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SARAH ROWLAND JONES

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# Come Let us Reason Together: Tradition-Based Reasoning and Christian Mission

**Drawing on the earlier article by Richard Sudworth and the interview with Cyprian Yobera, this issue's guest editor, Sarah Rowland Jones explores the callings to deepen our own faith and our understanding of the Christian gospel (particularly in changing and culturally complex circumstances) and to engage in dialogue and mission in a Christian manner. By introducing us to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and the approach of tradition-based reasoning she shows how this provides resources for these two related Christian callings**

As Richard Sudworth's opening article in this issue reminds us, times have changed. The broad move away from modernity and the inheritance of the Enlightenment, with its over-prioritisation of ostensibly objective cognitive propositions, has challenged many long-held assumptions about the ordering of Christian life, as well as the assumptions of wider Western society. Now we grapple with its parasitic offspring, postmodernity, while finding ourselves within the widening context of a globalisation that not only brings a McDonalds to the world's high streets, but also both the riches of multiculturalism and the challenges posed by those of other faiths and none. We eye continuing developments within hermeneutics while hearing calls to hold fast to 'the plain truth' and 'the faith once delivered'. We worry that we might not be able to distinguish authentic and legitimately diverse inculturation of the gospel from untrammelled relativism and inappropriate syncretism.

The solution does indeed lie in the interplay of 'staying' and 'following', of the 'said' and the 'saying' to which Sudworth refers – so say the proponents of 'tradition-based reasoning'. This perspective asserts that the best possible answers to questions of how we should make sense of life and live it well are found within the broad pragmatic practices by which communities, such as faith communities, sustain themselves, not least through constructive engagement with changing circumstances and the challenges of wider society around.

## Introducing MacIntyre and Tradition-Based Reasoning

Tradition-based reasoning is influenced by the systematic approach developed by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*, first published in 1981, and subsequent writings.<sup>1</sup> He advocates reflective practices that fully encompass affective and corporate elements – that is, which take into account the full breadth of what it is to be human (fallibility and wilfulness both included) and what it is to be an individual-in-community. These, he argues, provide a far better and more comprehensive account of what it means to live rationally and justifiably than an over-reliance on the cognitive propositional formulations and individualist perspectives that characterise analytical philosophy. We are honed in our beliefs and practices, alerted to blind-spots and biases, and rescued from the potential pitfalls of relativism through reflective engagement with our own inevitably evolving context and with the challenges of the perspective of others.

For MacIntyre, the ‘best possible’ example of this so far in human history is mainstream historic Christianity of Western Europe and its descendents rooted in Thomistic-Aristotelianism. However, writing as a philosopher, he does not spell out how the process operates in practice within a Christian context.

This challenge has been taken up by others. Some, most notably Stanley Hauerwas, stand accused of concluding from MacIntyre’s pessimism about the state of contemporary ethical debate and practice that the Christian community must withdraw unduly from the public space. Others, such as the Reformed epistemologist Nicholas Wolterstorff and atheist Jeffrey Stout, have argued that instead, MacIntyre provides the basis for a constructive encounter that is vital for the health of both Christianity and the wider communities in which we live. This approach informs Wolterstorff’s extensive writings on Christian education and what it means to bring up young people to be full participants within the church living as members of the body of Christ able to engage confidently with a pluralist world.<sup>2</sup> He has also addressed our wider processes of discernment, notably of the leading of the Holy Spirit, in various ways as an intrinsic part of our reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Stout’s primary concern is to promote the sort of broad pragmatic democracy in which all citizens, particularly those from faith communities, debate over all that is good, virtuous and makes for human flourishing through ‘an exchange of views in which the respective parties express their premises in as much detail as they see fit and in whatever idiom they wish, try to make sense of each other’s perspectives, and expose their own commitments to the possibility of criticism’.<sup>4</sup> His desire that Christians should unashamedly engage as Christians is a direct invitation to be salt and light in the world.

