

Models of Education and a Catholic University: Preliminary Reflections

Christopher J. Thompson
Department of Theology

As a means of addressing the complex questions of curriculum at a Catholic university, I have drawn upon the recent reflections of Alasdair MacIntyre. While his efforts are not specifically limited to questions of curriculum, his analysis supplies us with an important tool for sifting through these complex questions. In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, MacIntyre identifies distinct and incommensurable approaches to education. Recognizing different models of education may help us identify some of the reasons why apparent agreement concerning the value of a liberal arts education is coupled with such thorough disagreement as to what such an education means for the development of a curriculum at a Catholic university.

As the title of his latest work indicates, MacIntyre argues that there are at least three competing versions of education or liberal learning functioning within contemporary academia, each with a unique historical context in which it emerged and each with a method of analysis and aim of accomplishment. The contemporary university, moreover, is for the most part the unwitting heir to these rival traditions. Catholic universities are no exception to the general problem as they, too, are immersed in a multifaceted, often contradictory discourse concerning the nature of education. In other words, all of us engaged in these kinds of discussions are inheritors of many intellectual traditions, some of which, moreover, may be systematically at odds with a mission of a Catholic university.

The first approach to intellectual inquiry MacIntyre identifies is the Encyclopedist, named from the model of rationality displayed by the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In the Encyclopedist approach, truth represents a single, univocal body of knowledge whereby the inquirer seeks to free him- or herself from the vicissitudes of culture and tradition in an effort to discover "reality." It supposes that, "substantive rationality is unitary, that there is a single if perhaps complex, conception of what the standards and the achievements of rationality are, one which every educated person can without too much difficulty be brought to agree in acknowledging."¹ Since truth is one, so the Encyclopedist argues, there must be a single method of analysis to uncover it. Rationality ought to function the same for all agents in all contexts in all circumstances, hence any pre-theoretical commitments concerning, for example, the nature of a historical revelation are absolutely unwarranted. In this view, the rational inquirer, "aims at providing timeless, universal, and objective truths as his or her conclusions, but aspires to do so by reasoning which has from the outset the same properties. From the outset all reasoning must be such as would be compelling to any fully rational person whatsoever. Rationality, like truth, is independent of time, place and historical circumstances."²

Using MacIntyre's Encyclopedist model of rationality, we can suppose that a curriculum constructed on such terms would be reluctant to admit any pre-theoretical commitments in its operations, i.e., a commitment to a revelatory tradition. Instead the facts, research, data, and the "unrestricted" quest for knowledge become the hallmarks of the enterprise. Curricula modeled on Encyclopedist terms seek maximal exposure to a vast array of perspectives. Any attempt to advance a particular tradition, especially religious, is seen as an affront to rational inquiry as such. Its rhetoric is steeped in the "free and open exchange" within the "marketplace of ideas," uncritically refusing to acknowledge within that exchange either the value of a unique intellectual tradition or the risk of intellectual fraud.

Encyclopedists assume "that all rational persons conceptualize data in one and the same way and that therefore any attentive and honest observer, unblinded and undistracted by the prejudices of the prior commitment to belief, would report the same data, the same facts, [and] that it is the data thus reported and characterized which provide inquiry with its subject matter."³

With a particular hostility toward the notion that religious faith may, in fact, be a rational enterprise, the Encyclopedist nudges belief to the fringes of the academy, tolerating the pseudo-science of theological inquiry as, at best, an important cultural artifact. What for centuries had been understood by Christians as "faith seeking understanding," is recast as "faith within the limits of reason alone" and finally as "faith as a compelling cultural phenomenon." In an Encyclopedist milieu special emphasis is given toward developing within the student an appreciation of religious faith as a mere function of life in the contemporary world.

In such a climate, a Catholic intellectual tradition particularly suffers since it is a first principle of Encyclopedist reasoning that faith in a historical revelation is not a reasonable position. Belief in a particular God may occur, to be sure, but not on reasonable grounds. The study of religion might even continue in this milieu, but only as a means of investigating objective cultural phenomena and never as a means of uncovering the truth of things. Students can observe, watch or chronicle the development of religion, but never engage in a particular tradition as a viable means of inquiring into the nature of what is real. There may even be a requirement to take a certain number of courses on the topic of religion, but only under the rubric of some kind of cultural sensibility and not as a substantive revelation of truth.

