The God(s) That Failed: Religion, Secularity, and the Early Alasdair MacIntyre

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"God or the World? As always the choice was between a highly specific God and a highly specific world."
-- Alasdair MacIntyre

Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most controversial figures in contemporary thought. In a remarkable career spanning multiple decades and disciplines, he has launched the Anglophone academy’s most radical and influential critique of liberal modernity. His prominence dates from After Virtue (1981), in which he argues that liberalism, insofar as it denies tradition and the virtues, fails to provide a coherent ethical discourse and collapses ultimately into nihilism. The reason that debate about contemporary moral issues (torture or abortion, for example) quickly reaches an impasse is that we simply have no common language for discussing them. The fact that we have different and incommensurable opinions is not, for MacIntyre, a laudable manifestation of our pluralist lifestyle, but rather a symptom of decadence and social collapse. Unlike Stanley Hauerwas or some of his other disciples, he did not arrive at this position from within a religious tradition; that is, he is not a Christian who has become increasingly disenchanted with a fallen world. On the contrary, MacIntyre, who converted to Catholicism soon after the publication of After Virtue, was delivered into Catholicism by his engagement with secularity. A consideration of his early career, then, can demonstrate the aporias of the secular public sphere of his intellectual upbringing: that of the British left-wing in the 1960s. In the process it can help us to think about the possible pitfalls of our own.

Commentators have been unsure what to do about Alasdair MacIntyre’s Catholicism. In any given discussion of his work it tends to either dominate the discussion or (much more frequently) disappear altogether. The primary reason for this, it seems to me, is that we are reticent to admit that an obviously significant philosophical and intellectual figure could have rationally arrived at such a clearly irrational point of view. As Wittgenstein said of Anscombe, he could "not possibly believe all the things they [i.e. Catholics] believe."¹ This sort of understanding has done little to ingratiate MacIntyre with the philosophical community. In a nasty review of Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, Thomas Nagel suggested that the book’s arguments are only plausible if "God is guiding our feet."² Similarly, in a review of the same book (the first in which Macintyre’s Catholicism was

obvious) Martha Nussbaum claimed that he was "in the grip of a world view promulgated by authority rather than by reason."³ As Charles Taylor has pointed out, this attitude—this "closed spin"—has become hegemonic in the academy.⁴ Along with José Casanova and Jeffrey Stout, Taylor has been criticizing the idea, central to liberal theories of communicative rationality, that religious reasoning must remain relegated to the private sphere and can have no place in public discussion; this is the point of view of such key figures as Habermas, Rawls, and Rorty. Through a consideration of MacIntyre's early career I hope to draw out a feature of modern religious life that is often overlooked by those on both sides of this debate. Modern religiosity, in a post-Durkheimean age, is not always a phenomenon born in private, which can either be allowed into or barred from the secular public sphere. Religion in modern thought and society is more complex than this: it can be generated by the instabilities of the secular itself.

There has been a remarkable efflorescence of thought about the secular in the last decade. A number of reasons might be adduced for this: intellectually, one might cite the particular development of French poststructuralism towards apophatic religion by way of différance, or even the glut of historical and sociological studies which undermine the secularization hypothesis.⁵ Likewise, one might point to the incessant ruptures of religiosity into the public sphere, whether this takes the form of Rick Warren, French headscarves, or Islamist terrorism. For these reasons it seems beyond doubt that secularism, as both intellectual and political project, is today in crisis and that the reductive attitudes towards religion expressed by Nagel and Nussbaum contribute little to salvaging it.⁶ A consideration of MacIntyre's early trajectory, clarifying the intellectual and historical rationale for his conversion in the early eighties, can help us to understand the role that religion plays in his thought and the extent to which it does not conform to the implicit model of religion (as both fideist and irrational) assumed by Nagel, Nussbaum and others who wish to hermetically seal religion from public discourse. That is to say, he did not irrationally submit to the absurdities of Rome; with John Milbank and other "new traditionalists," MacIntyre argues, on the contrary, that religious tradition is the last refuge of robust rationality in a ruined world. Whether or not we think he is right about this sympathetic understanding of his position is an intellectual necessity. He is not alone and the radical religious critique of Western modernity cannot simply be ignored.

