

# Tradition navigating transformation: reading Alasdair MacIntyre in search of mirrors and windows for reformed theology

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## Abstract

A tradition concept that does not sufficiently reckon with the problem of transformation, opens itself to two opposite dangers: the loss of openness through refusing any change; and the loss of integrity through surrendering assertibility to relativism. This article examines Alasdair MacIntyre's tradition concept and brings it into conversation with a selection of Reformed scholars, hoping to instil, by its integration, a philosophical robustness in the Reformed tradition's thinking about tradition per se and its transformation, so that both integrity and catholicity might be maintained. This article ultimately argues for a congruence between MacIntyre's tradition concept and the Reformed dictum *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est secundum verbum Dei* and shows that the vitality of the tradition is not tied to an absence of argumentation, but rather to the presence of its virtues in these disputations. This may potentially alleviate anxieties in the South African Reformed churches about current arguments and transformations, and help guard against losses of integrity and openness, holiness and catholicity.

## Keywords

*Alasdair MacIntyre, tradition, Reformed Theology*

## 1. Introduction

The sufficiency of our ways of thinking about tradition can be challenged by the problem of transformation. If a tradition transforms, can it still be said to remain essentially the same? This question lies at the heart of concerns to protect the integrity of a tradition. On the other hand, can a tradition which never transforms, truly be said to be a living and relevant

tradition? Such a concern for the openness of a tradition reckons with the inevitability of transformation since any tradition is necessarily translated into new times and places when it is passed on to a next generation of its bearers or adopted by new but foreign adherents. A translation is always a restatement, and hence to translate matter is to change that matter to some extent.

One such insufficiency in tradition concepts is that these concerns, for integrity and for openness, are mutually exclusive as though to be open to engage rival claims and new contexts is to imperil the identity of a tradition. Such a contention allows two possible postures to the problem of transformation: either absolute integrity in the form of a fossilised tradition, which runs the risk of losing all relevance, or absolute openness in the form of a relativistic tradition, which runs the risk of sacrificing any claims to the assertibility of its claims.

These twin dangers contribute to the anxiety which seizes on the Reformed churches in South Africa as the identity of the Reformed tradition is disputed, and transformations contemplated in the form of, for example, the Dutch Reformed Church's adoption of the Belhar confession, the related possibility of her reunification with her sister churches such as the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa, and the frictions surrounding maintaining denominational unity amidst a diversity of ethical stances on issues such as sexuality.

If the tradition is to deepen in its vitality through navigating these arguments and transformations, rather than decay thereby into fossilisation or relativism, it requires a robust concept of tradition which can account for both the vital values of integrity and openness. This is the aim of the current article: not to resolve current disputes in the Reformed tradition, but to impute these with vitality through shoring up the sufficiency of how the tradition thinks about tradition *per se*.

One source for such a concept comes from the philosophical work of Scottish-American ethicist Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre (1929–), currently a Permanent Senior Research Fellow for Notre Dame's Centre for Ethics and Culture with a storied career on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on tradition has evoked much discussion since his famous *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* was published in 1981, and he has continued to

develop the arguments of *After Virtue* through later works such as *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (1988) and *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (1999) and beyond, though these will be the main sources for this article's engagement with MacIntyre's ideas.

For MacIntyre's tradition concept to be useful to Reformed churches, philosophy must be brought into conversation with theology to integrate its ideas, and to ascertain whether such an integration would be congruent with the character of the tradition in the first place. To this end, this article reads MacIntyre in light of the Reformed tradition – that is, in concert with Reformed scholars whose work either touches on related themes, or who have explicitly engaged with MacIntyre.

To give idiomatic expression to this article's aim using the imagery of this conference's theme: it hopes to find in MacIntyre a tradition concept which, like a road vehicle, enables the Reformed tradition to navigate the paths of its transformation, using both mirrors to clarify the integrity of the tradition's deepest identity, as well as windows to clarify the tradition's openness to other traditions, and to the future.

