Interview: Alasdair MacIntyre, University of Notre Dame

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Kavanagh: Recently Villanova University was honored to welcome you as the recipient of the *Civitas Dei* Medal, which is awarded to individuals who have made exemplary contributions to the Catholic intellectual tradition. The contemporary Catholic university faces many challenges and expectations. In particular, many people claim that it is a primary responsibility of the university to provide students with the skills and resources they need to pursue their chosen career paths. You have written that, on the contrary, "[I]t is a primary responsibility of a university to be unresponsive, to give its students what they need, not what they want, and to do so in such a way that what they want becomes what they need and what they choose is choice-worthy."[1] How might the contemporary Catholic university retrieve this self-understanding?

MacIntyre: Of course students need to be well prepared for the world of work, but for this they need not only the relevant sets of skills, but also an ability to make reflective choices. There are the skills that everyone needs, whatever their career path, some of them mathematical – everyone should have a course in probability and statistics – as well as others that enable us to understand difficult texts or to disentangle complex arguments. Those skills are put to use in learning what the different disciplines have to teach us about nature and human nature, about what it is to choose and act as a rational agent in our particular time and place. It is the task of any worthwhile university not just to educate in particular disciplines, but to enable its students to understand how each discipline contributes to an overall understanding of the human condition and so to become reflective. It is the peculiar task of Catholic universities to show how that understanding will remain inadequate and incomplete without a recognition of the dependence of the created world on God and an acknowledgment of God's self-revelation to Israel, in Christ, and through the teaching of the Catholic church.

It is therefore not difficult to say what Catholic universities have to do, if they are to fulfill their mission. Why then is it so very difficult to do what needs to be done? Three kinds of obstacles

are posed, some by faculty, some by students, some by administrators. Faculty have generally been educated to become specialists not just in this or that discipline, but in this or that sub-discipline or sub-sub-discipline. They are generally under pressure to publish in journals that are read only by other specialists. And the more intellectually distinguished they are, the more likely this is to be so. They are therefore generally badly prepared for and often averse to performing the tasks that I have identified as central to the life of the university. In Catholic universities theologians too are now generally specialists, lacking the kind of understanding of the secular disciplines that they need in order to identify the inadequacies of a purely secular understanding of the human condition.

Students, through no fault of their own, provide a second set of obstacles. They want to do well and to please their parents by doing well. But this leads them to choose courses in which they predict that they will do well and not to be adventurous or risk-taking. They are insufficiently open to the possibility that it would be good for them to break out in some new direction and they often make their fundamental decisions too early, before they have become sufficiently reflective. Too often they do not want an education which is both rigorous and demanding *and* unsettling and disturbing, that gives them reason to be less than entirely happy with themselves and with the world.

Administrators find themselves under pressure to compete with other universities for students, for faculty, and for endowment and are therefore apt to take as models those universities that are placed above them in the rankings. So they tend to emulate the great secular research universities and by so doing to move away from rather than towards the goals that a Catholic university should have. In fact the more a Catholic university becomes what it should be the less likely it is to rise in the rankings.

Kavanagh: Do you believe the Church could play a more active role in cultivating this self-understanding? Could it play a role in determining certain curricular core requirements, for example?

MacIntyre: What the Church can and must do, indeed what it has already done, is to state clearly the minimum requirements that must be satisfied for a university to claim the title "Catholic." Those requirements are to be found in John Paul II's 1991 Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, a copy of which should be on every faculty member's and every university administrator's desk. It does indeed, as you suggest, have important things to say about the curriculum, about, for example, the place of theology in the university and the need to bring out the relationships between the disciplines. And it rightly leaves universities free to decide how they are going to implement these requirements. What it did not leave them free to do was to ignore it, as so many American Catholic universities have in fact successfully done.

Kavanagh: You have followed John Henry Newman and Pope John Paul II in arguing that both philosophy and theology are necessary and constitutive elements of a Catholic education. But

some of your most sympathetic readers have questioned your understanding of the relationship between theology and philosophy. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, has suggested that you draw too sharp a distinction between the two.[2] Similarly, John Milbank has argued that, without determinate theological commitments, philosophy risks remaining bound to the conceptual frameworks of secular modernity.[3] How might you respond to these readers that, perhaps, you are not theological enough?