This sort of understanding requires us to reconceptualize our common understandings of "religion" and "secularity." Instead of seeing them as eternally opposed binaries, they are in constant tension and the contours of their interrelationship change over time. The conventional understanding of Nagel and Nussbaum is not alive to this complexity and thus overlooks the complexity and significance of modern religiosity. The fideistic interpretation of religion is of limited value in understanding either the contemporary political situation or MacIntyre's

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⁴ Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, MA, 2007), Chapter 15.
⁵ For two points of entry into this literature, see Callum Brown, The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000 (New York, 2001). Hent de Vries, Philosophy and the Turn to Religion (Baltimore, MD, 1999).
⁶ In addition to Taylor, some of the most provocative entries in this debate are Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," Critical Inquiry 33, no. 1 (2006), Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford, CA, 2003), William Connolly, Why I am not a Secularist (Minneapolis, 1999), Jeffrey Stout, Democracy and Tradition (Princeton, NJ, 2004).
philosophical project. However, as Talal Asad and others have shown, this fundamentally Protestant notion, according to which one’s religion is private and one’s election invisible, has become inescapable. Wittgenstein provides, perhaps, the most fruitful method for thinking our way out of this particular fly bottle and towards an understanding of the indubitably public status of modern religion. For him nothing is hidden, as an “an 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria.” As recent events have made uncomfortably clear, religion does not exist in hearts or in souls: rather, "everything lies open to view." It represents, therefore, "not a doctrine [...] but a description of something that actually takes place."9

It was the fideist irrational idea of religion, bankrupt in my view, that crippled the critical acumen of both Nagel and Nussbaum and kept them from grasping the radicality of MacIntyre’s epistemological critique; one that highlights the false binary between reason and authority, individual and tradition. This is not to say of course that MacIntyre’s formulation is unassailable, but simply that it cannot be dismissed outright as religious obfuscation. The very idea of "religious obfuscation" has built within it an implicit belief that something about religion is invisible or hidden from view. MacIntyre, like other religious thinkers, is not simply spinning propositions about an entity called God to which he has access and we do not. He is, rather, playing a different language game, and it is not the game of description—however they might themselves understand their utterances.10

As Wittgenstein put it in his lectures on religious belief, "Suppose that someone believed in the Last Judgment, and I don't, does this mean that I believe the opposite of him, just that there won't be such a thing? I would say: 'not at all, or not always.'"11 Once we reject the idea that God is a signifier sans signified, we are faced with a new question: what purpose is served by the word "God"? If words are like tools, what does the word "God" do and why do so many reach for it, willfully ignoring the tool called "secular"?

This mode of understanding religion seriously troubles the most common secular attempt to overcome the uncomfortably theological genealogies of our cherished truisms, such as human rights or just war doctrines: the translation of once-religious doctrines into universal, rational truths. The standard bearer of the translation project is Jürgen Habermas who, while at least occasionally admitting that our rational ideals are genealogically religious, maintains that they are able to swing free of their divine origins, thus creating a transparent and exportable secularity.12 This idea assumes that religion is primarily a diachronic phenomenon, always to be spoken of in the past tense even as its present reality is lamentably recognized. But, as Derrida put it, "Religion can only begin and begin again."13 The Wittgensteinean understanding of religion outlined above is necessarily synchronic insofar as it represents a form of life and not simply a bank of propositions waiting to be

7 See especially Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore, 1993), Chapter 1.
9 Quoted on Brian R. Clack, Wittgenstein, Frazer, and Religion (New York, N.Y., 1999), 49.
10 This can be understood in a weak, or methodological, sense, following Owen Chadwick’s belief that all history, even religious history, must be "secular." This is all I need to show here, although I think it is true in a strong sense as well.
translated: religion is constantly and not contingently regenerating and reproducing itself.

Which is not to say that his conversion had no diachronic resonance. MacIntyre was in fact part of a long line of prominent British Catholic converts. But he did not have this tradition in mind when he submitted to Rome insofar as he was influenced by Newman and the rest, this seems to have been a post-conversion phenomenon. So rather than attempt to understand MacIntyre diachronically, as continuing a lengthy tradition, it will be more helpful to think about him synchronically: what about contemporary thought pushed him towards the Church? To be as blunt as possible, just as Bergson believes the universe to be a machine for making Gods, British intellectual life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a machine for making Catholics. Insofar as liberal presuppositions were hegemonic in ways not true on the Continent, the Church occupied the space from which the most radical critique of capitalist society was possible. As I’ll attempt to demonstrate below, the Catholic language game was the only one in which a fully consistent critique of modern capitalism was possible for MacIntyre.

MacIntyre, like Newman, Chesterton and others before him, endured a long and winding road of more mainstream positions before converting to Catholicism. After a period of (Protestant) theism in the 1950s, MacIntyre spent the 1960s as an outspoken atheist engaging with a dizzying array of philosophical, primarily Marxist, schools. He was, for instance, among the first British intellectuals to engage with continental theory, far before Perry Anderson and his New Left Books revolution of the 1970s brought Western Marxism into Britain.