## 2. The need for another St. Benedict

MacIntyre's tradition concept must be approached within the broader context of his philosophical project, which begins (in its most familiar expression in *After Virtue*) with a diagnosis of structural deficiencies in post-Enlightenment thought about ethics: "We possess indeed simulacra of morality; we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, or morality" (1981:2). Expounded in brief: the grand task of the philosophers of the Enlightenment might be identified as the unshackling of the human intellectual life from tradition, and subsequently to provide a new means of justifying values and the assertibility of beliefs through an appeal to universal Reason. Though Enlightenment concepts such as utility and rights still abound in the academy, in politics, law and economics, the values and institutions of the Enlightenment are nevertheless incapable of transcending rival assertions about values and their ordering, especially when values seem to conflict with one another (MacIntyre 1981:8). The Enlightenment Project, so goes the argument, is a failure.

Instead of independent and impassionate Reason, contemporary moral reasoning is, in reality, conducted by evoking in the other the same emotions which made a particular moral position seem attractive to the self in the first place; an approach to ethics known as Emotivism (MacIntyre, 1981:22). Emotivism, because it can only persuade through manipulation, enables the bureaucratising of societies to better apply its ultimately arbitrary power to arbitrate moral disagreement. This arbitration is masked by appeals to the classical concepts of ethics and their theorists in an unintegrated and disembodied manner, resembling thusly the traditionless justification-by-reason which cannot be attained.

MacIntyre proposes two possible legitimate alternatives to emotivism. The first would sweep away all pretence to persuasion, and revel in the naked application of power: this is the Nietzschean option, which MacIntyre finds unpalatable (1981:257). The second option, which MacIntyre argues for (1981:256), is to seek rationalisation within traditions, rather than beyond traditions: this is characteristic of the premodern tradition of virtue ethics, which MacIntyre argues finds its highest expression in the thought of Aristotle as developed by Aquinas.

This is one sense of *After Virtue's* famous closing lines (MacIntyre 1981:263): "... if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope [...] We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict." Though the virtue tradition lays largely abandoned (as much of classical civilisation was following the collapse of Western Rome), it is only in a conception of tradition as understood through virtue, embodied in communities (as St. Benedict and the monastic communities he ushered in were guardians of knowledge endangered by that collapse), that moral rationalisation is possible.

This, then, is MacIntyre's purpose behind his proposed tradition concept: to combat the fragmentation of common frameworks of ethical appeal by reclaiming traditions as teleological, narrative frameworks for communities to which may be appealed in resolving ethical disputes. The Reformed churches in South Africa, anxious about their own fragmentation along racial lines, or because of ethical disputes, might sympathise with

MacIntyre's project; and it is in this spirit that this article now turns to investigate MacIntyre's tradition concept.

### 3. MacIntyre on tradition and transformation

Two core ideas to MacIntyre's proposed tradition concept address the conditions for an intellectual tradition's vitality, and the possibility of a tradition's attaining assertibility. These will now be examined, respectively:

#### 3.1 A living tradition?

A living tradition ... is an historically extended, socially embodied argument ... in part about the goods which constitute that tradition (MacIntyre 1981:222).

Aristotelean formalism informs MacIntyre's argument that the vitality of a tradition is not reliant on a static stability of content, but rather on the presence of ongoing internal arguments about the identity of the tradition. Every generation's taking into possession of the tradition, if it is serious, will generate (at times conflicting) answers as to the meaning of the tradition, and its deepest identity. This is what is meant by the "goods which constitute the tradition," rendered in a technical sense as it is used in virtue ethics: a tradition has internal goods that it aims at achieving, and these teleologically indicate the tradition's identity (MacIntyre 1981:187; cf. D'Andrea 2006:269; Lutz 2004:41). Virtues are the excellences required for a tradition's practices to successfully achieve these goods.