At a Catholic university the Encyclopedic mode is inadequate, for while it is true that religion can be studied as an important cultural phenomenon, the Church is not a mere cultural artifact nor is faith an idiosyncratic gesture. Racism, fanaticism and other practices can be studied as important cultural trends, but no one suggests that these culturally significant trends are, like the Catholic faith, a medium of coming to know what is true. To recognize Christian faith as "an important dimension of contemporary life" pales in comparison to an affirmation of faith in Christ and his Church as a venue to truth. It is one thing to tell your lover, "I love you," and another to say, "It's interesting to note that some have found you attractive."

The second model of inquiry MacIntyre identifies is the Genealogical approach to education (from Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals). Often parasitic upon other forms of inquiry and largely in reaction to the Encyclopedic tradition, this approach sees all forms of rationality as disguised attempts at a will-to-power and sees the function of education to be the unmasking of those attempts. A curriculum modeled along these lines champions the cause of emancipation from the limitations of (primarily Western) traditions of rationality/oppression. All claims to a universal, objective truth, so the Genealogist claims, are attempts to oppress. Thus "critical thinking" as a means of "empowerment" becomes the paramount aim, instilling in the student the means of establishing his or her personal "freedom" of thought. Theology, to the extent it is recognized as a legitimate discipline, undertakes the task of "removing the mighty from their thrones," of liberating students from the burden of religious tradition and seeing in revelation not the revelation of God but the not-so-subtle oppression of humanity. In the Genealogical mode, Catholic intellectual thought is particularly challenged since all claims to truth are "unmasked" as attempts at domination and oppression. Scripture and the Catholic Church are particularly vulnerable since as significant catalysts of Western culture they are the primary targets of these "emancipatory" critiques.

The Genealogical tradition, though, also fails as an adequate model of a Catholic curriculum for at least two reasons. In the first place, as MacIntyre points out, by reducing claims to truth as attempts at domination, the Genealogical tradition falls victim to its own critique. For what Genealogists fail to account for is why, precisely, one ought to listen to them. Without some intrinsic value invested in objective truth, the value of emancipation-via-education collapses; without any commitments to objective truth, the effort to emancipate itself becomes one more episode in the long history of manipulation and domination.

The second reason the Genealogical approach fails lies in the fact that truth, from the perspective of the Catholic tradition, is not a means of domination, but the very means of liberation from oppression, especially sin. Always recognizing the consistent failures on the part of the Church to be faithful to the truth it possesses, the Catholic university nonetheless is heir to a truth that is the ultimate liberation, the truth of Jesus Christ.

As the principle player in the intellectual dimension of evangelization, a Catholic university is especially suited for the advancement of such truth in all its intellectual rigor and splendor. As John Paul II claims, "A Catholic university's privileged task is to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth, Jesus Christ."⁴

I suggest that the reason why "faith in Christ" and "seeking understanding" have been set in opposition lies in our historically conditioned habit of casting the question of truth in either Encyclopedist or Genealogical terms. On either of these terms no one can rightly confess Christ to be the fount of truth, for to do so would betray either an unwillingness to act reasonably (on Encyclopedic terms) or a not-so-subtle claim to power and superiority (on Genealogical terms).

There is, however, a model of education that is not fundamentally inimical to the shape of Catholic intellectual life. MacIntyre suggests that the solution lies in recognizing that these two competing methodologies are embedded in a false dilemma. As he notes, "Either reason is thus impersonal, universal, and disinterested or it is the unwitting representative of particular interests, masking their drive to power by its false pretensions to neutrality and disinterestedness."⁵ This dilemma conceals, however, a third possibility, that of a tradition-guided inquiry, in which it is affirmed that, "reason can only move toward being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for genuinely rational inquiry and more especially for moral and theological inquiry."⁶

Space does not allow a detailed analysis of MacIntyre's final position, but his recognition that rational inquiry demands participating in a moral community in which fundamental agreement is essential, helps one make sense of John Paul II's claim that a Catholic university, " ... by its Catholic character, is made more capable of conducting an impartial search for truth" ⁷

In a tradition-guided approach to truth, participants share in a community and tradition of inquiry. They assent to the reality of objective truth, yet recognize that the further understanding of that truth entails an important historical, developmental dimension. Initiation into a tradition-guided inquiry involves neither the abandonment of one's faithful perspective in the hopes of arriving at some pure position of reason, nor does it entail the surrendering of one's autonomous capacities of thought. Instead, students are initiated into the tradition of inquiry through the faithful guide of a teacher, a mentor, in which the principal players in the conversation up to this point, the multiple points of view and textual traditions, the lines of contention and points of argument, and suggestions for further progress are introduced in a way that allows students to recognize intellectual development and decay, advances and distractions within the disciplines engaged. Truth is neither ahistorical in its unfolding nor manipulative in its manifestation. It is a collective property of a community of committed inquirers, committed in faith to a further expression and understanding of that content.