This paper will not be structured as a blow-by-blow account of MacIntyre’s pre-conversion philosophical output, valuable as that might be. MacIntyre himself, who has been reticent to reminisce on his own autobiography, once stated that the period from 1949-1971—i.e. the period covered by this essay—was composed of "heterogeneous, badly organized, sometimes fragmented and often frustrating and messy enquiries." Indeed, he was massively prolific during these years and seems to have migrated between universities and departments nearly as quickly as he discarded philosophical positions. Christopher Lutz, perhaps the most sensitive reader of the early MacIntyre, rightly concludes that the period constitutes "a long-running epistemological crisis.”

Instead I will operate in broad strokes, attempting to reconstruct the intellectual milieu in which MacIntyre found himself and investigate his critique of it. In 1953, MacIntyre was both a Marxist and a Protestant; he in fact held that these two positions were mutually complementary and, what is more, necessary to one another. This was the argument of his first book, *Marxism: An Interpretation* (1953). This was reprinted in 1968 with a new title and preface in which he claimed to have given up on both traditions of thought. This paper will trace the dynamics of this double refusal. Ironically MacIntyre rejected both Marxism and (Protestant) Christianity for their secularity, setting him on the road to Catholicism- the only moral discourse available that, in his view, avoided liberal nihilism. Given constraints of space I will not discuss MacIntyre’s actual conversion, about which little is known. Instead I will

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15 This is a term of art for MacIntyre, for reasons that unfortunately extend beyond the scope of this essay. Basically, for MacIntyre this refers to the period in which one discovers that one’s moral tradition is unsuitable, as described most fully in *Three Versions of Moral Enquiry*.
provide a genealogy of his 1970s crisis: during that decade, he published very little and felt abandoned by both Marxism and Protestant Christianity. This rootlessness was the necessary precondition to *After Virtue* and his conversion soon after; as seems clear in hindsight, he had nowhere else to go.

As we will see, progressive Christianity and Marxism in postwar Britain were both champions of the secular, if for different reasons. Marxists, then as now, simply presumed secularity, while Protestants argued that the end of religion opened the door for the reign of Christianity. If there’s one lesson to draw from MacIntyre’s intellectual biography it might be that secularity cannot be assumed as a priori postulate. It is a radically new phenomenon in our history, and we cannot assume that a coherent secular ethics and politics have already been created and we are simply waiting for religious believers to see the light. This is not to say that progressive thought is incapable of dealing with secularity, but it is a matter of historical fact that neither the British New Left nor Protestant theology (strange as it may seem) adequately grappled with its novelty. If Nagel, Nussbaum and Habermas can be counted as representative figures, we might wonder if the situation has improved and whether the sources of religion and its return should be placed within the “opaque core of religious experience,” as Habermas would have it, or, more disturbingly, if the sources might be entirely transparent, open to view and generated again and again by the instability of the secular.

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17 Marx’s own account of religion, developed most clearly in "On the Jewish Question," is in fact more complex than the "opiate of the people" cliché implies; this aspect of his thought is often, however, overlooked.


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MacIntyre and the New Left

MacIntyre was born in Glasgow in 1929 and later recalled growing up with a dual inheritance: the story-telling Gaelic culture, in deep decline, and the putatively non-narrative culture of modern liberalism, according to which the individual seeks Kantian a priori moral truths. He began to study philosophy at the University of Manchester in 1949, and began a long life of political activism the following year, when he briefly joined the Communist Party. The analytic training he received at Manchester (this being the apex of analytic philosophy’s hegemony in British thought) taught him the impossibility of maintaining any sort of contradictory beliefs. This training, combined with the bifurcated moral discourse of his youth, set off the furious dialectic that would not come to a close until *After Virtue* and the correlative conversion.