MacIntyre does not provide a definitive and timeless virtue list. While virtue lists are necessary, he argues that pretence at universality belongs to the failure of the Enlightenment's rationalisation project. Instead, the argument about the identity of a tradition, which also includes its self-identified list of excellences, is "socially embodied." This also proceeds from the teleological nature of the Aristotelean-Thomistic tradition: premodern societies inhabited a storied cosmos that made certain claims about the characteristic *teloi* of a community, so that the corresponding virtues could be discovered through argumentation appealing to that socially embodied *telos* (MacIntyre 1981:156; cf. D'Andrea 2006:251–252). In this manner, a tradition then provides its bearers with an orientation in their society.

It is also necessary that a tradition be “historically extended.” That is, as change-bringing argumentation continues for as long as the tradition exists, it should still recognisably be the same argument being waged, or else the tradition did not survive its transformation, and has ceased to exist. This relates to what this essay has called the “integrity” of a tradition, while MacIntyre calls it its “unity.” The nature of this unity is narrative, in that while a narrative is necessarily a sequence of changes, it yet remains a united whole in that it unfolds from a particular origin and continues to be concerned with that particular unfolding (D’Andrea 2006:277). A tradition must, therefore, be able to recognise its essential self in its past forms, even if its form is not completely identical anymore.

For the purposes of this article, it is significant that this tradition concept conceives of a type of integrity maintained across time and its transformations. The model of an argument resists notions of integrity that would eschew change and risk fossilisation; and narrative unity requiring the tradition’s ongoing relating back to its origin or deepest essential identity over time resists notions of openness that lapse into relativism.

### 3.2 An assertible tradition?

MacIntyre’s tradition concept as treated in *After Virtue* has emphasised how the vital integrity of a tradition amidst transformation is possible, and its development in *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* picks up the matter of a tradition’s vital openness, even as integrity is maintained. It pertains to the way a tradition rationalises itself, attaining assertibility, with MacIntyre arguing that this happens through “epistemological crises”:

Every tradition, whether it recognises the fact or not, confronts the possibility that at some future time it will fall into a state of epistemological crisis [...] All attempts to deploy the imaginative and inventive resources which the adherents of the tradition can provide may founder ... (MacIntyre 1988:364).

Yet it is in the way in which the adherents of a tradition respond to such occurrences, and in the success or failure which attends upon their response, that traditions attain or fail to attain maturity. (MacIntyre 1988:361).

An epistemological crisis occurs when a tradition encounters some shortcoming of its internal resources when translated into a new time or space, with new challenges that cannot be meaningfully addressed (cf. MacIntyre 1977). A rival tradition might prove to possess superior resources for confronting these challenges. Successfully navigating such a crisis is how traditions rationalise themselves and mature.

MacIntyre suggests (1988:362) three conditions for success: the tradition's new formulation must coherently solve the problem that brought about the initial shortcoming; it must account for the failure of internal resources that necessitated a reformulation; and it must demonstrate a continuity of its concepts and frameworks with the fundamentals of the tradition that has hitherto preceded it.

If these three conditions are met, the tradition will have emerged from its epistemological crisis strengthened, having attained greater clarity about its own goods and identity. This is also MacIntyre's internal, socially embodied alternative to the Enlightenment's quixotic universal rationalisation: rather than an unexamined dead weight to be swept aside by the application of reason, a vital tradition is necessarily something reflective, adaptive, and open, even while it upholds continuity with its past. The crises by which a tradition is potentially endangered through its openness are precisely the means by which a tradition matures and attains assertibility.

For the purposes of this article, it is significant that this element of MacIntyre's tradition concept emphasises the essential link between the vitality of a tradition and its openness to encounter rival claims, which is also an openness to translation into new times and places. Such an openness, and the crises it could invite, need not be fatal to a tradition's integrity. On the contrary, integrity through continuity is a requirement for surviving an epistemological crisis, and successful navigation of such a crisis in turn strengthens and clarifies a tradition's integrity.

#### **4. Reading MacIntyre along with Reformed voices**

A total integration of the philosophical model into the Reformed tradition is not undertaken here; the sources chosen to serve as conversation partners with MacIntyre are also not presented as an exhaustive portrait

of the identity of the Reformed tradition, or a complete account of the tradition's own concepts for tradition, in any sense. The selected scholars have either written on relevant topics with an argument comparable to MacIntyre's thought (such as Niebuhr and Gerrish) or have explicitly engaged MacIntyre's work (such as Brümmer and Jennings, as well as Smit and Vosloo, who represent a South African engagement).