In what follows, I consider how the MacIntyrean approach, particularly as developed by Wolterstorff and Stout, assists the Church’s self-understanding of

1 Notably MacIntyre 1981/1985, 1988, 1990, 1999. While *After Virtue* was criticised for over-reliance on pre-Christian models of virtue, failure to allow for the subversive nature of the cross, and inadequate stress on the need for traditions to critique their own shortcomings (such as patriarchy), MacIntyre’s subsequent writings have more fully addressed these issues.

2 Stronks 2002 and Joldersma 2004.

3 Wolterstorff 1995, notably Chapter 15.

4 Stout 2004: 10,11; also Stout 1988/2001.

what it is to abide in Christ through changing contexts and cultures. I then consider the importance of open engagement with others, not least in helping us in our own maturing understanding of the nature of our faith and our call to mission. Tradition-based reasoning offers significant resources for the confident re-expression and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ with an authenticity and rich flexibility that is more than adequate to the diverse and dynamic societies of our age. It is also of value for guiding encounters between Christians of different cultures and perspectives.

### **Staying: abiding in Christ**

Much of what is described by MacIntyre is not far from the intelligent common-sense approach of many who want to pursue a coherent moral life. He systematically spells out processes for sifting all possible evidence against prior understandings, through which we may endeavour to find the best way forward. By offering us increasing self-awareness of how we make sense of life around us and weigh the decisions that confront us, MacIntyre enables us to pursue our processes of discerning how we should believe and live with the greatest integrity – the greatest faithfulness before God – that we can muster. Furthermore, greater self-awareness enables us better to communicate and live out this life of faith with confidence and conviction within a pluralist world.

### **Practical rationality**

In a nutshell, this practical rationality which underpins the life well lived rests on fully reflective practices pursued within the life of a tradition, conducted by human beings so that they, and the community in which they live, might flourish. In Christian terms, we may speak of the self-conscious attempt by individuals within the local church and wider body of Christ to comprehend and live out the life of faith to which God calls us. It is living within the community of faith that provides the essential context for our process of discernment and the framework for living our vocations, individual and corporate. Thus orthopraxy is stressed as much as orthodoxy - we 'work out our own salvation in fear and trembling', needing both 'to will and to work' for God's good pleasure (Phil 2:12, 13).

First and foremost, practical rationality cannot be abstract and impersonal, because it is conducted by, and concerns, human beings. And to be human presupposes, says MacIntyre, a 'metaphysical biology'.<sup>5</sup> What it means for us to pursue the moral life must address comprehensively who we are as human animals, often dependent and vulnerable, and very diverse (for example in personality and character – to say nothing of our circumstances). From the Christian perspective we understand ourselves as having the vocation to flourish in love before God in heart, soul, mind and body, and as individuals who are also neighbours (cf. Mk 12:30-31). We therefore need to pay appropriate and balanced attention to the emotional, spiritual, intellectual and physically embodied dimensions of our lives (and the interactions between them all), as well as to the interplay of both the personal and the communal. God meets us, deals with us, and has expectations of us, in all these areas, and in their whole.

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5 See MacIntyre 1985: 163 and 1999: x.

We are also finite and fallible. Our understanding is limited by our very nature, our personal capacities, contexts and experiences, by our ability to make mistakes, not least through ignorance, and by our wilful sinfulness.<sup>6</sup> Our reasoning processes must take account of these elements, for example through addressing a healthy hermeneutics of suspicion towards ourselves. They also have important consequences for recognising how we may have a justifiable understanding of the truth while also needing to accept that it remains nonetheless partial and provisional (for though we may certainly be able to recognise that the Lord we encounter is indeed the one who is The Truth, and know him increasingly, we can never entirely grasp the fullness of the Godhead). I shall return to this point below.