MacIntyre rose to intellectual prominence as a member of the British New Left, a complex and internally divided group of British Marxists responding, basically, to the perceived crisis in British socialism in the aftermath of the Popular Front of the 1930s. After the Second World War those Communist intellectuals who had been allied with the Labour cause broke ranks as the Cold War cemented the Labour Party into American hegemony and the Soviet Union called off the Popular Front. After 1956 and the crisis in Hungary, however, it was widely felt that Stalinist Marxism was far too dogmatic both politically and intellectually. This led to a rash of defections from the Communist Party and a period of terrifically fruitful Marxist scholarship as a
A generation of committed radicals attempted to rethink the revolution.\textsuperscript{21}

MacIntyre’s critique of so-called "vulgar" Marxism was quite similar to those of other New Left founders. This is most evident in a withering essay he published in 1956, entitled simply "Marxist Tracts." It is primarily an attack on now-forgotten orthodox Marxists arguing, as Thompson and others were doing, that their base/superstructure distinction was impossibly reductive and failed to take into account the complexities of social and especially linguistic practice. He ends this way: "It is both sad and significant that no Marxist undertakes original philosophical work. For them there remains only the zeal of the evangelist. To read their books is to move in a dead world."\textsuperscript{22}

But MacIntyre was similarly displeased with the New Left’s critique of orthodox Communism, a fundamental disagreement he wasted no time in expressing. In the inaugural issue of the \textit{New Reasoner} (1958) a post-Communist periodical founded and edited by E.P. Thompson, MacIntyre published "Notes from a Moral Wilderness," in which he claimed that Communist defectors had no moral ground from which they could reasonably speak. This struck at the heart of the New Left project which primarily defined itself as a moral project. In 1956, for instance, Thompson himself had framed his political maneuvering as a "conscious struggle for moral principle."\textsuperscript{23}

As would be expected given his later work, MacIntyre’s major critique of the defectors and the Stalinists from whom they defected was that they were each fundamentally liberal in their understanding of morality. In other words, they both conceived morality primarily in terms of the distinction between "is" and "ought," or fact and value.\textsuperscript{24} He claimed that whereas Stalinists sided unproblematically with what they felt to be historical reality (i.e. the "is") moral critics of Stalinism simply framed their disagreement in terms of individual preference (the "ought"). They both implicitly bought into "the isolation of the moral from the factual," which MacIntyre already held to be the grievous category mistake infecting modernity. Interestingly, given his later religious identity, he links this with the Reformation, which, in his view, uncoupled morality from desire and the facts of human nature. Thompson and the rest are figured as modern-day Luthers whose dictum MacIntyre cites as their motto: "Hier steh’ ich, ich kann nicht anders." Instead of moral posturing, he held, "we need a morality which orders our desires and yet expresses them." We must, that is to say, embrace human nature and its desires, which we necessarily share in common with others instead of setting up abstract freely "chosen" moral values. Only Communism allows us to do this and hence it will preside over the "great release" of human nature.\textsuperscript{25}

Of course Thompson, Raymond Williams, Christopher Hill and others did attempt to construct a historical genealogy of English working-class radicalism through

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  \item \textsuperscript{21} For a solid summary, see Dennis L. Dworkin, \textit{Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies} (Durham, NC, 1997), Chapter 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Alasdair MacIntyre, "Marxist Tracts," \textit{Philosophical Quarterly} 6 (1956): 370. Interestingly, similar language of the "dead world" is used in the opening pages of \textit{After Virtue} to describe all contemporary moral discourse.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Quoted on Dworkin, \textit{Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies}, 58.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} A few years later, he expanded this analysis in an influential essay on Hume. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Hume on "Is" and "Ought"," in \textit{Against the Self-Images of the Age} (New York, 1971).
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Alasdair MacIntyre, "Notes From the Moral Wilderness," in \textit{The MacIntyre Reader}, ed. Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, 1998), 33, 35, 43, 48. The provenance or nature of this Communism remains untheorized, as MacIntyre attacked both Stalinism and the New Left response.
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which they could articulate their moral critique. The primary documents here are Thompson’s epochal The Making of the English Working Class (1963) and Raymond Williams’s Culture and Society (1958). These interventions are, of course, different in many ways, and the two authors were always wary of one another’s theoretical projects. But they were both trying to recover a historically situated moral tradition of protest that might give them the sort of authority for which MacIntyre had called.

MacIntyre was, however, equally dissatisfied with this project: he thought that his New Left contemporaries were attempting to reconstruct a common moral culture where one simply did not exist. This can be seen in two reviews that he wrote in the early 1960s. In a 1961 review of Culture and Society, MacIntyre argued that Williams’ exegetical efforts ignored the realities of class, power and struggle in the interests of reviving a common culture. In 1964 he turned on his old mentor R.H. Tawney in a review of his collected essays. The critique was the same as he had made of Williams: “What we miss in these essays is the social context of the 1920s, of poverty, of unemployment, of suffering.” He ended with the simple sentence that might sum up his critique of the New Left: “Goodness is not enough.” MacIntyre argues that Tawney was basically a tool of the Labour Party which he now held to be insufficiently radical to effect real change. It is important to keep in mind that this was the period of so-called "Butskellism", in which the Labour Party’s exhilarating early years gave way to a long period of economic progress and rapprochement between Labour and Conservatives over the nature of the postwar settlement. What was missing was any serious left-wing opposition to the ruling consensus and MacIntyre was certain that the New Left could not provide one.