These sources are brought into conversation with MacIntyre on his tradition concept to explore the possibilities of a Reformed use of the MacIntyrean framework.

#### 4.1 The integrity of Reformed theology?

MacIntyre conceives of a tradition maintaining its integrity through its transformation by an ongoing engagement with its internal goods: that is, an ongoing relating back to its deepest identity. What constitutes the deepest identity of Reformed Christianity is, as MacIntyre suggests, a matter of argumentation, and different answers on different levels are possible: the five *Solas*, or the doctrines of different confessional documents, are possible answers. The very task of identifying a monolithic core identity can be problematised, especially if it is located solely in early modernity and on the European continent.

Rather than prescribing a particular answer for the question of identity, this article follows MacIntyre's reticence to prescribe a universal virtue list and brings him into conversation with Reformed voices to clarify our seeking after identity. The quest, rather than its object, is here to be enlightened.

To express the question that is our first objective in the terms of the theme of the present conference: *by what mirrors can Reformed theology behold its essential identity?* Helmut Richard Niebuhr writes about this deepest identity, which he calls revelation, in *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941). Revelation, in his argument, is the apprehension of God: "... God who discloses Himself to us through history as our knower, our author, our judge and our only saviour" (Niebuhr 1941:111). In a MacIntyrean sense, it is the summary of all internal goods which the tradition aspires to mediate to its recipients. Its primary location is in God's historical relations to human beings; this is the scandal of Christian particularity which requires, as MacIntyre argues for, an internal rationalisation. Niebuhr argues that



only an internal and personal history can be revelatory: “history abstracted from human selves is also abstracted from the divine Self” (1941:54). It cannot be identified with the entire history (which because it contains evil, cannot contain God), but is, instead, that part which makes the whole intelligible.

To seek after revelation is “... to endeavour to deal faithfully with the problem set for Christians in our time by the knowledge of our historical reality” (Niebuhr, 1941: 16). For the Reformed Christian, this search is conducted in the Bible, informed by church history, and interpreting scriptures in the light of the whole canon, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Crucially, there is an ecclesiological dimension to this search which accords with MacIntyre’s requirement for social embeddedness:

... in Protestantism we have long attempted to say what we mean by revelation by pointing to the Scriptures, but we have found that we cannot do so save as we interpret them in a community in which men listen for the word of God in the reading of the Scriptures, or in which men participate in the same spiritual history out of which the record came.” (Niebuhr 1941:38)

The search itself is never wholly concluded; because the Reformed tradition emphasises the perpetual temptation towards idolatry, it always continues to test its answers. One test which Niebuhr suggests (1941:104) is that our identification of revelation should be demonstrably implicit in the theology of the past. It should also be subjected to the tools of systematic and ethical inquiry, as well as to practical inquiry in its application in worship and preaching.

Niebuhr, then, represents the Reformed tradition in a manner that accords well with MacIntyrean theory: it always seeks to measure its identity against the illuminating principle of revelation, which is the apprehension of God (historically extended argument about internal goods?), and that this is always embodied in the church and always tested by her own tools (socially embodied?).

*The Meaning of Revelation* remains mostly unconcerned with the problem of transformation, however. Different voices from within the Reformed tradition can be consulted to expand this account. Vincent Brümmer’s

valedictory lecture, *The Identity of the Christian Tradition*, adopts a view similar to Niebuhr's definition of revelation as the heart of the tradition when he expresses the nature of the problem that transformation potentially poses to its integrity: "... the conviction of Christian belief that the message proclaimed in the life, death, and glorification of Jesus Christ is God's definitive word to mankind. Therefore unless the word proclaimed to men of every successive age and culture is in some significant sense the same word, God's promise is not fulfilled" (Brümmer 1997:6–7; cf. Lash 1973:59).