### **Human learning and journeying**

Another aspect of our humanity is our ability to learn to reason, to learn to reflect on our reasons, and to learn to reflect on our process of reasoning. This continuing learning and refining presupposes that untutored humanity needs guidance and instruction by more experienced members of the community in practical reasoning, in order to become what we might be.<sup>7</sup> Christians recognise that we all need training in the life of discipleship by those who are more mature. We can also see that such a conceptualisation of reasoning, or discernment, is far closer to what the Anglican divines of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had in mind (when they arrived at 'Scripture, Tradition and Reason' as the foundation stones of Anglicanism) than the more narrowly analytical understanding of the word that has dominated subsequently.

In this vein, evangelicals who take comprehensive integrity seriously should be aware of how, and why, in our reasoning processes, we deliberately give greater weight to certain aspects of Christian faith – Scripture and how we understand and apply it; the person and work of Jesus, not least through the cross; particular developments in church history and tradition, and so on. We do this while equally deliberately playing down others. The benefits of this self-reflection are two-fold: enhanced ability both to communicate our convictions to others and to assess developments, for example, in biblical interpretation, against the fabric of our faith and so discern which are to be embraced while retaining allegiance to our core concerns. We can remain faithful and confident evangelicals without being trammelled by particular expressions of evangelicalism of the past that no longer seem adequate to current circumstances.

As for a defensible concept of what humanity 'might be,' and what it would be for us to 'flourish', MacIntyre sees these as teleologically framed, with this telos being subject to our constant refining through experience. There is a direct parallel with the coming of the Kingdom in all its fullness – something of which we have developing understanding as we journey on life's pilgrimage. Pressing on towards this goal provides a guiding trajectory for our lives (cf. Phil 3:12, 14).

While the ability to discern and to live well is something in which mature Christians train those who are young in the faith, also intrinsic to our reasoning is the ongoing process of dialectic between every member of the community. Through

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<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre 1999: 84.

<sup>7</sup> Stronks 2002, chapters 1 and 14 consider what this means for teaching and learning in Christian schools, alongside family and church.

discussion and exchange, we sharpen our own and one another's understanding of our situation and of what is required of us. Thus we live in a community both where what is received from the Lord is handed on to new believers (cf. 1 Cor 11:23) and where everyone has a part to play: each is gifted for the common good within the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:7), as we are each called to build one another up in peace (cf. Rom 14:19), in encouragement (cf. 1 Thess 5:11), in truth and love (cf. Eph 4:15-16) and in mutual submission (cf. Eph 5:21). It is mutual accountability – whereby each can ask others to give an account of what they believe and why, and how they live – pursued through friendship and collegiality within the community of faith that is, as MacIntyre asserts and Christian tradition teaches, the best protection against both moral and intellectual error.<sup>8</sup> Growing self-knowledge, which, together with honesty, is necessary for maturity, can only be well-developed within a community that itself is committed to the pursuit of honesty, self-knowledge, and maturity.

Morality and rationality are inextricably linked – one cannot claim to be rational without pursuing a moral, just, and virtuous life. Furthermore, the life thus lived demonstrates a narrative unity. Christians can speak of moving from finding a place for God within our own story, to finding a place for ourselves within the unfolding story of God's creation and salvation (recollecting of course that narrative is the dominant biblical genre in which this is conveyed). They do so within the context of the pilgrim journey of the whole people of God, and the outlived life of the body of Christ. Put another way, a rational life is one that 'makes coherent and comprehensive sense' as we journey from birth to death. This is a journey on which we pursue our goal of discovering and living out the 'good', God's salvific and redemptive purposes for ourselves and the wider community. So life 'has the continuity and unity of a quest, a quest whose object is to discover that truth about my life as a whole which is an indispensable part of the good of that life'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Holy remembering and humble relating**

There are points of contact here with the Anglican commitment to Tradition, especially when it is understood not as 'a dispassionate history of institutional life, the dry and dusty account of some external observer' but rather as 'holy remembering – remembering as Scripture teaches us to remember' as Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane put it in his essay on 'The Heartlands of Anglicanism'.<sup>10</sup> Holy remembering is intrinsic to the Christian life, for, as he went on to say:

"Do this in remembrance of me" are Jesus' words to us, as we meet Sunday by Sunday, breaking bread and sharing wine, and finding ourselves joined with him and all that he has won for us through his one self-giving sacrifice for the sins of the world. Holy remembering is far more than casting our mind across a widening gulf of years. Holy remembering is both to recall and to participate. It is to be caught up into the unfolding narrative of God's involvement with his people in every time and place. It is to recognise God at work in our church throughout the centuries, and to know ourselves in living continuity with his faithful people in every age. To remember is to take our place within God's story of redemption.