MacIntyre: Philosophy, like carpentry and accountancy, is a secular trade. The standards by which its arguments and its enquiries are evaluated are those of natural reason. The questions from which its enquiries begin are, as John Paul II pointed out in the introduction to *Fides et Ratio*, developed from the existential questions posed by human beings in every culture: "*Who am I?" "Where do I come from?" "Where am I going?" "Why do evils appear?" "What remains to us after this life?"* Philosophical enquiry proceeds by reformulating such questions, by considering alternative and rival answers to them, and by identifying what is presupposed in asking them. In so doing philosophy makes issues of meaning and truth central to its enquiries. So it is of some importance that philosophical theses emerge from argumentative disputation and are always open to further questioning. In philosophy no one ever has the last word, but only at best the last word so far.

There are of course philosophical positions that exclude the possibility that the truths of the Catholic faith could be affirmed by any rational person. It matters that such positions should be put in question, that their conclusions should be shown to derive, as they do, from what are always at best question-begging premises. But, if we are to do this in a way that will carry the debate forward, our own premises must not be similarly question-begging, as they would be if our philosophical stances involved prior theological commitments. It is in fact theology that presupposes commitment to certain philosophical positions, something recognized by the First Vatican Council in its teaching that God's existence and the natural law that he ordains for human beings, independently of his self-revelation, can be known by the light of reason.

Kavanagh: You have described your philosophy as "theistic, but as secular in its content as any other."[4] Do you understand "theistic" here in purely formal terms, as the affirmation of the interminability of philosophical enquiry, for example? Or is there a determinate content to your theistic commitments?

MacIntyre: Theistic philosophers are of a number of different kinds, partly because of their different religious and cultural affiliations, partly because of their varying philosophical stances. What they share is a twofold conviction: first, that there arises in and from the natural world that which cannot be adequately understood in the terms – physical, chemical, biological – in which we rightly understand nature; and, secondly, that we can only make intelligible the relationship between nature and that which cannot be understood in naturalistic terms by taking there to be just such a God as the God of Abraham, the God worshipped by Jews, Christians, and Moslems. In the Middle Ages some Islamic, Jewish, and Catholic Christian philosophers arrived at this

conclusion by reflecting on some of Aristotle's theses and arguments and for the last hundred and thirty years Thomists have continued to work in this tradition. But there have also, of course, in the same period been theistic phenomenologists, most notably perhaps Adolf Reinach. And there have also been remarkable theistic philosophers who were neither Thomists nor phenomenologists, a catalogue that includes Scotists and Occamists, Anselm and Abelard, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Pascal and Kierkegaard.

What many, if not quite all, of this strange and diverse group share as philosophers is a conception of God and a judgment that God exists that is prior to and independent of their commitment to this or that particular theistic faith. The task that all contemporary theistic philosophers have is that of keeping open the question of God's existence in a culture that is often less secularized than its intelligentsias take it to be, so that modernity becomes self-questioning and self-doubting. To achieve this they have to engage in the contemporary philosophical conversation on its own terms, something insufficiently recognized by such theologians as Hauerwas and Milbank.

Kavanagh: Have you any interest in writing a more overtly confessional text: a spiritual autobiography, for example?

MacIntyre: Autobiographies should only be undertaken by those with the appropriate literary gifts. Otherwise what their authors write are among the most tiresome of narratives. I do not have those gifts.

Kavanagh: Do you think there is a role for prayer in the life of a philosopher?

MacIntyre: If one is a theistic philosopher, one cannot but speak about God. But God is omnipresent. There is no way of speaking about God that God does not hear. So one finds oneself at once speaking not only about, but also to and with God, and therefore no longer in the accents of philosophical debate, but in fear and trembling and supplication. Someone who thinks that he can speak about God without being drawn into speaking to and with him must have misunderstood who and what God is.

Kavanagh: In *After Virtue*, you argue that, "Where the notion of engagement in a practice was once socially central, the notion of aesthetic consumption now is, at least for the majority."[5] You illustrate this point in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* when you compare Great Books and Humanities programs to art museums.[6] In both cases, artworks and texts are presented as contextless commodities to aesthetic consumers. Do you think that contemporary Liberal Arts and Humanities programs actively contribute to our spectatorial, consumerist culture? And are they unwittingly contributing to their own demise?