Brümmer considers three possible solutions to the problem of integrity retained through transformation: an "identity and essence" model, which separates an unchanging essence from mutable accidents; an "identity and continuity" model, which views a tradition's identity as a constantly morphing *Wirkungsgeschichte* that links to the past only in its being passed on, not in retaining an essential similarity to earlier links; and finally, an "identity and origin" model, which Brümmer ultimately opts for (1997:15).

This last option values the continuity model's realism when it comes to inevitable change, but also offers a corrective to its relativism, in that integrity is valued. Instead of an unchanging kernel, as in the essence model, the origin model understands integrity as a holistic recognisability, a phenomenological unity over time: "the unity and coherence of a religious tradition is that of an 'enacted narrative'" (Brümmer 1997:13). Brümmer directly draws from MacIntyre's notion of narrative unity, as well as Saul Kripke's name theory, in developing this idea. Like the continuity model, it requires that developments in a tradition display an unruptured history, but Brümmer suggests a further requirement: that such a sequence of developments should have a fixed point of origin to which it always relates back, in every generation, by which every step of development can measure its faithfulness to the tradition's holistic identity. For Christian traditions, this must be the life and death of Jesus (Brümmer 1997: 150; cf. Kripke 1980.)

Thus far, reading MacIntyre along with Niebuhr and Brümmer has, idiomatically, shown that the Reformed tradition safeguards her integrity when navigating transformation by fixing her mirrors on her deepest identity, found in Christ, and that these mirrors should periodically be

checked when making navigational decisions, to ensure a coherent route through the process of transformation.

But what would “checking the mirrors” entail? How is the tradition to test itself against its point of revelatory origin? What tests are available?

John Henry Newman’s tests in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) are seminal and sweeping: “preservation of the idea”; “continuity of principles”; “power of assimilation”; “early anticipation”; “logical sequence”; “preservative affinity”; and “chronic continuance”; and could provide an attractive model for Reformed reflection on the topic. Many of Newman’s tests would not be offensive to Reformed theology, and something of the logic of providing markers for intellectual viability are also found in Brümmer (1997:2–6), who lists relevance (does it speak to the realities of the present?); adequacy (does the development creatively reformulate the tradition?); intelligibility (is the language thereof familiar and accessible to bearers of the tradition?); and credibility (or, is the developed tradition assertible after the challenges of rival claims?). If one were to add Niebuhr’s requirement that a development should also be implicit in the earlier tradition, it would represent a solid set of criteria for testing integrity.

However, MacIntyre’s construction of his tradition concept on the framework of the virtues holds the potential to shift this issue away from markers of integrity that skew towards the purely intellectual: “What ... sustains and strengthens traditions? What weakens and destroys them? The answer in key part is: the exercise or the lack of exercise of the relevant virtues ... Lack of justice, lack of truthfulness, lack of courage, lack of the relevant intellectual virtues – these corrupt traditions ...” (MacIntyre 1981:222–223)

Virtue is cultivated in and by persons; they are embodiments of the teleological narratives of societies, in that they are excellences which allow the attainment of a tradition’s ends. If viability and orthodoxy, pursued by Brümmer and Newman, represent “relevant intellectual virtues”, then they stand alongside such virtues as justice, truthfulness, and courage as markers of the vitality of a tradition. If, as MacIntyre argues, it is the task of a particular tradition to identify its own particular virtues, which virtues might be considered particular to the Reformed tradition?

Brian Albert Gerrish attempts precisely such an identification in *Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind* (1999), which is a discussion on the habits of mind that Reformed theological education should be cultivating. He argues that, since lists of essential doctrines do not agree over time or space, the essential identity of Reformed Christianity is found in:

... something more constant and even more fundamental than fundamental beliefs; namely, good habits of mind, all of which rest finally on the one foundation which is Jesus Christ” (Gerrish 1999:12).

