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## DISCUSSION:

# THE UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF GOD: BEYOND DIALECTICS AND RHETORIC

GREGORY A. CLARK

"I don't want to be deceived," he said. "I am looking to Reason to keep me from illusion." Jerry was one of my brightest philosophy majors. His father was a pastor. Under the influence of higher criticism of the Bible and Nietzsche, however, the effect of countless sermons and his religious upbringing had diminished. Jerry was convinced that his father was deceived and that Jerry himself had been brought up in a faith that was little more than wishful thinking. "Reason" was going to protect him from illusions that might try to trap him later in life.

The dichotomy is common and ancient: truth opposes illusion, reason opposes power, philosophy opposes rhetoric, and real argument opposes merely verbal links in discourse. Almost every philosopher since Plato, who sets out the dichotomy in the *Apology*, dwells on these oppositions. Interestingly, even those who chasten and restrict reason do not hesitate to make the opposition and condemn rhetoric. Alasdair MacIntyre offers up a familiar and representative lamentation: "In the forums of popular life rhetorical effectiveness in persuasion and manipulation prevails against rational argument."<sup>1</sup>

The concepts of "power" and "violence" provide the basis for the opposition. According to philosophy, rhetoric values effectiveness and power, regardless of the rational merits of the case. Violence destroys or tears apart integrity -- the integrity of the will, of the mind, of the body. Rhetorical power becomes violent when it does not respect the rationality and will of the hearer, when it aims to impose the will of the speaker on the hearer.

While traditional philosophers want to avoid violence, postmodern philosophers think that violence is unavoidable, but that some forms of violence are better than others. That is, philosophers like Nietzsche and Deleuze maintain the dichotomy, but they defend the sophists. Everything is the will to power. Dialectical argument merely disguises the will that seeks to dominate other wills. It is not on that account less a will.

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Any criticism of the Enlightenment and contemporary Christian higher education must consider the relation postmodernism, (2) the ethic of love and peace espoused by the Christian Church, and (3) the meeting of (1) and (2) in the church-related college. I believe that we must think about how to construct a university where the rhetorical power of this dichotomy between rhetoric and dialectics no longer holds the minds of students like Jerry. We must both break down the dichotomy and learn to value the power of words.

Accordingly, I will begin with an account of MacIntyre's proposal, in his book *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, for a postliberal university. MacIntyre's postliberal university institutionalizes the conflict of wills that postmodernism claims is everywhere. I will then turn to John Milbank's criticism of MacIntyre's position. According to Milbank, MacIntyre's position is neither Christian nor postmodern. I will sketch a part of Milbank's criticism of MacIntyre in order to show some problems with taking the postliberal university as a model for a church-related college. Finally, I will offer a modest proposal for the form of discourse the should prevail in a church-related college.

### I. The Postliberal University

In his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, Alasdair MacIntyre distinguishes three types of universities. The preliberal university of 18th and 19th century Scotland and the United States could assume a fairly homogeneous and well-educated public. Aided by religious tests to exclude and promote faculty<sup>1</sup>, it was able to advance considerably. The preliberal university produced a constrained agreement.

The liberal university claims to open its doors to all. By doing away with religious tests, it would promote progress and agreement in all areas of knowledge. The liberal university, then, claims to produce an unconstrained agreement. In fact, however, we can now see that the liberal university does impose constraints. Further, these constraints have cost the liberal university the resources to understand and to justify its own existence.

If we cannot return to the constrained agreement of the preliberal university, nor to the feigned unconstrained

agreement of the liberal university, where shall we go? MacIntyre suggests that we should develop a university system that will be a "place of constrained disagreement, or imposed participation in conflict, in which a central responsibility of higher education would be to initiate students into conflict."<sup>2</sup> What would this look like? MacIntyre continues,

*Surely a set of rival universities would result, each modeled on, but improving upon, its own best predecessor. . . . And thus the wider society would be confronted with the claims 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 . . . . But then also required would be a set of institutionalized forums in which the debate between rival types of enquiry was afforded rhetorical expression.<sup>3</sup>*

MacIntyre's postliberal university has two tiers, both of which emphasize constraint and conflict. First, the university must establish its own identity. This university will look much like the preliberal university that embodies a constrained agreement. That is to say, arguments alone are not enough to establish agreement; there must be some authority to enforce agreement. For the Thomist university, this authority will be the church, and ultimately the Pope.<sup>4</sup>

This is not a simple sectarianism, however. MacIntyre's sketch of the university is an attempt to institutionally embody a tradition and to allow for dialogue between other institutionalized versions of moral enquiry. If this were sectarian, they would never come into contact with each other. So, second, the universities in the system need to engage in open hostilities on a level fighting field. In spite of the claim, in *Three Rival Versions*, that this conflict will have a rhetorical expression, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* clearly indicates that these conflicts are mediated dialectically. Moral enquiry progresses, according to MacIntyre, through open argument, both within a tradition and across traditions. The best tradition will be able to solve the problems of other traditions and be able to account for the failure of the inferior tradition. Let us then define the postliberal university as a place of dialectically mediated conflict and constrained agreement. Such is the postmodern opportunity for the university according to MacIntyre.