MacIntyre: My use of the word "aesthetic" is strongly influenced by Kierkegaard's use of it and may be misleading. When I speak of aesthetic attitudes in *After Virtue* and elsewhere, I am not speaking of the attitudes that we should take to great or even minor works of art and I am

speaking of a type of attitude that is often taken to objects that are not works of art. What those with an aesthetic attitude, as I define it, demand of whatever is presented to them is that, so far as possible, it should entertain them, that it should hold their interest, it should rescue them from the threat of boredom, and it should distract them from the harsher realities of life.

Aesthetes, thus understood, are spectators and consumers and a culture in which the aesthetic attitude is taken for granted is one in which education confronts difficulties. For almost all worthwhile learning requires patience with what must at first appear tedious and boring and a willingness to engage in activities the point of which will only be grasped later on. If you do not learn to conjugate Greek irregular verbs now, you will not be able to read Sophocles later. If you do not recognize how painfully inadequate some of your work is, you will never remedy what is amiss. So the teacher who sets her or himself to be entertaining does students a disservice, but is likely to receive highly favorable teaching evaluations.

This is, as your question suggests, most often a problem with the teaching of the humanities and, when economic pressures direct students away from the humanities, because of their or their parents' false belief that a degree in philosophy is less likely to lead to an interesting career than, say, a degree in business studies, that problem becomes more acute. For humanities teachers are not mistaken in supposing that, by being entertaining they are at the present day more likely to attract students to their classes.

Moreover the impact of information technology has created another not unrelated problem. Contemporary students often feel that something has gone wrong if they are not throughout the day in touch with others by cell phone or otherwise. They no longer understand how important it is to be silent, to be patient in silence. They no longer understand that knowing how to be and act in the company of others involves also knowing how to be and act when alone.

Kavanagh: In *God, Philosophy, Universities*, you follow Newman in diagnosing the "moral limitations of a university education and the tendency of university communities to disguise those limitations from themselves."[7] What precisely are the moral limits of a university education, and how do university communities disguise this from themselves?

MacIntyre: Every profession trains its practitioners to view the world from its own idiosyncratic perspective and the academic profession is no different from any other. Every profession therefore has its own peculiar vices, the vices that arise from lack of awareness of the limitations fostered by that perspective and here once again the academic profession is no different from any other. What are those limitations? Let me restrict myself to two. Anyone who has had to sit through both meetings of their department in universities on the one hand and meetings of, say, trade union branches and local neighborhood associations on the other knows that faculty members are, compared with others, extraordinarily bad at collective decision making aimed at the common good under constraints of time. They have developed habits of mind and speech which too often disable them as participants in shared deliberation.

Moreover, as I noted earlier, they have been trained as specialists in work areas of ever-increasing specialization. This, as Newman already noted, makes for a one-sidedness and narrowness of outlook that too often puts them at a disadvantage in situations where it is important to understand how matters appear from a variety of standpoints. These traits too often combine to make faculty members disappointingly ineffective in areas where they have an important contribution to make. The most obvious of those areas is the university itself. Over the past fifty years the ways in which universities have developed have been largely determined by administrators, donors, and grant-givers, not by faculty members, and this failure on the part of faculty to resist the resulting transformation of the university resulted in key part from the two sets of traits that I have just identified. We may note that the more successful a university is in transforming itself into a replica of the major research universities the more it will be the case that faculty members will fit easily and unresistingly into roles designed for them by administrators, donors, and other sources of money. Success in the academic life as it is now commonly understood is one more kind of failure.

Kavanagh: In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, you argue that, contrary to the claims of the secular university, all creative rational enquiry presupposes some shared background of moral and intellectual beliefs. You suggest that this might best be achieved through a series of rival universities, "each advancing its own enquiries in its own terms and each securing the type of agreement necessary to ensure the progress and flourishing of its enquiries by its own set of exclusions and prohibitions, formal and informal."[8] You have also argued that it is crucial that Catholic universities have non-Catholic faculty, "not only because of the excellence of what such faculty can contribute, but also in order to prevent Catholics from forgetting that the secular calling of the university *qua* university is shared with non-Catholics."[9] But does this present us with a dilemma? If the basic shared beliefs of a Catholic university are theological, how can a Jewish, a Muslim, or an atheist scholar contribute to a Catholic University? If the basic shared beliefs are *not* theological, then how can a community of shared enquiry claim to be Catholic?