The five habits of mind that Gerrish identifies (1999:13–20), are: “deferent,” in that the classical sources for theology, such as scripture, the Apostles and Church Fathers, are respected; “self-critical”, in that the tradition remains living and human and therefore fallible, so that conversing with the tradition’s past is not reduced to passive absorption; “open”, in that, in concert with the original practices of Reformed theology’s free borrowing from Luther and Renaissance humanism, she seeks truth wherever it may be found; “practical,” in that Calvin’s paradigmatic Institutes might be understood as a *pietatis summa* rather than a *summa theologiae*, implying that Reformed theology is always engaged with reforming public life; and “evangelical” in that the tradition’s fundamental concern is with the good news that the Word of God became flesh, and “...tradition, as Calvin says, is nothing other than a handing down of the Word of God” (Gerrish 1999: 20).

These virtues, then, are the road markers by whose presence the tradition might be assured that her navigation of transformation has not lost the route that is true to her identity. To these might be added an additional virtue, suggested by MacIntyre: the virtue of “having an adequate sense of the tradition to which one belongs” (1981:223); idiomatically, the virtue of being able to read the map sensibly, to chart the turns already taken, and to creatively plot the possible futures that lie ahead.

#### 4.2 The openness of Reformed theology?

Gerrish’s identification of openness as belonging to the integrity of the Reformed identity, has just been noted, along with MacIntyre’s requirement

that openness to the possibilities of the future belongs to the virtue of possessing a sense of one's tradition. This invites a transition to consider the second of the vital qualities that would allow the Reformed tradition to successfully navigate transformation: her openness.

To give idiomatic expression to the question that is our second objective: *What is the relationship of the Reformed tradition's windows beyond herself, with her mirrors? What does beholding the other do to the self?*

It is central to MacIntyre's account of the rationalisation of traditions through epistemological crises that traditions can only mature if they are open to encountering rival traditions. This is the first sense in which this article proposes that openness is vital to a tradition: namely, openness to engage and be engaged.

With regards to authors already cited, Niebuhr's understanding of revelation as that element which illuminates the identity of the whole does not have as its consequence that only exclusively Reformed sources can be indicative of the tradition's deepest identity: "... the Christian church sins anew ... in attempting to eliminate from its history part of the common life, as when Protestants try to forget medieval Christian history." (Niebuhr 1941:86)." Niebuhr's reason for calling the abandonment of openness sinful is that it frustrates attempts at reconciliation between Christian traditions (1941: 86–88). A tradition that surrenders all commonality thereby loses a potential corrective on entrenched idolatries arising from an exclusionary approach to absolutized integrity. Reformed theology, with its characteristic awareness of the ubiquity of idolatrous sin, should be uniquely sensitive to this way in which integrity and openness are mutually reinforcing.

An openness to engage is therefore linked to a second kind of openness: towards critical self-examination and repentance. The iconoclastic (or *idoloclastic?*) impulse of the Reformed tradition informs her engagement with the world beyond herself: in affirming, critiquing, or reconciling with the claims of rival traditions, as well as in reforming social institutions and realities to bring them into accord with what is confessed about God; but the Reformed tradition also prophetically challenges her own inclination towards idolatry, and reforms herself. In MacIntyrean terms: she is always engaged with dialogically clarifying her own sense of her internal goods.

This insight has driven much of the engagement with MacIntyre from South African Reformed theologians, who see in the historic errors of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa with regards to race and nation precisely such a lapse into idolatry, the wounds of which are not yet fully healed.

Dirkie Smit affirms that a Reformed confession of faith does not serve only to delineate the tradition's particularities and differences from others; rather, Calvin understood that the content confessed is an apprehension of the truth of the gospel itself, addressing and being offered up for the entire church catholic (Smit 2009:300). Pertaining to an openness to reform, Smit recalls the paradigm shift he experienced under the tutelage of Willie Jonker, who taught that responsible traditionalism means doing as Calvin did, for example, and not enshrining the specifics of what Calvin said (Smit 2009:189). This was embodied in a hermeneutical strategy of reading Calvin against Apartheid's form of Calvinism, which for Smit resulted in a rediscovery of the radical liberating potential of Calvin. Here, Smit directly references MacIntyre's tradition concept to account for the possibility of faithfully subverting a tradition's actual identity at the hands of its deepest identity.