In turning to the native tradition of moral protest New Left historians, MacIntyre argued, were looking in the wrong place, as all moral thought since 1800 was infected by the bacillus of the secular. This deeper diagnosis first appeared in his 1964 Riddell lectures, entitled Secularization and Moral Change. The basic thesis of the lecture series—one that would be reprised under a different name in After Virtue—is that the religious culture that had nurtured moral life in Britain had been destroyed by industrial capitalism, which was premised upon the fact/value split to such an extent that coherent moral critique was impossible from within capitalist society. Society’s fragmentation after 1800 led to a situation in which Christianity became a tool of class conflict instead of a “moral framework” in which one might debate ultimate ends.

In one sense this is a typical New Left text. He is concerned with moral fragmentation in industrial society, the same problem that exercised Thompson, Williams and others. He is in fact heavily reliant on the historiographical revolution presided over by the New Left historians, whose work he constantly cites. His major disagreement was that he did not believe that any of the working-class consciousness produced in this period was valuable, in that all of it was tainted by the original fragmentation and in fact represented no more than a "vestigial Christianity." The collapse of the society-wide moral framework provided by Christianity around 1800 led to the hegemony of so-called "secondary" virtues, which govern means rather than ends.

26 Dworkin, Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies, 95-105.

27 This was also Thompson’s critique of Williams. Alasdair MacIntyre, "[Review]," International Socialism, no. 5 (1961).


(these are the much-vaunted Victorian values of tolerance, prudence, etc.). Apart from these, each class simply trumpeted its own egoistic claims backed up by no coherent moral argumentation—the latter was in fact impossible as the society as a whole no longer accepted any "primary" virtues. The hegemonic values of industrial society are not, then, disguised forms of class domination; instead, there are no hegemonic values at all, as society is entirely fragmented and all discourse becomes instrumental.30

This is worth pausing over. Thompson famously saw the secondary virtues of industrial society as the primary virtues of the ruling class. This is most explicit in the famous chapter on Methodism in The Making of the English Working Class, entitled "The Transforming Power of the Cross," in which the worker's conversion is refigured as the transformation into a capitalist subject. Thompson, following Elie Halévy and others, blames Methodism for the "uninterrupted decline of the revolutionary spirit" in the early nineteenth century. "Methodism served as ideological self-justification for the master-manufacturers […] We can now see the extraordinary correspondence between the virtues which Methodism inculcated in the working class and the desiderata of middle-class Utilitarianism."31 The catalog of virtues is the same as that cited by MacIntyre, but the source is completely different, as Thompson lacked the distinction between primary and secondary. Whereas Thompson explained the rise of capitalism and its correlative horrors in terms of the hegemony of a particular class, MacIntyre believed that the social fragmentation (i.e. secularization) was itself responsible.

Whatever the weakness of MacIntyre's account—and they are legion—it must be said that he points to a real aporia in New Left thought. Perhaps because 1960s Britain experienced rapid secularization, New Left thinkers failed to consistently engage with either religion or its decline.32 While temporary alliances with religious groups were forged, notably in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the truce was always uneasy and religion was not at the heart of the New Left project the way it was, for instance, in the United States. This is especially remarkable given the omnipresent evangelical impulse in the earlier movements to which they were attempting to attach themselves. Perhaps Culture and Society is the most obvious culprit here, as Maurice Cowling has pointed out.33 Nearly all of the critics that Williams sought to unearth, including Tawney, had been obsessed by Christianity. But in the book itself it hardly makes an appearance and there is no attempt to understand the historical role of Christianity (the word "secular" does not appear in the work, either—Williams was simply uninterested in the whole problematic). As we have seen religion plays only a negative role in Thompson's Making of the English Working Class.

The neglect is especially remarkable in Richard Hoggart's influential and idiosyncratic memoir/polemic/social survey, The Uses of Literacy (1957). In this book, one of the most influential of the early New

30 Ibid., 35. It seems that this distinction between primary and secondary virtues eventually morphed into the distinction between institutions and practices, central to his later work.


