

We're All Traditionalists Now: The Priority of *Praxis* to *Theoria* for the Culture War

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the banality and absurdity of evil in our time. The author analyzes the social and cultural conditions that have made wanton disregard for life so common.

THE VIRGINIA TECH MASSACRE is the most recent, well-known, and shocking illustration of the decrepit state of our culture. But I think that the following and much lesser known event is even more revealing. In April of this year a teenage girl from Atlanta desired an unnatural relationship with another teenage girl, but the desire wasn't mutual. As a consequence, the girl (as we know from the text messages that she was sending at the time) tried to kill herself by driving head-on into another car. The girl survived, but the driver in the other car did not. She was a mother of three children, one of them a six-year-old girl.¹

This seems beyond ordinary wickedness. It only takes a moment of reflection to recognize the profound evil of this crime, the *senselessness* of it, its utter *banality* and *absurdity*. These words don't do it justice—even the word *evil* seems wanting. If revenge is one's motive, how does killing *oneself* as well as a perfect stranger obtain it, especially if the object of one's revenge could care less about you? Murdering another human being from a motive of rage, envy, hatred, fear, or insanity is at least intelligible, though not excusable. But killing oneself and an innocent stranger—a

¹ "Police: Mother of Three Killed In Girl's Suicide Attempt," *WNBC.com*, 20 October 2006, accessed June 21, 2007; available from <http://www.wnbc.com/news/10121527/detail.htm>.

young mother!—for such a banal motive as unrequited sexual desire approaches, I think, evil in its pure form. The Marquis de Sade said that evil done from a motive of complete apathy is the purest of evil, since having a passion for anything, including the hateful passion for murder, indicates a lack of autonomy and self-possession. The Marquis would be proud of his twenty-first-century spiritual daughter from Atlanta.

Such exquisite disdain for, and indifference towards, human life is, I submit, a symptom and a manifestation of something more fundamental and sinister than an anarchic and morally debased social milieu inhabited by a relatively miniscule number of particularly wicked individuals. Of course, the perpetrators were, as individuals, quite evil, and our violence and sex-soaked media culture did play a significant causal role in both of the crimes. But to achieve the profound level of depravity and inhumanity that these crimes evince requires deliberate and systematic cultivation, something outside the capacity of individuals, however wicked, or a social milieu, however necrophilic. Rather, it presupposes a very particular social, cultural, and political milieu in which such acts can first become imaginable.

We are no longer contending merely with formidable anti-life ideas, but with a systematic and coherent body of such ideas, united by a historical and publicly authoritative narrative and embodied in well-entrenched and concrete habits, attitudes, customs, rituals, institutions, and practices—a full-fledged, anti-life *tradition*. And though not every devotee of this anti-life tradition will become an actual murderer or suicide, the most logical of its devotees will—and the implicit logic of this anti-culture is becoming more and more explicit. Archbishop Javier Martinez of Granada makes the point well in a remarkable essay entitled “Beyond Secular Reason”:

Nihilism is today not a philosophy, it is above all a practice, and a practice of suicide even if is a soft suicide. It is the suicide of the depressed. It is also a practice of violence. The secular society lives in daily violence, violence with reality. This violence shows that nihilism cannot and does not correspond to our being. But it shows also, in a very concrete way, how the secular society annihilates itself by engendering the very monsters that terrify it most and that it

itself hates most.²

As I shall try to show below, the most powerful weapon for the culture war are not *ideas*, though these are indispensable, but *practices*.

LIBERALISM: THE TRADITION OF THE PSYCHOPATH

Liberalism is *the* established tradition in Western culture. As Alasdair MacIntyre has famously observed, “[t]he contemporary debates within modern political systems are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals, and radical liberals.”³ Yet, is the cultural soil of liberalism truly capable of germinating the kind of monstrous behaviors that I have described? Have not psychotic murderers been present throughout human history? And if liberalism is the “established tradition,” isn’t it simply the establishment of that level and lawful, political, economic, and cultural playing field that is most befitting creatures free to choose good or evil, in other words, the establishment of freedom? Not according to MacIntyre:

Liberalism in the name of freedom imposes a certain kind of unacknowledged domination, and one which in the long run tends to dissolve traditional human ties and to impoverish social and cultural relationships. Liberalism, while imposing through state power regimes that declare everyone 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.⁴

It only takes a few logical steps to realize that if the dominant tradition is one that “discredits traditional forms of human community” such as family and church and deprives “most people” of knowing their true good,

² Francisco Javier Martinez, “Beyond Secular Reason,” *Communio* 31/4 (2004):, accessed 21 June 2007; available at <http://www.secondspring.co.uk/articles/martinez.htm>.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 392.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, “An Interview with Giovanna Borradori,” *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 258.

disastrous cultural consequences must follow. If we do not *know* our good, then how can we *love* it? If we do not know or love our *good* because the very idea of good has become unintelligible and therefore unlovable, then how can we love *ourselves* and *others*?