8 MacIntyre 1999: 96

9 MacIntyre 1990:197

10 Available at <http://>

[www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2006/7/11/ACNS4165](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2006/7/11/ACNS4165)

Knowing ourselves as part of an unfolding narrative helps us to grapple with the inevitability that our understanding at any time is (as mentioned above) partial, perspectival, provisional, and, indeed, peccable, that is, infected by sin. We know that 'now we see in a mirror dimly ... now we know in part' though we will one day see, and know, clearly (1 Cor 13:12). We know that throughout our lives we are being 'led into all truth' (Jn 16:13). Truth is ultimately not to be found in propositions, but in the unfolding relationship of the community of Christ's Easter people with the one who is The Truth. Tradition-based reasoning, with its teleologically oriented narrative, offers us a rationality adequate to this relationality.

Knowing that there is always more to know about God and about what he has in store for us should propel us forwards in seeking that ever deepening relationship with our Saviour. This gives us a right humility towards what we assert. It demands of us openness to being challenged in what we think we know, and in the lives we lead. That challenge may come in different ways. Sometimes Christians, and the wider Church, have realised that they were misguided, as in the matter of slavery. At other times, it is that our faith needs to be stretched. Since my teens, I have believed that my salvation is found in Jesus Christ, the incarnate second person of the Trinity, who died for the sins of the world, who was raised, who ascended to the right hand of the Father and who ever intercedes for us. But I hope that today I would describe my understanding of all that this entails with rather more depth and maturity than I could thirty years ago!

Knowing that we can only see from our own perspective is a further factor in cultivating holy humility and openness. Christians of other centuries, other cultures, have much to teach me. Indeed, the faith of those from the most different circumstances may have the greatest potential to bring new insights, as well as deep challenges. Christians who live under persecution, Christians from less individualistic societies, Christians living with great poverty, Christians living with great wealth; those of different generations, gender, personality, education, upbringing, family circumstances, life-experiences ... all have walked with the Lord along different paths to mine, and I can only be enriched through being stimulated by what they have discovered of the Christian life. This is not to say that I will always agree: Bishop Jack Spong's notorious *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* stimulated my faith far more than the vast majority of books I have read. It did so because its every assertion challenged me to work out whether I agreed, or disagreed, and on what grounds.<sup>11</sup> By the time I reached its end, I had a far clearer idea of where I stood on the appropriate (for me, there and then) Christian response to a great variety of contemporary issues and behaviours, and why! For I must be ready too to give an account of my walk with my Saviour, whether to Christians or others (1 Pet 3:15).

### **Following: into all the world**

This brings us closer to the territory of mission. Our life within the local church is challenged not only by Christians from other parts of the body of Christ. It is challenged also by those outside the community of faith and by the inexorably changing circumstances of the world around. There are similarities in the way that

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<sup>11</sup> Spong 1998.

tradition-based reasoning suggests we respond to each of these. One mark of the vindication of a tradition is its ability, on its own terms, to address, analyse and overcome both internal and external challenges, while retaining (even if in somewhat revised or re-enunciated forms) its core beliefs, texts and practices.<sup>12</sup>