32 For British religion in the 1960s, see Brown, The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000.

Left, Hoggart attempts to chart the terrain of a quickly disappearing working-class life, which he felt was endangered by the "candy-floss world" of advanced consumer capitalism. Secularization is not discussed at all and, in fact, Hoggart’s analysis of the moral framework of working-class life was directly in line with MacIntyre’s critique. In the only section of the study dealing with religion Hoggart drew attention to the fact of secularization and the low rate of churchgoing among the working class. But he recognized, as did MacIntyre, the role that Christian ritual still played in their lives.

In so far as they [working-class Englishmen] think of Christianity, they think of it as a system of ethics; their concern is with morals, not metaphysics [...] They will say, without sense of contradiction, that science has taken the place of religion, but that we ought all to try to 'live according to Christ’s teaching.' [...] For the most part their approach is empirical.  

Hoggart was also clear that this ethical system was employed in a conscious effort to define "us," the workers, against "them," the capitalists. MacIntyre argued against Hoggart that social salvation cannot be found in a moral framework grounded on nothing and belonging to a single class.

By the mid 1960s MacIntyre had given up on the mainstream of the British left-wing, having passed through both organized Communism and the more porous New Left. He had not, however, given up on Marxism altogether. While British working-class radicalism was morally unsound, the tradition of pure revolutionary Marxism still held promise. MacIntyre now associated himself with the Trotskyite groupuscule centered around International Socialism, a journal that he edited from 1960 until 1968. His editorial interventions were revolutionary and far more strident than comparable those found in comparable New Left journals. One of his earliest editorial notes, for instance, championed the Cuban Revolution. There are also veiled critiques of the New Left, and specifically the newly formed New Left Review, for taking refuge in utopianism and ignoring the pressing issues of international revolution and working-class consciousness. He criticized Thompson and the like as insufficiently reformist and not radical enough to reinstate the shared moral framework he felt to be necessary after the disastrous process of secularization.

In this he was, of course, not alone. The uniqueness of his contribution stems rather from his decision to cast this failure in terms of ethics, which began to obsess MacIntyre during this period (his Short History of Ethics was published in 1966). As Julian Bourg has recently argued the greatest philosophical legacy of 1968, in France at least, has been the ethical turn. While MacIntyre had begun to turn far earlier it was the events of that year that led him to reject Marxism altogether. While 1968 in Britain was relatively tame, MacIntyre was surprised to find himself on the side of the authorities as they represented a storehouse of value confronted with the orgiastic consumerism writ large (as MacIntyre saw it) of the Marcuse-inspired soixante-huitards. As we have seen MacIntyre wanted to recover a coherent ethical tradition that could both "order" and "express" human desires: he felt the 1968

35 Ibid., Chapter 3, "'Them' and 'Us'".
revolutionaries ignored the first of these two requirements. The most extended discussion comprised an entire book entitled, accurately enough, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and Polemic* (1970). MacIntyre makes his opinion obvious from the outset: "It will be my crucial contention in this book that almost all of Marcuse's key positions are false." The basic critique, now somewhat familiar, living as we are in a year of constant hand wringing over '68 and its failures, was that Marcuse was simply naïve about the possibilities of absolute freedom and untrammeled human nature. While Marcuse, at least in MacIntyre's version, taught that all laws were inherently enslaving, MacIntyre argued instead that freedom in fact entails rational self-control exercised by way of rational institutions; otherwise, we would count the insane as the freest among us. So by 1968, he felt that Marxism was bankrupt as an intellectual or ethical project, and he resigned from his position at *International Socialism*. Why though this did not lead to a return to the Protestant Christianity in which, after all, he had been raised?

**MacIntyre and Secular Theology**

Recall that in 1953 he had espoused both Marxism and Christianity, while in 1968 he rejected them both. We've now seen his rejection of Marxism: he felt that it simply could not provide the community-wide moral framework that was required for the regeneration of nihilist capitalist society. His rejection of Christianity, however, is more puzzling, and can only be understood once we historicize religion properly. He did not reject Christianity as such, but merely the version of Christianity available to him. In post-war Britain Christianity primarily took the form of evangelicalism: indifferent towards institutions and, in a paradoxical connection with the 1968 rebels, obsessed with individual freedom from authority and tradition.

