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Tradition, Knowledge, and Community

Mark T. Mitchell's *The Limits of Liberalism: Tradition, Individualism, and the Crisis of Freedom** (2019) is published by the University of Notre Dame Press. He is also the author of *Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing** (ISI Press, 2006) and *The Politics of Gratitude: Scale, Place and Community in a Global Age** (Potomac Books, 2012). Much of *The Limits of Liberalism* examines the nature of human rationality, which, he argues, is always situated. (As one of our earlier guests commented, there is no epistemological Switzerland.) As a result, Mitchell writes, "We can never fully divest ourselves of tradition and at the same time remain rational beings." He argues that the Enlightenment's account of objective reason "provides a false conception of knowing and thus a false conception of the knower. . . . The liberal self is born of this wrong turn." Mitchell cites Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the liberal view of reason, which insists that reason is either "impersonal, universal, and disinterested or it is the unwitting representative of particular interests, making their drive to power by its false pretensions to neutrality and disinterestedness." Mitchell concurs with MacIntyre's observation that this ignores a third option: "the possibility that reason can only move towards being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for genuinely rational inquiry and more especially for moral and theological inquiry a prior commitment is required and the conclusions which emerge as inquiry progresses will of course have been partially and crucially predetermined by the nature of this initial commitment."

At the beginning of his concluding chapter "The Incoherence of Liberalism and the Response of Tradition," Mitchell includes some discussion of Josef Pieper's *Tradition: Concept and Claim** (originally published in 1970, currently in print from St. Augustine's Press). In that book, Pieper stresses the dynamic quality of tradition: "To hand down does not mean simply to give somebody something, to bring it, share it, or deliver it. It means rather to deliver something that has previously arrived in your hands, which was consigned to you; to share something that was handed over and handed down; to hand on something that you received — so that it can be received and handed on yet again." Pieper further warns: "no one who wants to hand down a tradition successfully should talk about 'tradition.'"

Disc 1

1 Introduction

- 2 **Mark T. Mitchell**, on the dangers of the pursuit of freedom unrestrained by traditions which convey an understanding of the meaning of the human
- 3 **Hans Boersma**, on how theological reflection on the beatific vision has oriented Christian anthropology
- 4 **Henry T. Edmondson, III**, on political themes that emerge in the writings of Flannery O'Connor

Disc 2

- 1 **Brian Clayton and Douglas Kries**, on the common and faulty assumption that faith and reason cannot be reconciled
- 2 **Conor Sweeney**, on why baptism is the key to sustaining vibrant faith in the context of postmodern nihilism
- 3 **Carole Vanderhoof**, on the literate and layered writings of Dorothy L. Sayers, starting with the Lord Peter Wimsey novels

Later in his book, Pieper establishes Christianity as the foundation of all sacred traditions and hence of all tradition. He quotes Augustine's *Retractationes*: "The very thing which is now called the 'Christian religion' existed among the ancients. Indeed it has never been absent since the beginning of the human race, until Christ appeared in the flesh. That was when the true religion, which already existed, began to be called the 'Christian religion.'" The last sentence in Pieper's book: "[R]eal unity among human beings has its roots in nothing else but the common possession of tradition in the strict sense — I mean, our sharing in common the sacred tradition that goes back to God's words."

more on

Other books mentioned

Hans Boersma's *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition** (2018) is published by Eerdmans. *A Political Companion to Flannery O'Connor** (2017), edited by Henry T. Edmondson, III, is published by University Press of Kentucky. *Two Wings: Integrating Faith and Reason** (2018) is published by Ignatius Press. Conor Sweeney's *Abiding the Long Defeat: How to Evangelize Like a Hobbit in a Disenchanted Age** (2018) is published by Angelico Press. The anthology of excerpts from the work of Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Gospel in Dorothy L. Sayers: Selections from Her Novels, Plays, Letters, and Essays* (2018), edited by Carole Vanderhoof, is published by Plough Publishing House.

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