### Continuity and change

Wise Christians, whether it was Cranmer who did not believe his Prayer Book would remain usable for more than a few decades or Barth calling for the renewal of systematic theology, have understood that each generation needs to re-express its faith within its own context. We do this conscious of the nature of both continuity and change within the Christian tradition. Some areas of continuity are clear – first and foremost, the canon of Scripture, along with the creeds, the decisions of the earliest Councils of the undivided Church, and so forth. But we know that interpretation and application can be problematic. What it means for me in practice to honour my mother, who lives in financial security over 8,000 miles from me, is likely to be quite different to that which is incumbent upon my brother at 3 miles' distance, or upon my Xhosa colleague whose mother lives with his sister in the considerable rural poverty of the Southern Cape. It is different again from what was incumbent upon my mother in relation to her own mother a generation ago. How do we discern what is truth here, the truth of what each of us is called to be and do? How do we disentangle this from what is cultural practice at its best or worst? Contextual answers about contextual living are often legitimately diverse.

New situations may arise to which a Christian response is not immediately obvious. As a young autistic relative, interrupting a conversation on 'What would Jesus do?', pointed out with unimpeachable logic, 'Don't be silly – Jesus never had to choose between watching a DVD and playing on his computer'. We need to be clear of our reasons if we attempt to apply some biblical text directly into some greatly different context or to explain why it is that we employ particular themes of justice, redemption, love, the fruit of the Spirit, or some other scriptural principles, in weighing our options.

Much of what is required remains within the grasp of common-sense 'everyday practical reasoning' outlined above. Yet in order to ensure that we are doing the best we can, we need consciously to search out all other possible perspectives, from outside the Church as well as from within.<sup>13</sup> There is no part of God's creation from which he is not potentially able to speak to us. Alternative views stir us to keep honing our views and our practices, propelling us towards our *telos*.

Cyprian Yobera's five-strand questioning approach for focussing mission within the particularities of culture, outlined to Paula Hollingsworth earlier in this issue, is in this vein. He sets out to identify and address all relevant factors, analysing their underlying assumptions, and the ways they interact with one another.

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<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre 1988: 251.

<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre 1988: 358. Both MacIntyre and Stout (1988/2001) see Thomas Aquinas as a particular exemplar of tradition-based reasoning, drawing as he did on Platonic, Stoic, Aristotelian, Biblical, Jewish, Islamic, and Augustinian sources to give powerful

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new expressions of Christian belief and life. This approach thus has much in common with the best of pre-Enlightenment reasoning, and can similarly connect with cultures that have not been part of the Western Enlightenment tradition.

Recognising that fully neutral perspectives do not exist, he uses encounter between cultures to bring to light the presuppositions with which our understanding is often clothed. It was only by being immersed in inner-city Manchester that he was able to see how far Kenyan culture had previously influenced his ministry. Yet his Kenyan perspective also helps him see below the surface of Harpurhey life.

### **The Anglican Way**

Initially, we should reason from inside our own tradition, on our own terms, so to speak. There is a particular challenge here to Anglicans. If we are serious about being Anglican as part of our identity, believing that it 'provides the most productive spiritual soil for living out the Christian faith' (to quote Ndungane again) then we should be serious too about understanding the particularities not only of our history, but of the 'Anglican way' of living out our faith. I suspect that among the many factors of current tensions within the Communion is a failure to engage adequately with our tradition within the wider spectrum of Christian identities. We are thus losing sight of the particular strengths which have enabled Anglicanism's continuity, notwithstanding considerable internal diversity and at times division, through so many centuries. Included in this is the belief that, though we stand four-square upon Scripture, interpreted through Reason and Tradition, we are also a church that must be *semper reformanda*. In every age we must be asking ourselves, 'are we (and how are we) in need of reform?' According to tradition-based reasoning, this, if pursued well, is a mark of maturity and integrity. As Cyprian of Carthage said, 'Custom without truth is but the longevity of error.'