MacIntyre: My basic thesis is that all constructive disagreement, the kind of disagreement that issues in worthwhile enquiry, presupposes some large measure of agreement. So it is in physics or in history or in political science. So it is too with enquiry into what we should teach our students and how the curriculum should be organized. So in any university in good order there will be a large measure of agreement among both faculty and administrators – who in such matters should be the servants of the faculty – both about teaching and research in each particular discipline and about how and why the teaching and research of each particular discipline contribute to the educational tasks of the university, as I characterized them in my answer to your first question. Note that I spoke of a large measure of agreement, allowing for a variety of disagreements, some of them disagreements that we need to make explicit if we are to understand what our commitments are.

It is often only through discussion with Jews and Moslems of their grounds for rejecting Catholic Christianity, for example, that we become fully aware of what it is to which we, unlike them, are

committed, as well as of what as theists we share with them. And what is true of Jews and Moslems is also true of atheists. So a Catholic university may be less authentically Catholic, as well as less of a university, if it does not allow for the expression of a wide range of disagreements. But even those disagreements must presuppose strong underlying agreements about the nature and tasks of any university.

It is these latter agreements that are too often lacking among faculty in the contemporary liberal university, where characteristically and generally a ragbag of disciplines are taught, but there is too often little or no shared rationale as to why it is this rather than that set of disciplines or as to what the bearing of the findings of each discipline might be on the findings of each of the others. So the overall curriculum tends to evolve through a series of chances: what attracts funding in this period, but fails to attract it in that, what is fashionable with parents or students here or there, what will lead to a job whose remuneration will enable the young graduate to repay her or his student loans.

We therefore need alternatives to the liberal university and my suggestion in *Three Rival Versions* was that these could be of more than one kind, depending on what agreements were crucial in constituting them as universities.

Kavanagh: You have previously argued that "it is only where an educated public exists, and where introduction into the membership of that educated public is the goal of education, that both the overall purposes presupposed in modern education systems can be realized."[10] How might a Catholic university help to foster an educated public?

MacIntyre: The task of bringing into being an educated public is the task of every university, not especially of Catholic universities. An educated public shares at least four things. It acknowledges common standards of argument. It recognizes a shared cultural inheritance that gives expression to some measure of agreement on what is required if human beings are to flourish. It agrees further to some significant extent on what the difficulties and problems that it confronts are. And it is able to view its informal discussions of great issues, over dinner tables, in coffee houses, in debating clubs, in magazines, newspapers, and now the internet as contributing to the making of decisions in the decision-making organs of that particular society, whatever they are. In modern societies the first three of these will only be adequately achieved when a sufficient number of citizens receive a good higher education. Yet, even when this is so, it may not be enough. Why not?

The debates of an educated public require a willingness to listen to a variety of conflicting voices and to allow the argument to carry one forward to what are sometimes quite unexpected conclusions. Such debate is frustrated when significant voices go unheard. It is the peculiar task of the Catholic university to educate its students so that later on they are able to make distinctively Catholic voices heard and to sustain those dialogues to which it is important that Catholics should contribute. Yet they will only do this well if they care about the dialogue and

know how to listen and to learn as well as how to speak. This is more important than ever in the United States now, when among the political elites the capacity to listen to and learn from their antagonists and to sustain genuine dialogue has been increasingly lost. And this loss is one more symptom of educational failure.

Notes

1. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2001. "Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices." *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions*. Ed. Robert E. Sullivan. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press: 15.
2. Hauerwas, Stanley. 2007. *The State of The University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God*. Malden, MA: Blackwell: 26–27.
3. Milbank, John. 2006. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Second Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell: 327–381.
4. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1998. "An Interview with Giovanna Borradori." *The MacIntyre Reader*. Ed. Kelvin Knight. Cambridge: Blackwell: 265–66.
5. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2007. *After Virtue.* Third Edition. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press: 228.
6. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press: 385–386.
7. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2009. *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Traditi*on. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield: 148.
8. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1990. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encylopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press: 234.
9. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2001. 10–11.
10. MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1987. "The Idea of an Educated Public." *Education and Values: The Richard Peters Lectures*. Ed. Graham Haydon. London: University of London Institute of Education: 17.