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**LOGOS I MAJOR ESSAY:
IN DEFENCE OF ALASDAIR MACINTYRE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY EDUCATION**

Laurel Hooper

In God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition, Alasdair MacIntyre sets forth the claim that the modern research university is afflicted by a lack of unity in its disciplines.¹ As a result, its educational approach is compromised, its purpose seemingly limited to the pursuit of specialised knowledge and economic gain. The Catholic philosophical tradition, however, equips its universities with the intellectual methods and religious sense of purpose that can most fittingly combat this troublesome trajectory of the modern research university. Specifically, MacIntyre argues that the relationship between God and our ability to understand Him, through philosophy as well as faith, constitutes the keystone of good university education, by cultivating a habit of viewing particulars in their relationship to ultimate truth. In “Is a Catholic University Education a Good ‘Idea’?” Terrence Merrigan considers the threat posed by economic factors in the university sector, offering additional arguments for the essential role of philosophy in combatting the secular motivations of university education.²

In order to understand how MacIntyre views the relationship between God, philosophy, and the purpose of a university education, it is necessary to first define key terms in his argument. “God” refers to a monotheist Creator who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. He is the start and end of all things, greater than creation, and vaster than human intellect can grasp.³ In discussing “philosophy” MacIntyre considers both Catholic and non-Catholic schools of thought, but ultimately advocates for the stance of Catholic philosophy; a reasoned inquiry into the nature of things, that has its starting point and end in God. This allows him to distinguish Catholic universities from their secular, modern research equivalents, the latter harbouring no commitment to a religious worldview. “Truth” is defined as the realisation

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

² Terrence Merrigan, “Is a Catholic University a Good ‘Idea’? Reflections on Catholic Higher Education from a Newmanian Perspective,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 80 (1) (2015): 3-18.

³ MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*.

of the nature of all things, concerning the “complex relationships between the myriad of particular facts that comprise the universe.”⁴ The interconnectedness of these three concepts is crucial for understanding MacIntyre’s notion of purpose, and its centrality to university education.

By orienting itself towards God, MacIntyre argues, philosophy is able to arrive at a keener understanding of truth than that afforded by dependence on faith or reason alone. Without a philosophical approach to God, the mind risks becoming narrowed by an overdependence on faith, the outcome of which is a nature contrary both to the nature of God, and His intended nature for us.⁵ MacIntyre draws on the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas to show how philosophical inquiry is an essential element of faith. Aquinas was influenced by both Augustinian theology and Aristotelean philosophy, and, in the process, arrived at a crucial insight into how we are to understand the relationship between philosophy and theology: we must identify the presuppositions of each mode of thought, and its methodology.⁶ The apparent conflict between theology and philosophy is thus the result of the starting point trusted by each in order to arrive at truth. Philosophy starts with the things in front of us, that we can know through the senses: this can lead us to knowledge of God by investigating their causes. Theology, by contrast, starts by looking at God directly, and framing all else in relation to Him. However, Aquinas argues, we can conclude that the two are compatible, because they seek the same truths, the essence of which is that God is the source and goal of all things. And while neither philosophy nor theology alone is capable of expressing the whole truth, they moderate each other’s shortcomings: theology in ensuring that philosophy seeks its end in God, through challenging the logical chain of cause and effect beyond the limits of antecedent conditions needed to satisfy purely rational argument; philosophy, through justifying the study of the natural world and trusting in reason as a crucial aid to understanding the Creator. Ultimately then, it is the orientation towards a higher order which most richly characterises the relationship between God and philosophy. This reconciles the seeking of knowledge with the purpose of life, which MacIntyre defines as the “deepest desire of every ... being, whether they acknowledge it or not ... to be at one with God.”⁷

For MacIntyre, this orientation underpins his insistence that a university education be

⁴ MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 145.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 14.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 6.

