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Th.D. Seminar: Explorations in Practical Theology
September 20, 2007
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Philosophical Roots of Praxis:
What MacIntyre is trying to fix and its relation to Christian practical theology

In his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre points out that today there is no coherent way of resolving moral disagreements.[1] Arguments are made but they are not based on the same "standard" (iv). Thus, people arguing "miss each other" and the arguments continue without end. But people are not quite aware of this phenomenon. "Our lack of consciousness . . . constitutes part of our predicament" (263).

Gradually people acted more and more as if they were emotivists. In emotivism, moral statements are nothing "but expressions of preference" (12).

Those who embody this emotivism treat others as means to an end (24). Everyone simply "consumes" one another as they see fit. People do what they can get away with. Majority rules. If you have more people who vote on your side, you can do what you would prefer to do. This is liberal democracy.

MacIntyre points out that corporations treat people this way. The "manager" (MacIntyre's term) at the top of an organization (or what we might call the "CEO") is charged with arranging his human resources in order to sell more products (25). People are simply another resource.

Another character who embodies this functional emotivism is the "therapist." He or she tries to help people feel better, to have their preferences realized (20, xv).

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[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (3d. ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). All page numbers in the text are from this book. The second edition and third edition page numbers are the same.

The "rich aesthete" lives for themselves, trying to alleviate boredom. The modern

obsession with celebrities and entertainment reflects the instincts of the aesthete.

In the third edition prologue, MacIntyre introduces another stock character: "the

conservative moralists, with their inflated and self-righteous unironic rhetoric" (xv).

All of these characters have a certain "expertise" but do not consider the

contemplation of the *telos* of what they do or the effect their actions have on other people

to be their responsibility (30). People have bought into the philosophy behind the free

market economy. If everyone does what they prefer to do, it will all work itself out

because Adam Smith told us so.

Christian Smith, a sociologist (like MacIntyre at the University of Notre Dame),

describes the typical religious philosophy of teenagers in almost the same words as

MacIntyre. He calls the phenomenon "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."[2] On the whole,

American teenagers adhere to inconsistent rules, live to feel better, and believe in a non-

intervening God.

MacIntyre's program for hope is based on a fresh application of Aristotle

understanding of virtue. He concludes the book by calling for

the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual
and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us . . .
we are waiting for a . . . another . . . St. Benedict (263).

Though MacIntyre wants to see local communities embody these virtues, it is not

communities in themselves which MacIntyre suggests hold hope for the future. He

clarifies this in the prologue to the third edition,

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[2] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

I see no value in community as such – many types of community are nastily oppressive – and the values of contemporary communitarianism . . . are compatible with and supportive of the values of liberalism that I reject (xiv).

Rather, MacIntyre sees hope in Aristotle's understanding of friendship as "the sharing of all in the common project of sharing and sustaining the life of the city" (156). People understand best how they are to live well in the context of shared communal projects which MacIntyre calls "practices" (187). It is in the context of this specificity that morality or "what is virtuous" can be best discerned (149).

MacIntyre is a fruitful dialogue partner for practical theologians in that he helpfully describes how moral statements by Christians have become one option among many in this pluralistic world. Enlightenment-rooted analytical arguments may not help persuade people. The implication of his argument is that Christian virtues only make sense in light of a shared *telos* such as the kingdom of God embodied in a local community of believers. Therefore, Christian thinkers should take up communal Christian life as Benedict did, in order to provide a more compelling and more coherent description of what the good life looks like.

In looking historically at the discipline of practical theology, Richard Osmer believes that four tasks have emerged as central to the field. [3] These four tasks are the *descriptive-empirical* task which explores "What is going on?"; the *interpretive* task which explores "Why is this going on?"; the *normative* task which explores "What forms ought Christian praxis take in this particular social context?"; and the *pragmatic* task which explores "How might this area of praxis be shaped to embody more fully the normative commitments of the Christian tradition in a particular context of experience?"[4]

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[3] Richard Robert Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 303-317.