## II. The City of God

MacIntyre has come under attack by John Milbank in his *Theology and Social Theory*.<sup>5</sup> According to Milbank, MacIntyre's move to dialectics in *Whose Justice? Which*

*Rationality?*<sup>6</sup> shows that he is too much the philosopher and not sufficiently Christian or postmodern. Dialectics is itself a form of the will to power. Insofar as MacIntyre does not realize this, he has not yet crossed the bridge of postmodernity. Insofar as he still appeals to dialectics, he remains within an ontology of violence and has not yet taken up the cross of Christian peace.

I am interested in the second criticism for the purposes of this essay. That is, I want to ask if violence and conflict are necessary and constitutive parts of the life of the mind. If dialectics is itself the embodiment of conflict, how might we begin to think differently? In what follows, I will first draw the distinction between the ontology of violence and the ontology of peace. I will then contrast MacIntyre's Thomist postliberal university with the church-related college.

### A. Counter Ontologies

An ontology of violence posits a primordial conflict that politics, morality, and dialectics each attempt to overcome or limit with another act of violence. Milbank finds an "ontology of violence" in the philosophy and institutions of the ancients, the moderns, and the postmoderns. Since the ancients *and* the postmoderns are committed to an ontology of violence, MacIntyre's choice between Aristotle and Nietzsche does not present us with true alternatives.

In contrast with the history of philosophy, Milbank finds an "ontology of peace" expressed in Augustine's *The City of God*. Peace is a harmonious agreement based in charity. Christianity posits an ontology of peace because God is the most basic reality, and the God of Christians is a God who is love in trinity and who created the universe out of generosity and love. Milbank argues that only Christianity provides an ontological option to violence. The church is that society which promotes and incarnates the charity made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

### B. Counter Universities

While Milbank does not consider the implications of his criticism for a university or for a church-related college, one might easily generate a series of questions that extend the criticism to MacIntyre's proposal for the postliberal university. Is a "place of constrained disagreement, or imposed participation in conflict" compatible with a society founded on an ontology of peace? Can a higher education that is Christian both attend to its identity within the Christian tradition *and* engage in open hostilities as instituted in the postliberal university? Can a postliberal university exist in the City of God?

If MacIntyre's post-liberal university and the church-related college are rooted in mutually exclusive categories, then the postliberal university would amount to an institutionalized hostility to Christian identity. To take MacIntyre's postliberal university as the model for the church-related college would be to forfeit the college's identity in the mission of the church. I will argue that MacIntyre's postliberal university is modeled on an ontology of violence insofar as it defines itself by dialectical argument. The church-related college articulates an ontology of peace insofar as it embodies a history of faith and persuasion.

### 1. The Thomist University

Consider first the Thomist postliberal university. Thomism, for MacIntyre, is part of the history of philosophy or intellectual history.<sup>7</sup> He reads Thomas, in the end, as a philosopher rather than as a theologian whose work reflects the faith and practice of the church. Thomism is a set of beliefs, an intellectual position, an extended dialectical argument, that is, a tradition.

A Thomism instituted in a postliberal university requires conflict. This conflict is mediated dialectically. Otherwise said, dialectic is the intellectual management of conflict. The Platonic dialogues, Aristotle's method, and Thomas's method show dialectics as the attempt to bring many competing voices into a unified harmony.<sup>8</sup> This unified harmony is the Idea of the Good and of peace.<sup>9</sup>

Postmodernism asks whether dialectics *can* bring about such harmony. Socrates and Plato face this question when they confront the Sophists, and Aristotle confronts it as well, since "good" can be said in many ways. Plato, Aristotle, and many Thomisms were not entirely successful in achieving a harmony through dialectical means. Neither did the preliberal or liberal university succeed. While MacIntyre appeals to dialectics, agreement within the postliberal Thomist university is itself guaranteed by a decree of the Pope. If dialectics cannot establish harmony, "then only a merely 'effective' peace is possible, a 'secular' peace of temporarily suspended violence or regulated competition."<sup>10</sup> That is, the conflict is only resolved by one party imposing their will on another.