founded upon clearly acknowledged presuppositions about the nature of the created world. It ensures that knowledge-seeking remains oriented towards God when determining its purpose, a point on which Catholic and modern research universities are greatly conflicted. While the Catholic stance insists that education must harmonise with the basic purpose of human life in finding unity with God, the latter has become increasingly motivated by career prospects and specialised expertise, the result of which has been the fragmentation, rather than the unification of knowledge, as disciplines become ever more exclusive.⁸ The two stances are at odds in their relation to truth, because, as stated above, MacIntyre's view of truth in Catholic terms includes not just knowledge of particulars, but an understanding of the "complex relationships" between them. The problem with studying distinct disciplines without examining their relationship to each other and to God is that by themselves they present conflicting and incomplete versions of the truth, as their methodologies present differing standards of intelligibility. Furthermore, their lack of concern with disciplines other than their own risks creating a culture of intellectual and spiritual "aimlessness," as they fail to seek truths beyond their own limited horizons.⁹ To combat this, MacIntyre proposes the full incorporation of philosophical inquiry into university education, to moderate the standards of truth used by each discipline and, therefore, to understand the claims of each. Rather than being a narrow discipline studied by a few, philosophy fills a new role of mediator, recalling the Thomist notion of philosophy as "sacra doctrina" in being not just "a body of truths, but ... a process of teaching."¹⁰ Self-awareness of this distinction is what enables philosophy to restore a sense of purpose to university education, thereby reconciling the knowledge gleaned from diverse disciplines with universal truth.

MacIntyre's conception of the threat posed by the modern research university's educational values focuses on the role of specialisation and private ambition. By comparing his ideas about the value of Catholic university education with those of Merrigan, we can arrive at a more holistic understanding of what obstacles MacIntyre's view must reckon with, and thus evaluate how suited philosophy is to mediate the pursuit of knowledge in universities.

In Is a Catholic University Education a Good 'Idea'? Merrigan examines how much modern university education diverges from the view that knowledge should be studied and

⁸ Kevin Gary, "God, Philosophy, and Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition," review of *God, Philosophy, and Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*, by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 45 no. 3 (2011): 563-567.

⁹ Gary, "God, Philosophy, and Universities," 566.

¹⁰ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 54.

pursued for its own sake. Although, he identifies a conflict of purpose between modern and Catholic universities, just as MacIntyre argues for, Merrigan's understanding of this distinction focuses far less on notions of fragmentation between disciplines and the need for coherence. Instead, he frames it in more radically economic terms – the “utilitarian” objectives of a secular education, in which religion plays no part.¹¹ In so doing, he claims that modern universities have adopted a market-based approach to education. This is a crucial example of how the standards of intelligibility that MacIntyre discussed in terms of university disciplines and philosophy, also apply in terms of institutional agenda. Drawing on earlier research by Readings (as cited in Merrigan), the use of the word “excellence,” common in modern advertising of services and beloved of universities, presents a serious challenge to MacIntyre's conviction in the value of a single standard of truth that unifies all specific intellectual endeavours.¹² Rather than valuing the constant and unchanging, “excellence” signifies a shift in the culture at large towards viewing services, including university education, as being more concerned with customer satisfaction than commitment to an unchanging value.¹³

This, in turn, has implications for how we frame the Catholic vs. modern research university divide that MacIntyre has presented in terms of the fragmentation of disciplines: we have economics determining value according to its standards of truth, which limits itself to measurable goods, while at the same time trying to step beyond its jurisdiction and dictate claims and views about education as a whole.¹⁴ We see that the outcome of this, in the emergence of a claim for excellence as the university's apparent agenda and purpose, is not just the opposite of MacIntyre's universal approach, centred in God, but actually displays a lack of integrity to the very notion of purpose, because it is willing to shift the goalposts wherever it catches a scent of market opportunity.¹⁵

MacIntyre's philosophical approach to university education is not only concerned with relating the study of particular disciplines to an understanding of God, but, through unerring commitment to this worldview, helps maintain our integrity of purpose in the face of apparently conflicting fields of knowledge. By contrast, when university disciplines limit their pursuit of truth to the confines of their particular methodological structures, the outcome, as argued by

¹¹ Merrigan, “Is a Catholic University a Good ‘Idea’?” 10.

¹² Merrigan, “Is a Catholic University a Good ‘Idea’?” 11. See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5, 16.

¹³ Merrigan, “Is a Catholic University a Good ‘Idea’?” 11.

¹⁴ Merrigan, “Is a Catholic University a Good ‘Idea’?”

¹⁵ Merrigan, “Is a Catholic University a Good ‘Idea’?”

Merrigan, is not an uneasy balance between disciplines, but the misplaced dominance of a single, in this case, economic, worldview, on whose heels a loss of purpose swiftly follows.

For MacIntyre, the objective of philosophy rests decisively beyond itself, in the understanding of God.¹⁶ It is therefore not complete in itself, but in its ability to find God. So long as it is used faithfully to this end, philosophy can harmonise the breadth and scope of modern knowledge with the constancy of God. Without philosophy yoking the various disciplines of human intellect to the eternal truth and majesty of God, another mode of thought will step into this vacuum. The outcome of which, as we have seen in the rise of economics, is not merely infidelity to purpose, but a complete abandonment of God.

¹⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 17.

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