### **Facing deeper challenges**

Sometimes the challenges we face are not easily digestible by every-day common-sense reasoning. What then should we do? A more thorough process of 'rational enquiry' is called for, remembering that such rationality continues to encompass all aspects of human nature and experience, including prayerful reflection and those hard-to-define urgings of the Spirit that we nonetheless come increasingly to recognise with experience.<sup>14</sup> We are in search of an analysis that can give an account of why it is that disagreements and divergences in understanding have arisen, and why it is that earlier understandings of our faith seemed insufficient to the challenges that arose. Such an analysis allows us to move to a deeper and more textured sense of what we face, and how to address it.<sup>15</sup> In this way we can move to a new understanding or new behaviour, recognisably rooted in the old, but now adequate to enunciating and living out the life of the kingdom before these circumstances or challenges.

Thus Christians engaged in the debate over slavery were required not only to argue for a new understanding of Scripture in relation to the issue. They also had to give an account of why it was that the old understanding had prevailed so long, and how it could be that this interpretation of the Bible might be legitimately

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<sup>14</sup> Wolterstorff 1995: 277.

<sup>15</sup> Stronks 2002. Chapter 15 gives a 'worked example' of how in this way Wolterstorff was challenged by a Navajo Christian to review completely his understanding of the relationship between gratitude and obligation.

overturned – and all the while remaining faithful to the central tenets of belief as revealed in Scripture. This comprehensive picture ultimately made their argument all the more convincing.

Sometimes, in order to get to a point of resolution when engaging with different perspectives, a two-step approach can help. First, we need to listen to the other viewpoint on its own terms (as we would hope others can listen to us) and to ask how coherent it is from that perspective, according to its own standards. It may be that, even if not *directly* applicable to me in my circumstances, the pursuit of holiness of life by a devout Muslim, or the selfless caring of an atheist NGO worker, or the particular struggles of the community around me, have something new to teach me about how I should live in my own context. This becomes clear when, as a second step, I then try to articulate their perspective in my own terms and weigh it against my prior understandings, the teachings of the Bible, the standards of my tradition and so forth. This involves bringing to bear the cultural critiques of Yobera's Message and Milieu strands on both their assumptions and mine. This binary approach is also the best way of accurately understanding where and why, from the Christian perspective, other viewpoints are in error or lacking. The 'double listening' referred to by Sudworth is one particular example of these processes.<sup>16</sup>

We can then take a further, clearly missional, step – we should be enabled to enunciate our understanding in terms that are comprehensible to those with whom we have engaged. To have this level of engagement requires a significant level of 'translatability' between different communities.<sup>17</sup> To a considerable extent, one can only comprehend a tradition from within. This inevitably follows when we conceive of rationality as entailing not just an abstract understanding but a lived out life through participation within a tradition. This is the reason why we need to engage so fully with the culture of which we are a part, if we are to bring the full weight of the gospel to bear within it and upon it.<sup>18</sup> Yet it is important to underline that this does not commit us to a schizophrenic identification simultaneously with the life of the world alongside the life of faith. Close dialogue and listening never entails a requirement to agree with what it is that we are encountering. Nonetheless we need to 'walk in the shoes of others', for, as Yobera argues, engaging from within is the only authentic way to conduct mission and to bring gospel transformation to the cultures in which we live.

## Conclusion

While faith is of course God's gift, we have our own part to play in the missionary call to make disciples. Our responsibility is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in language (not only words) that other people can understand on their own terms. More than this, we must proclaim it in ways that help bring them to that point of making the choice to move from their current community, traditions and practices and instead become incorporated into the body of Christ. As MacIntyre and others argue, there is no greater rationality or morality than to belong to such

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**16** Cf. *Mission-Shaped Church* 2004: 104ff  
**17** Particularly explored in Chapter XIX of MacIntyre 1988.

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**18** The need to bring up young Christians to know how to engage openly, honestly, and fearlessly with surrounding culture is one of the themes running through Wolterstorff's writings in Stronks 2002.

a community, and grow in participating in the beliefs and practices of its tradition. When it comes to discerning 'how then shall we live?' within our complex and changing world and to proclaiming our response within the Church and beyond its walls, Christians could do a lot worse than draw from the insights of tradition-based reasoning.

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