Robert Vosloo identifies Apartheid as an epistemological crisis in the MacIntyrean sense for the Reformed Church in South Africa and argues the appeal from both sides of the struggle to Reformed sources illustrates the relevance of MacIntyre's definition of tradition as an argument. Vosloo concludes that the presence of current disputation about the tradition should not be viewed by its contemporary bearers as an indication of the decay of its vitality; it is, rather, the absence of the virtues from these arguments that make way for both "hermeneutically suspect forms of Reformed fundamentalism" and "faddish innovation for its own sake" (2011:18–31; cf. Vosloo 2004). Crucially, an openness to restatement of old formulations is identified as a virtue of Reformed theology, which guided the Reformers' reading of the early church, as is an openness to the prophetic dimensions of seeing the present and the future as *kairotic*. A traditionalism that is not constrained to emulating the past, but is genuinely open to the future, resists the danger of making integrity into an idol.

Thus far in this article, MacIntyre’s work has enjoyed an appreciative reception. In the work of Reformed scholar Willie James Jennings, one finds a point of critique of the legacy of this tradition concept stemming from a characteristically Reformed perspective. Jennings reflects in “Against the Finished Man” (2021), a symposium on his book *After Whiteness* (2020) (the title of which plays on MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*), that:

It offered a path towards cultivating a comprehensive theological identity ... [but] what I saw was less a matter of MacIntyre’s philosophical project and much more a matter of theological longing. I watched people aim their life towards a vision of maturity that bridged an imagined past to current intellectual postures. But the past was not what was actually being brought forward but instead a person held tightly in a dream of coherence and clarity that had merged with the colonial master’s dream of control of spaces (Jennings 2021:1057).

Idoltrous integrity, according to Jennings’ argument (2021: 1054), arises from the desire for comprehensive visions and total accounts, which is also the desire for the power of becoming an eponymous “finished man” (cf. Bonhoeffer 1997:106–108). Where MacIntyre laments the fragmentation of the virtue tradition as a coherent whole, Jennings reframes coming to terms with the reality of fragmentation as a necessary guard against the desire for a tradition masking a desire for power.

In summary, these scholars show how the integrity, and the openness of the Reformed tradition are integrated and mutually reinforcing: to look backwards, into the mirror of tradition, is done with the purpose of clarifying the way forward, which is the future imaginatively seen through its windows. Simultaneously, to travel forward through transformation is to deepen the tradition’s grasp of its deepest identity, retroactively clarifying which parts of the path taken thus far were essential to the route, and which were detours that could have jeopardised the journey as a whole.

## 5. Mirrors and windows for navigating transformation

With MacIntyre's model established and read along with relevant Reformed scholars on the topic, this article now presents a potential and partial synthesis:

The Reformed tradition, in translating itself across new times and places, thereby faces the opposite dangers of the sacrifice of her openness to safeguard an absolute integrity, or the sacrifice of her integrity to safeguard an absolute openness. Heuristically, these vital elements might be compared with classical markers of the church: *holiness* expresses the calling of the church to obedience to God, in accordance with which she maintains her integrity; and *catholicity* expresses the generality of Christ's church, and the foundation of all truth on Christ the Word, who compels her openness. The church, if she is healthy, requires both her holiness and catholicity to remain intact throughout her navigation of inevitable transformation.

MacIntyre's tradition concept, which imagines a tradition to be a historically extended and socially embodied argument about the deepest identity of the tradition, and that a tradition matures and attains assertibility for its claims through navigating epistemological crises brought on by encounter with rival traditions, accords well with the basic logic of the Reformed dictum: *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est secundum verbum Dei* (the Reformed church must always be reforming according to the Word of God) (cf. Koffeman, 2015). This renewal principle, popularised by Karl Barth, communicates something akin to MacIntyre's notion of a historically extended seeking after the true meaning of a tradition's identity by contemplating its internal goods. Barth (1956:705) expresses its function as a formal principle of continuing reformation: "*Semper reformari* ... does not mean always to go with the time, to let the current spirit of the age be the judge of what is true and fake ... it means never to grow tired of returning not to the origin in time, but to the origin in substance of the community".