To be educated into the culture of a liberal social order is, therefore, characteristically to become the kind of person to whom it appears normal that a variety of goods should be pursued, each appropriate to its own sphere, with no overall good supplying any overall unity to life.⁵

If there is no overall and antecedent good or unity to my life, then my life is inherently meaningless, and so is everybody else's for that matter. I might choose to *create* meaning for my life and the lives of others, or I might not. What is the upshot of all this? Jim Kalb provides a very startling answer:

Since it is choice itself that makes something good, one does not choose things for their goodness but simply because one chooses them. Choices thus become arbitrary, and human actions essentially non-rational. On such a view, the rational component of morality is reduced to the therapeutic task of clarifying choices and the technical task of securing their satisfaction efficiently and equally.... It is the outlook of a psychopath.⁶

And Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic therapy, as Philip Rieff suggests in his magisterial *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, has created *well-adjusted* psychopaths. To use Stephen Gardner's phrase, Freud was the "doctor of the damned."⁷

"I want what I want." That is the first commandment dictated to us by today's culture. As Benedict XVI warned us on the day before his election to the Pontificate, "[w]e are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal

⁵ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, p. 337.

⁶ James Kalb, "Liberalism, Tradition, and Faith," *Telos* 128 (2006): 114.

⁷ Stephen L. Gardner, "The Eros and Ambitions of Psychological Man" in Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Wilmington DE: ISI Books, Fortieth-Anniversary Edition, 2006), p. 233.

consists solely of one's own ego and desires."⁸ In short, liberalism—the ideology defined precisely by its *rejection* of and claim to *transcend* tradition—has been transformed *into a tradition itself*, and it is not what it pretends to be. Liberalism is a liar.⁹

BEYOND SECULAR REASON

There was a time when liberals would decry this transformation into a tradition as a *betrayal* of liberalism, a reversal of the Enlightenment, a corruption of pure *reason* by irrational *belief*. Well, things have changed. We have moved “beyond secular reason.” The era of Enlightenment, of modern, foundationalist, universalist, idealist liberalism has been displaced by the post-Enlightenment, by postmodern, anti-foundationalist, particularist, pragmatic liberalism. The most sophisticated and honest of contemporary liberal theorists have not only admitted liberalism's traditionalist identity, but have defended it precisely as such. Tom Bridges summarizes the *raison d'être* of the traditionalist liberal project:

If liberalism is to survive the collapse of Enlightenment culture, liberals must now attempt to de-universalize or contextualize their political language, to learn to explain and advocate liberal democratic moral ideals in a vocabulary that can express the particularism of liberal political norms without thereby invalidating them.¹⁰

And Jeffrey Stout, perhaps the most sophisticated spokesmen for postmodern liberalism, writes:

There is much to be gained by abandoning the image of democracy as essentially opposed to tradition, as a negative force that tends by its nature to undermine culture and the cultivation of virtue. Democracy is a culture, a tradition, in its own

⁸ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Homily, *Missa Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, 18 April 2005.

⁹ See Stanley Fish, “Mission Impossible: Settling the Just Bounds between Church and State” in *Law & Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. S. M. Feldman (New York NY: New York Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 383-410.

¹⁰ Thomas Bridges, *Culture of Citizenship: Inventing Postmodern Civic Culture* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 15.

right... To put the point aphoristically and paradoxically, *pragmatism is democratic traditionalism*.¹¹

Enlightenment secularism is dead. As Jurgen Habermas stated in the remarkable 2004 exchange between him and (the former) Cardinal Ratzinger, Western culture is now “post-secular.”¹² Liberalism, due in part to Alasdair MacIntyre’s powerful and influential critique, now accepts that it is culturally contingent and historically particularist, that is, a tradition. The *post-modern, traditionalist* liberal has sloughed off the impossible burden of identifying his philosophical system with reason itself, and thus can defend liberalism in the same manner as Christians defend Christianity: as both *our* tradition, and the *best* tradition, as both good for *us* and for *others*, as *historically limited* in origin, embodiment, and intelligibility, but as *timelessly universal* in scope and significance.