The 1950s were a golden age for British Christianity, although, as can perhaps be seen in the popularity of Billy Graham and the like, it was far from a golden age for British theology. In 1962 the Archbishop of York summed up the prevailing mood by declaring on television that "religion is jolly relevant to this life." Admira and modern as this sentiment may have been, it is clear that MacIntyre *qua* revolutionary was seeking something more than jolly relevance. The history of theology in twentieth century Britain was in fact somewhat repetitive and lacked the forward momentum found on the Continent or, indeed, in the United States. The controversy that had been kicked off by Jowett and the *Essays and Reviews* circle in the 1860s replayed itself ad nauseam. Basically a group of Oxbridge theological radicals would make sweeping claims for historical theology, and argue that Christian dogma was unprovable metaphysics that should be swept aside to allow the simple moral purity of Jesus' example to shine through the barnacles of superstition. This would be followed by a horrified establishment reaction and then the dust would eventually settle with handshakes all around and perhaps a few conversions to Catholicism. The same process occurred in Germany in the early decades of the century, but the dialectical theology of Barth

39 Ibid., 2.
and Bultmann in the 1920s turned German theology on a radically different path from its English counterpart.

MacIntyre was invested in bringing theology back into dialogue with philosophy which required an openness to Continental thought that had been lacking. To this end he edited and introduced Barth's From Rousseau to Ritschl, prefaced by a call for "fruitful conversation in contemporary terms between philosophers and theologians." In the same year (1959) he published Difficulties in Christian Belief, an idiosyncratic attempt to stage that conversation. As in his other writings in this vein, he wrote as a Wittgensteinian, arguing that "What we know about God we do not learn from philosophy. All that the philosophers can hope to do is to clear up misconceptions." His critique of evangelical religion was in fact philosophical and not social, as Thompson's had been. MacIntyre used Wittgenstein's private-language argument to show that personal experience is never an adequate reason to believe in God and argued elsewhere that religious visions cannot be used to ostensibly define "God" any more than they can "pain." He prefigures his own turn from Protestantism by citing G.K. Chesterton, perhaps his most kindred spirit in this regard: "The inner light is the worst kind of lighting." In the end his attempt to bring philosophy and theology in dialogue led to the conclusion that philosophy was of use only in that it could demonstrate that the secular call for justification was itself absurd. To this point, Barth and Wittgenstein—to both of which MacIntyre was devoted during these years—could be cohered. But when a theological movement attempted to radically redefine the meaning of the word "God", MacIntyre was forced to question his Barthean allegiances, eventually claiming that dialectical theology pointed to atheism.

In the 1950s and 60s, British theology, just as MacIntyre had hoped for, was rocked by the German intellectual revolutions, which had until then remained almost entirely ignored. Three decades of revolutionary thinking flooded into the Church at once. While there were minor precursors, the bombshell was John Robinson's Honest to God (1963). This slim volume created an incredible sensation, selling nearly a million copies between 1963 and 1966. As Adrian Hastings puts it, "Only the Bible could rival it. English religion of the 1960s will always remain more associated with Honest to God than with any other book." It was also, for reasons that will become clear, massively controversial, both because of its tendentious ideas and the fact that its author was not a religious crank or a Colin Wilson-style outsider. Instead, he was the Bishop of Woolwich.

The book was controversial because, to be somewhat reductive, it embraced secularity (indeed, it was published in 1963, Callum Brown's annus mirabilis of secularization). This was done by combining the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich into an unstable mélange, united perhaps only by its willingness to shock conservative Anglican sensibilities. Robinson's major task was to demolish the idea that God is somehow "out there" and replace it with a God who is "the ground of our being." God thus ceases to be an "existent" (like an apple) and become instead the very ground of existence. In Heideggerean terms, which are not out of place here, Robinson argues that God is ontological, not ontic (i.e. existential, not

47 Ibid., 72.
50 John Robinson, Honest to God (London, 1963), Chapter 3.
existential). This revaluation of the meaning of "God"—in fact Robinson suggested that we all stop using the word "God" for a few years to allow this shift to take root—was linked with a devalorization of traditional "religion," which Robinson felt to be wedded to insupportable notions of a transcendent deity. Following Bonhoeffer, Robinson wanted a "Christianity without religion," dedicated to uncovering God as ontological ground, phenomenologically realizing himself in interpersonal love.

The outcry of the Anglican hierarchy was immediate, as it was not every day that the front page of the Observer touted that "Our Image of God Must Go," accompanied by an article by a bishop. MacIntyre’s consistent attacks did not spring from the same conservative impulse, he was, as we have seen far from orthodox. Rather, his critique should be understood as the outcome of his reading of secularity discussed above. He was one of the most outspoken critics of Robinson and tellingly, is normally discussed in histories of Anglican theology in this regard with no inkling of the fact that he went on to become one of the most celebrated moral philosophers of his generation.