### 2. The Church-Related College

Contrast the Thomist university with the nature of the church-related college. The church-related college differs from non-affiliated colleges in that it serves the mission of the church in some way. The church is the community of those people whose lives have been claimed by the God who is love and peace. The preeminence of the peace of the

Lord, however, is not established or shown dialectically, by managing conflict through argument. Rather, it is established by God in Jesus, and it is shown in the life and preaching of the church. Phillips Brooks says, *However, the Gospel may be capable of statement in dogmatic form, its truest element we know is not in dogma but in personal life. Christianity is Christ; and we can easily understand how a truth which is of such a peculiar character that a person can stand forth and say of it, "I am the Truth," must always be best conveyed through, must indeed be almost incapable of being perfectly conveyed except through, personality. And so some form of preaching must be essential to the prevalence and spread of the knowledge of Christ among men.*<sup>11</sup>

Note two interrelated points. First, while dogmas are important and necessary, the church is not founded on dogma or a set of articles. Second, and this is crucial, this first point does not mean that we stop preaching. Jesus preached; Peter and Paul preached. In preaching, the church takes its native form. As a form of discourse, preaching's primary goal is not to establish any given set of ideas. The truth of the gospel is the person of Jesus, and this truth is communicated through the personality of the preacher as he or she preaches. Preaching articulates a counter-logos which is neither dialectical or sophistical rhetoric. It is more original than either. The Christian *logos* gives "pride of place to opinion (*doxa*), testimony (*marturia*) and persuasion (*pistis*)."<sup>12</sup> The God of peace is revealed through the power of the Word.

Both of these points help to clarify the difference between the Thomist university and the church-related college. The church-related college is not founded on any one doctrine or school of thought, and its goal is not to produce more and better scholars. Perhaps Thomism is a tradition of moral enquiry; Christianity is not. While Christianity has much to say about the things that concerned philosophers, it is not on that account oriented and guided by philosophy. Christianity is not one more competing vision of the good life. It is not graspable through dialectics; it is not itself promulgated through dialectics. It is a mode of discourse aiming to reveal the God of peace with whom the apostles were acquainted. "Perhaps," Milbank says, "we have to take more seriously the Biblical narratives . . . which presumably tell how things happened in the very idiom adopted by their users for the making-of-things-to-happen."<sup>13</sup>

Further, this "idiom," this preaching that humans can now be reconciled to God and to each other, contains an acid that cannot be neutralized by philosophical systems or arguments, and this too can be seen in the preaching of the

apostles. John Howard Yoder observes that the apostles did not request "free speech and room for one more stand in the Athenian marketplace of ideas for a new variant of already widely respected diaspora Judaism." Rather, *A handful of messianic Jews, moving beyond the defenses of their somewhat separate society to attack the intellectual bastions of majority culture, refused to contextualize their message by clothing it in the categories the world held ready. Instead, they seized the categories, hammered them into other shapes, and turned the cosmology on its head. . . . The development of a high Christology is the natural cultural ricochet of a missionary ecclesiology when it collides as it must with whatever cosmology explains and governs the world.*<sup>14</sup>

In the arena of ideas, Christians do not fight fairly. Which is to say that they don't fight. They do not pit Christian ideas against non-Christian ideas. Rather, they introduce the person of Christ who is irreducible to any and all ideas. Christianity will always oppose the absoluteness and adequacy of every system or idea, while refusing itself to be reduced to a system or an idea. Philosophy will always find Christianity an unassimilatable phenomenon. Like the Son of Man, Christianity is nomadic. It is the reef upon which the ships of idolatrous philosophies are wrecked. The effect of this preaching, Yoder insists, is an intellectual pluralism and relativism, for *pluralism/relativism is a confusing world, but it is not an alien one. It is the child of the Hebrew and Christian intervention in cultural history. It is the spinoff from missionary mobility, from the love of the enemy, from the relativizing of political sovereignty, from a dialogical vision of the church, from a charismatic vision of the many members of the body, from the disavowal of empire and theocracy. It lays before us the challenge of convincing interlocutors who are not our dependents, of affirming a particular witness to be good news without being interested in showing that other people are bad.*<sup>15</sup>

The Christian witness, like the Word about which it testifies, is active and affirming. Conflict with and reaction to "other views" does not constitute the first move or have priority.<sup>16</sup> The first move in the Christian witness is not our move at all. Rather, God comes and reveals himself to us as love. Our response to God's love constitutes the second move. The second move is not exclusively or primarily a matter of intellectual assent but an obedience expressed in love for one's neighbor. This is the essentially active and affirming nature of the Word and of the preaching of Christian witness. Only such a Word and such a witness can embody an affirmation of power that is non-violent.