According to MacIntyre, the impasse is broken between the Encyclopedist and Genealogist, then, with the recognition of at least one tradition of inquiry which avoids the pitfalls of those competing versions. A willed assent to the parameters of the discussion advanced thus far does not derail, as the Encyclopedist might suggest, the project of education. Nor does it betray, as the Genealogist suspects, a servile acquiescence on the part of a slavish inquirer. Rather, with this third version, a belief in the history of the progress of inquiry thus far and a commitment to the moral community of inquiry underwrites the conditions for the possibility of rational advancement and reform.

A tradition-guided inquiry not only will be vindicated by its capacity to narrate the discourse up to the present in such a way that defects are both accounted for and remedied, but it also will be partially vindicated (and thus open to further revisions) by

better accounting for what is real in ways that previous traditions could not. And the process by which an individual is initiated into better and better traditions of inquiry will initially demand a certain trust, a belief-in-persons, their canonical narratives and traditions of interpretations prior to a complete understanding of what such a tradition might offer as intelligible. Growing in trust, one becomes better skilled in the craft of inquiry.

It is in this third context that the rationale for a curriculum for a Catholic university emerges. For a Catholic university, unlike its secular counterparts, has in addition to the scholarly tradition, the treasure of the Church, that living Body of Christ which seeks further reflection and inquiry regarding the nature of God's revelation through the person of Jesus. Understanding that revelation requires a commitment to a community of inquirers, a trust in a tradition of inquiry and a teaching magisterium, and a willingness to engage critically the participants of the conversation thus far.

Such an inquiry is no longer cast as a mere pseudo-exercise, a pretentious imitation of what constitutes the "real" inquiry. Nor will such an exercise be another veiled attempt at domination. With the assistance of those who have gone before us as well as divine grace, inquiry into the nature of the living revelation-of-reality will be a fully rational enterprise, a fully human enterprise.

It is at this level of the human enterprise, that the Catholic university is especially equipped to engage in authentic education, for to emphasize the person is to cut to the heart of the matter, to no longer flee down the labyrinth of more and more formal distinctions. The Catholic university affirms as its animating principle the radical vocation of the human person to God through the person of Christ and his Church. To be sure, a Catholic university has responsibilities to the canons of intellectual disciplines as any institution of higher learning; but beyond this a Catholic university is invigorated by the unequivocal affirmation that Christ is the answer to the ontological vocation of the human person.

Recognizing the primacy of Christ in the destiny of humanity does not in any way suggest the exclusion of others in the quest for further understanding. The real threat to Catholic intellectual life and thought is not people of different faiths, rather it is models of intellectual development which are inimical to faith as such, models which are influential even among Catholic intellectuals; moreover, we need not keep the secular academy at arm's length, thereby running the risk of missing opportunities of further growth and development. We do need, though, to be ever vigilant against patterns of intellectualism that threaten the very foundations of "faith seeking understanding."

In terms of theological inquiry it means that in addition to critically following the canons of research related to the discipline as understood within the academy at large, a theology department at a Catholic university has the additional responsibility of investigating the radical character of our human destiny in Christ and the Church. For Christ reveals to us the fullness of our humanity, even — dare we say — the humanity of our students.

Nothing less than an unequivocal, institutional affirmation of the vocation of the person before God is owed to those who come to our community seeking understanding. n

Works Cited

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) 14. Hereafter, RV.

2. RV, 65.

3. RV, 16-17. Emphasis mine.

4. John Paul II, *Apostolic Constitution: Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Paragraph 1. Hereafter, ECE.

5. RV, 59.

6. RV, 59-60.

7. ECE, Paragraph 7. It's important to note that MacIntyre's conditions do not apply only to moral or theological inquiry, but to all disciplines that claim to develop along reasonable lines.