The most virulent attack, "God and the Theologians," appeared in Encounter in September 1963. He controversially claimed that Robinson was in fact an atheist. MacIntyre held that nothing divine, let alone Christian, survived in his system, which simply bestowed the name "God" on various features of our existence, paying no heed to Christian dogma or tradition and leaving in fact no space for a true deity. Not only that, but the entire post-liberal revolution in Protestant theology, represented primarily by Barth, Tillich and Bultmann, "converge[s] upon unbelief."

His purpose in writing the essay was not primarily to attack Robinson, but rather to attack the trends in Christianity and society that he represented. A great many people were viciously attacking Robinson, and a Trotskyite with vague ties to Christianity held little sway in the Anglican hierarchy. MacIntyre argued that the book had touched "a raw nerve" because postwar British society was deeply confused about its own religiosity. As he would argue more fully in his 1964 lectures described above, the decline of Christianity had left nothing in its place: "What we do have is a religious language which survives even though we do not know what to say in it." As he famously put it in the concluding sentences, in language that echoes Hoggart’s, "The creed of the English is that there is no God and that it is wise to pray to him from time to time." The questions religion answered would not simply disappear, as human beings are doomed to question the ultimate purpose of their activities, and religious language is "the only language we have for certain purposes."

Christianity, MacIntyre held, could no longer answer these questions, as the totalizing discursive system in which it once lived had irreparably decayed. For this

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51 Ibid., 8.
53 There is a bit of a "chicken and egg" problem here; as the secularization lectures were published in 1964, it is possible that his change of heart about the secular came about because of the Robinson controversy, and not out of the critique of the New Left. More likely, both of these were operating together, although I’ve separated them here for analytical convenience.
55 Alasdair MacIntyre, "God and the Theologians," in Against the Self-Images of the Age (New York, 1971), 16.
56 Ibid., 12, 23, 26.
reason, theologians, the guardians of these indispensable but now incomprehensible concepts, are doomed to constantly reinterpret, reinvent and retranslate the shards of an exploded tradition in an attempt to provide some kind of moral coherence and purpose. Robinson is then held up as the exemplar of all those "willing to translate theological statements into nontheological," a translation always doomed to fail:

Either they succeed in their translation: in which case what they find themselves saying has been transformed into the atheism of their hearers. Or they fail in their translation: in which case no one hears what they have to say but themselves.\textsuperscript{57}

MacIntyre doesn’t provide an easy solution, arguing essentially for the death of Christianity. He had given up Marxism as well, for similar reasons: Herbert Marcuse and John Robinson, for all their differences, were essentially similar from MacIntyre’s point of view, as they both denied the reality of tradition and normative virtue in favor of a more optimistic and expressive ethic (viz. one that expressed, but did not order, human nature and its desires). He was thus left with little more than a profound pessimism. This would percolate in his scattered and restless writings of the 1970s before issuing in After Virtue, his masterpiece, and the conversion to Catholicism: Thomism became the only moral discourse capable of meeting his requirements, for reasons spelled out most clearly in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (1988).

Conclusion

I’ve tried to show in this essay the tangled path that could take a sensitive and intelligent thinker away from "rational" religion and left-wing politics and towards an illiberal and anti-modern version of religion. There is increasing evidence that many today, both inside and outside the academy, reject the founding assumptions of secular modernity. As the case of MacIntyre shows, this need not be figured as a “retreat” into religion. The other options available to MacIntyre were, and perhaps are, deeply problematic. I am not offering an apologia for MacIntyre’s conversion, much less recommending it as the only solution to our theological-political problem. It seems clear, though, that we must take the criticism of the "new traditionalists" seriously; just as MacIntyre passed through Marcuse on his way to illiberal Catholicism, we must attempt to pass through MacIntyre towards a robust and post-secular moral discourse that can recover the virtues in a democratic way. "Modern democracy,” Jeffrey Stout has recently argued, “is not essentially an expression of secularism.”\textsuperscript{58}

In order to make this move we must understand the historical forces that pushed MacIntyre in the direction of radical religious critique. It had nothing to do with innate violence or fanaticism or ignorance, and everything to do with the instabilities and aporias of the varieties of secularity on offer to him. After Virtue, as has long been recognized, lays down a powerful challenge to our received forms of moral and ethical thought. Perhaps the danger is not that he was unaware of the rationality or virtues of secular modernity, as we tend to assume when confronted with religious thinkers today. Perhaps, more disconcerting, he knew them only too well.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 23, 13, 20.

\textsuperscript{58} Stout, Democracy and Tradition, 11.
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