This non-violent affirmation precedes the violence of both rhetoric and dialectics, as well as the violence embodied in the dichotomy between rhetoric and dialectics. That is, the Christian witness refuses to impose its will on others, either dialectically or rhetorically (I Cor. 1:17, 2:13), for this is the way God treats us.<sup>17</sup> This feature of the Christian witness prevents the church-related college from taking the postliberal university as an acceptable model.

MacIntyre himself catches sight of part of the problem when he ceases to play the role of the philosopher. He claims "this divorce between rhetorical effectiveness and rational argumentation is deeply at odds with the thirteenth-century Dominican ideal, especially as articulated by Aquinas, in which the homily was to be the end-product of an education in philosophy and theology."<sup>18</sup> The divorce also runs counter to the self-understanding and goals of many of those who founded our church-related colleges, not for training scholars capable of engaging successfully in dialectical warfare, but for preparing those capable of being witnesses ( $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\upsilon\rho\epsilon\varsigma$ ) of Jesus.

The affirmative message of Christian preaching does respond to "other views," but only as a third moment in the Christian witness. These other positions are not merely "unjustified," or "an expression of (bad) power," but "idolatrous." The category of idolatry indicates that the problem is not so much intellectual confusion or dullness, but our disordered loves. These disordered loves can keep us from confronting God as a person, rather than as an idea, and they bar us from full participation in the City of God. Preaching introduces disordered lovers to the God who is love. The church-related college, taking its guide from the preaching of the church, seeks to educate our desires and set them in order.

### III. Conclusion

Jerry, the student to whom I referred above, understood Christianity as a set of beliefs that have an absolute status. He thought that he had lost his faith when he exchanged one set of absolute ideas for another set of equally absolute ideas. The first set of ideas had been instilled in his mind rhetorically; the second set imparted dialectically. He thought that "Reason" stood outside of all power and could save him from "illusion."

Neither the liberal or the postliberal university have the resources to respond to Jerry's loss of faith, for they are rooted in a dialectically managed conflict of ideas. That is, postmodernism shows us that dialectics, rhetoric, and the opposition between them all assume a form of violence. By

institutionalizing these forms of discourse, both the liberal and postliberal universities ultimately underwrite an unavoidable violence.

The God worshiped by Christians is a God of love and peace. Thus, the church-related college must institutionally embody an ontology of non-violence both in what it says and in its mode of speaking. The message proclaimed by Christians, therefore, takes the form of preaching. Preaching calls for a transformation of the entire person. The truths of Christianity are not known cheaply or without personal risk. The church-related college, if it is to train preachers, must educate not the minds of students to be scholars, but the loves and desires of persons to be a preacher.

The Christian witness will not always convince modernist students like Jerry. It will not overwhelm the postmodernists. This is the risk it takes in affirming non-violence. In a postmodern era, it is this affirmation that provides the church-related college with its most valuable resource.

#### NOTES

1. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, 1990) 168.
2. MacIntyre says "Cleghorn was rightly preferred to Hume for the chair in moral philosophy at Edinburgh" (TRV, 224).
3. TRV, 230-1.
4. TRV, 234.
5. This is MacIntyre's position in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, 1988). See Martha Nussbaum's review of MacIntyre's position in "Recoiling from Reason," *New York Review of Books* (7 December 1989)36-41.
6. Blackwell, 1993.
7. MacIntyre is less dialectical, I think, in both *After Virtue* and in *Three Rival Versions*.
8. MacIntyre does insist on the importance of various practices for an intellectual tradition. Nevertheless, he fails to show how Christian theology emerges out of the life and the practices of the Church.
9. Milbank, 337.
10. Milbank, 335.
11. Milbank, 334.
12. Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989) 27. This means that books, e-texts, the world wide web, or video courses are less than adequate for the nature of Christian truth.
13. Milbank, 328.
14. Milbank, 121.
15. Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus," *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, 1984) 54.
16. Yoder, 60.
17. My concern here is motivated in part by Nietzsche, *Toward a Genealogy of of Morals*. Essay I, X. See also Paul Ricoeur, "Negativity and Primary Affirmation," *History and Truth* (Northwestern University Press, 1965) 305-328.
18. See Pascal's *Pensées* for the development of this theme.
19. TRV, 169. While I do not want to identify the homily with the various form that preaching may take, it is perhaps an ideal that can orient us.