WE’RE ALL TRADITIONALISTS NOW

This *traditionalist turn* in contemporary thought necessitates, I think, a radical change in strategy for the Christian, pro-life movement. While we generally endorse integrally Christian practices and discourse, we deem it prudent to doff our particular practices and discourse whenever we depart from Christian precincts. For those outside our tradition, and for the secular public sphere in general, we offer a mere *translation*. We secularize, intellectualize, moralize, and politicize what in our tradition is supernatural, mystical, spiritual, and theological, both in doctrine and in practice, so as to render it intelligible to non-Christians and practically effective for secular society. This strategy appears quite reasonable, but it presupposes two fundamental ideas whose plausibility, in light of the traditionalist turn, need to be re-examined. The first is that there is such a thing as the “secular public sphere” at all. The second is the separability of *theoria* and *praxis*, the idea that one can effectively strain out from the concrete practices and particularist discourse of any tradition a secular,

¹¹ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), p. 13.

¹² The exchange has been published as *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2007).

universally accessible remainder intelligible to all regardless of particular traditional allegiance.

Regarding the first: The Enlightenment claimed an ideologically neutral, universal, public world accessible to and based upon a universal public reason, abstracted from the practical and speculative particularities of any one tradition. But, as is now readily admitted by the Enlightenment's own disciples, this claim is no longer credible. But if the Enlightenment is no longer tenable, isn't the alternative even less so? If there is no objective, public reason, then do not all claims to truth become subject to the postmodernist "hermeneutics of suspicion," whereby any affirmation of truth or goodness is unmasked as either mere idiosyncrasy or the will to dominate? There is another alternative. According to MacIntyre,

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. What this alternative conceals from view is a third possibility, the possibility that reason can only move towards 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 enquiry and more especially for moral and theological enquiry.¹³

MacIntyre's term for this third-way between Enlightenment rationalism and post-Enlightenment irrationalism is "tradition-constituted rationality." It is only through active participation in particular authentic traditions that men are rendered capable of discovering and achieving their ultimate good; for it is only by going down, as it were, through a *particular* tradition that we rise up to *universal* truth. As body and soul composites, our encounters with reality are mediated by bodies, which are themselves mediated by history and culture. Even the words and concepts that we use to interpret and make sense of the brute facts of reality originate and develop in what MacIntyre calls "traditions of rationality." All men are necessarily habituated into a particular tradition, even if it is a rationally incoherent and morally defective one like the tradition of liberalism.

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 59.

Outside of one tradition or another coherent and accurate knowledge of man's good is quite difficult, and perhaps impossible. We are, in MacIntyre's improvement on Aristotle's classic definition, "tradition-dependent rational animals," or as Paul Griffiths puts it, we are, willy-nilly, "confessional":

To be confessional is simply to be open about one's historical and religious locatedness, one's specificity, and openness that is essential for serious theological work and indeed for any serious intellectual work that is not in thrall to the myth of the disembodied and unlocated scholarly intellect.¹⁴

Regarding the second problematic assumption, the separability of *theoria* and *praxis*, MacIntyre articulates a dilemma:

The theologian begins from orthodoxy, but the orthodoxy...becomes too easily a closed circle, in which believer speaks only to believer, in which all human content is concealed. Turning aside from this arid in-group theology, the most perceptive theologians wish to translate what they have to say to an atheistic world. But they are doomed to one of two failures. Either [a] they succeed in their translation: in which case what they find themselves saying has been turned into the atheism of their hearers. Or [b] they fail in their translation: in which case no one hears what they have to say but themselves.¹⁵

Is there a solution to this dilemma? I think so, but the indispensable condition for its realization is the recognition of the inescapable intertwining of *theoria* and *praxis* in all human activity.

What this intertwining should teach us is that there is no such thing as "pluralism" in the public sphere, only the domination of one tradition over another, and no such thing as "liberalism," no sphere of reason or action that manages to escape the particularism and exclusivity of tradition. And since traditions of rationality are distinguished by the particular way in which they grapple with matters of ultimate concern, all

¹⁴ Paul J. Griffiths, "The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended" in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 169.