The work of those Reformed scholars cited in this article can be drawn on to fill out the integration of MacIntyre with Reformed thinking:

The deepest identity of the Reformed tradition, on which she is founded and towards which she bends, is (per Niebuhr) the revelation of God's salvific



self-disclosure in history. This revelation is found in the communal and Spirit-led reading of scripture and is not identifiable with the entirety of the Reformed tradition's internal history, or the entirety of the claims of the tradition. This is because the tradition also confesses, from her reckoning with the reality of idolatry's ubiquity in the hearts of humans, including custodians who love the tradition and reconfigure her only out of loyalty, that the tradition itself contains error and evil, and neither are in God.

Holiness, which is the integrity of the church, depends on the clarity with which this revelation is adhered to. Holiness requires, given the constant propensity of humankind to be tempted into idolatry, precisely that our apprehension of revelation should always keep being examined (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est ...*) The primary sign of holiness in the Reformed tradition is the presence of her virtues among her bearers, which are those excellences which allow her practices to attain her end, which is the apprehension of God. These include the Christian moral virtues of charity, justice, truthfulness, and courage, as well as intellectual virtues, or habits of mind. For the Reformed, these are (per Gerrish): to be deferent to the tradition's classical sources; as well as self-critical of the tradition and even its classics; to be open to truth even from beyond the tradition; to be practical in how its confessions are committed to in the form of church orders and programs of social reformation; and to be evangelical, that is, committed to the gospel and the Word that is our foundation (... *secundum verbum Dei*).

Hence, it is in constantly referring back to her deepest identity in Christ as her origin point and the fulcrum of meaning, and measuring all developments against this identity, that the Reformed tradition maintains (per Brümmer) a narrative unity of her holiness or integrity over time, and across transformations. Catholicity, which is the openness of the church, is (per Niebuhr) crucial for the ongoing work of reconciliation and strengthens instead of imperilling the integrity of the Reformed tradition when the tradition is allowed to seek truth through encounters with rival traditions. The prophetic imagination enables (per Vosloo) the bearers of the tradition to navigate epistemological crises that might arise thereby, through creatively imagining future reformulations that resolve these crises in a faithful manner. Such encounters may also (per Smit and Jennings) remind the Reformed tradition of her particular emphasis on the fallibility

of human traditions, so that catholicity may also be a guard against total accounts of the tradition, which are in fact idolatries of integrity.

In this way, the MacIntyrean model, informed by the Reformed tradition's own resources, offers an encouragement to a tradition that might be anxious about current disputations. These arguments may accordingly be seen as the tradition relating back to her deepest identity in a search for identity, not as an indication of decay. Bearers of the Reformed tradition need not, in their concern for their tradition's vitality, seek to quiet every argument; on the contrary, what should be sought is that these arguments be waged with excellence.

If the South African Reformed churches are concerned about their tradition, they should work on inculcating the Reformed virtues in worshippers. The tradition-constituted will in turn become tradition-constituting, and thereby, informed by a tradition concept that understands that integrity and openness are mutually reinforcing, navigate the Reformed tradition's navigation of transformation faithfully.

## Conclusion

This article has read MacIntyre in light of the Reformed tradition, bringing his tradition concept into conversation with Reformed scholars, seeking therein after mirrors onto the identity of the Reformed tradition, and windows into the potential that lies yet beyond where the tradition is currently. It has suggested that MacIntyre's model accords well with the dictum *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est secundum verbum Dei*, and that the model informed thereby, integrated into the Reformed tradition, can imbue her thinking about tradition with a robust appreciation for the way in which her integrity and her openness belong together. Such a Reformed reading of MacIntyre potentially offers a hopeful path forward for South African Reformed churches to maintain and strengthen her vitality as she navigates her current disputations, and what transformations they might bring about.

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