutocracy, it is difficult to see how he could support a state powerful enough to engage in significant wealth redistribution or to limit economic inequality. His Marxist writings (E passim) are even pervaded by hostility toward the British Labour Party.

A MacIntyrean Social Democrat would have to find ways of circumventing deep moral disagreement, and of combating MacIntyre's pessimism about public deliberation in pluralistic societies. Our understanding of public reason will have to be purged of any suggestion that religious spokesmen should be told to "sit down and shut up," even when they attempt to frame their arguments in secular terms.⁵⁶ Even in the absence of such prescriptive secularism, the arguments made by religious spokesmen often fail to persuade.

8. God and Hope

Politics takes place among human beings, whose lives are always larger than their spiritual beliefs. The material basis of social life is the bare existence of human beings. However, since we are mortal, we need to reproduce ourselves culturally as well as biologically. Communities of virtue, with the exception of celibate communities not rooted in a larger breeding community, will do well by this standard, at least for a broad range of understandings of virtue.

As a theistic philosopher, MacIntyre is entitled to believe in a transcendent source of help and hope. But what should we hope *for*? That God will re-activate the world proletarian revolution? That He will rapture us from a decaying world at natural death or, as excitable Christians have supposed, at some earlier time, so that we will escape the wrath to come? That He will intervene and put an end to the human comedy? That we will be able to fight the wars of the Lord in small or large ways, without knowledge of the results? All of these answers and others as well have precedents in the history of theological politics, but the "Marxist, ex-Marxist, and post-Marxist audience"⁵⁷ that is looking for a way to revive their old belief or fill a Marxism-shaped gap in their thought and practice, are certain to be disappointed.

In sum, we are back to politics as usual. The very real limitations of liberalism as a political tradition do not release us from the central task

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁵⁷ Lutz, "MacIntyre's Tradition-Constituted Enquiry," p. 407.

liberalism set itself in the breakup of Christendom: namely, creating and defending institutions that allow persons of a wide variety of religious, quasi-religious, and non-religious outlooks to live together on terms of peace and, so far as possible, mutual respect.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ This article is a sequel to my “The Concept of Tradition,” *Reason Papers* 35, no. 1 (July 2013), pp. 107-12, and was delivered at the July 2011 meeting of the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry, the Philosophy Department at Providence College in March 2012, and the July 2014 meeting of the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry. I am indebted to the participants in those discussions, as well as to the editors of *Reason Papers*, for their comments on earlier versions of this article, and in particular to Michael Murray for putting his observations in writing. I am also indebted to Celia Wolf-Devine for her comments on the final draft.