¹⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (New York NY: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 19-20.

traditions are ultimately religious. In short, the “religious pluralism” of American public life is an illusion. David Schindler expresses well the political upshot of this tradition-and-praxis-constituted understanding of rationality:

A nonconfessional state is not logically possible, in the one real order of history. The state cannot finally avoid affirming, in the matter of religion, a priority of either “freedom from” or “freedom for”—both of these priorities implying a theology.¹⁶

As Cardinal Ruini, Cardinal Vicar of Benedict XVI, has recently argued,¹⁷ we, as individuals and in society, must live either as if God exists or as if God doesn’t exist—there can be no neutrality in action, including political action. Thus, what we have in America, and in any other nation with any claim to moral and political unity, is not only an established tradition, but also an established *religion*, that is, a confessional state. The City Council of Santa Cruz, California officially declared the city of the Holy Cross a “pro-choice city” earlier this year. I think that this is the only city in the world that has done so. Of course, though a resident and a citizen at the time, I didn’t exercise any power of choice in the decision. In any event, confessional states—albeit satanic ones—are alive and well.

AN ARMY OF WALKING LITURGIES

There is an intrinsic and extricable relationship between *theoria* and *praxis*. Practices *embody* natural and supernatural truths, and so are indispensable for effecting both intellectual refutation and spiritual conversion. Unless our pro-life philosophical and theological ideas be incarnated in integrally Christian social, cultural, and political practices (and as a Catholic, I would argue for the superior effectiveness of integrally *Catholic* practices), our ideas, however true and well articulated, will be ineffective in convincing and converting. D. Stephen Long

¹⁶ David Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 83.

¹⁷ Camillo Ruini, “Reason, Science, and the Future of Civilization,” address at the Italian Bishops Conference, March 2, 2007, accessed on June 21, 2007; available from [http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=125081 &eng=y](http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=125081&eng=y).

writes:

The goodness of God is discovered not in abstract speculation, but in a life oriented toward God that creates particular practices that require the privileging of certain social institutions above others. The goodness of God can be discovered only when the church is the social institution rendering intelligible our lives.... For a Christian account of this good, the church is the social formation that orders all others. If the church is not the church, the state, the family, and the market will not know their own true nature.¹⁸

Christians must bring their practices with them wherever they go, *especially* into the public square. We must become “walking liturgies,” to coin a term based upon Catherine Pickstock’s wonderful depiction of Socrates.¹⁹ We need weapons more powerful than the anodyne and abstract, moralized, secularized, and politicized words of a translated Christianity to convert the liberal traditionalists of death, traditionalists who have no qualms about communicating to others exclusively in their religious parlance of tolerance and diversity, and celebrating their liturgies of abortion, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia right in the heart of the public square. For they see themselves as the true believers, as the only genuine defenders of life. To them, Christians are the heretics, defenders of nothing but control, repression, and death, as H. Tristram Engelhardt insightfully puts it:

The new culture does not regard itself as a culture of death, but as a culture of life and liberation. Each culture is to the other a counter-culture, marking a profound break in our history, our self-understanding, and our appreciation of life and death.²⁰

¹⁸ D. Stephen Long, *The Goodness of God: Theology the Church and Social Order* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 26, 28

¹⁹ Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Blackwell, 1997), ch. 1.

²⁰ H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., “Life & Death After Christendom: The Moralization of Religion & the Culture of Death,” *Touchstone* (June, 2001), accessed on 21 June 2007; available from <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=14-05-018-f>.

How can these deluded devotees of death ever escape from their intellectually and spiritually enslaving practices unless they are first made aware of their chains? Above all, they need a palpable experience of truth, goodness, and beauty. However, the tradition that they inhabit and the practices in which they engage deprive them of the existential conditions required to discover and recognize *natural* truth, goodness, and beauty, let alone supernatural. Engelhardt writes:

In the grip of Enlightenment dispositions regarding religion, few are inclined to recognize that the moral life once disengaged from a culture of worship loses its grasp on the moral premises that rightly direct our lives and foreclose the culture of death.²¹

As witnessed by the ever increasing decadence and savagery of those both within and without our culture—the monsters of both secular and Islamic nihilism—we can conclude that the more a culture departs from Christianity (again, I would particularize this to *Catholicism*), the more irrational it becomes, whether this irrationality is expressed overtly in serial murder and suicide, or covertly in comfortable, nihilistic “niceness.” “No salvation outside of the Catholic Church” is a Catholic *theological* dogma. The authoritative interpretation of this dogma does not teach that only official, practicing members of the Roman Catholic Church can make it to heaven, but it does insist that some existential connection with the Catholic Church, however tenuous, is required to obtain access to the justifying and sanctifying grace, without which men, no matter how good-willed, must die in their sins. I propose a corollary *philosophical* dogma: “No *rationality* outside the Catholic Church,” and by this I mean that the *fullness* of truth can only be found in her, as embodied in the practices that flow from her Tradition.

²¹ Ibid.

