THE CHURCH ON EARTH: The Roots of Community

by Colin Gunton

1. The Drive towards Monism

'What on earth is the church for?' In Lent 1986 there took place an inter-Church study programme under that heading. The question, however, appears to carry a remarkable assumption: that we know what the Church is. At one level, of course, we do, and can answer fairly accurately the question of what it is in a number of ways, in the terms of sociological and historical analysis, for example. But at another level there is a case for saying that the question of the being of the Church is one of the most neglected topics of theology. We speak of the Church as 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic', but disagree on how the concepts should be understood because their meaning is determined by different assumptions and theologies. Similarly, while the choice of metaphors does make a difference—classically in the case of the Second Vatican Council's use of the notion of the people of God as a control on the metaphor of the body—there is little doubt that they too can be used in different ways and therefore with varying ontological content.

The case to be argued in this paper is that the manifest inadequacy of the theology of the Church derives from the fact that it has never seriously and consistently been rooted in a conception of the being of God as triune. Here, certainly in the British context, the deficiencies of ecclesi-

ology are matched only by a failure to give due place as a matter of general practice to trinitarian theology. There is a widespread assumption that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the difficulties of Christian belief: a kind of intellectual hurdle to be leaped before orthodoxy can be acknowledged. If that is the case, it results from a failure to realise both the interrelationship of the doctrine with other theological topics and its centrality for all areas of belief, worship and life. Because the Trinity has been divorced from other doctrines, it has fallen into disrepute, except as the recipient of lip service. But because it has been neglected, the Church has appropriated only a part of its rich store of possibilities for nourishing a genuine theology of community.

The first evidence for the thesis is that Harnack, who, unlike some others, devotes much space in his History of Dogma to the development of ecclesiology, can find little systematic reflection upon it in Eastern theology, and points out—accurately—that there is no dogmatic treatment of it in John of Damascus' On the Orthodox Faith. In the West, attention centred, as it has ever since, on the clergy, and it is not much of an oversimplification to say that ecclesiological discussion in our time nearly always centres on, or degenerates into, disputes about clergy or bishops, the result being that the question of the nature or being of the Church is rarely allowed to come into sight. What then is missing? The answer can be approached by way of a contrast. The efforts of early work on christology were devoted to an examination of the question of the being of Christ: of who and what kind of being he is in relation to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the rest of the human race.

Similarly, trinitarian reflection centred on the nature of God and of his relation to the world. Together, the two central strands in early Christian thinking have some claim to have generated an ontology that was distinctively different from those prevailing in the ancient world and, though in greater continuity, yet different also from the ontology (-ies?) implicit in the Old Testament writings. Did anything similar take place in ecclesiology? There is some case for saying that, at the very least, a process of similar rigour was not carried through; and in some cases that here was a sphere where, far from developing a distinctive theology of community, the theologians mainly conformed their views to those of the world around, with baneful consequences. Here, if anywhere, the thesis associated with the name of Harnack, that the implications of the gospel came to be overlaid with an ideology foreign to them, is more than amply confirmed. Evidence in the East for the development of ecclesiology is not easy to find, chiefly for the reason that there appears to be none. Harnack, without giving references, asserts the East's acceptance of 'the fancy that the earthly hierarchy was the image of the heavenly'.

The idea of the Church that had the most vitality in the East was that of something which, regarded as active was "the lawful steward of the mysteries ..." and conceived of as passive, was the image of the "heavenly hierarchy". Too much should not be made of unsubstantiated allusions to hierarchy. But Harnack's comment is justified, in that the letters breathe a spirit of authoritarian commitment to the unity of the Church above all else. Appeals to scripture are allegorised or arbitrary (Cyprian likes texts which can be employed against heretics and schismatics—i.e. anyone outside the 'enclosed garden', 69:2), and so far as I can see, rarely to the texts which express the nature of the Church as a community. The theological basis is equally jejune, with Cyprian's God operating mainly as a principle of unity. As von Campenhausen has shown, such remnants of the primitive ecclesiology as do survive are found in

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1Harnack, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 279.
3Harnack, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 279.
4In explicit contradiction of dominical command and example, as in their anti-papal polemics Puritans like John Owen were not reluctant to point out. See his Of Toleration, in Works, edited by W.H. Goold, Edinburgh, 1862, Vol. VIII, pp. 163–206.
5Harnack, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 85, note 1. Harnack recognises, as should we, the constraints under which Cyprian was operating, but that is not the point here.
7See especially the approving quotation in Letters 49:2 of the confession 'that there is one God and that there is one Christ the Lord ..., one Holy Spirit, and that there ought to be one bishop in the Catholic Church'.

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Cyprian's conception of the relationship of mutual love of the bishops, who accordingly become the 'real' Church.

When we come to Augustine, the picture is more complicated. A conception of the Church as the community of believers is undoubtedly important for him, but it is overlaid by developments deriving from the Church's change of status after Constantine. The official recognition of the Church meant that it was no longer certain whether it was a community of believers at all, so that it appeared rather to be a mixed community of the saved and the lost. This in turn led to two developments: the first a strong stress on the institutional nature of the Church, which fostered a tendency, with us to this day, to see the clergy as the real Church. The Church does not have its being from the congregating of the faithful—because not all of the faithful are faithful!—but from its relation to a hierarchical head. The mixed nature of the Church necessitates in turn an imposed, rather than freely accepted, discipline. The second is the platonising distinction between the visible and invisible Church. The real Church—represented by the clergy—is the invisible Church, those known only to God, the elect. It is ironical, but not surprising, that such a conception, too, required increasing stress on the institutional and clerical organisation of the body.

The conclusion must be that the conception of God as a triune community made no substantive contribution to the doctrine of the Church. It is a semi-Harnackian conclusion in the sense that it shares Harnack's views that the original teaching of Christianity was overlaid with a philosophy that was foreign to it, but qualifies it in an important respect. Harnack’s view, which is apparent throughout his great History of Dogma, was that the whole apparatus of early dogmatic theology was the imposition of a false metaphysic upon the gospel. I would hold rather, with John Zizioulas, that the development of the doctrine of the Trinity was the creation, true to the gospel, of a distinctively Christian ontology; but would add that its insights were for the most part not extended into ecclesiology. What happened was that the vacuum was readily filled by rival ontologies. There appear to have been two complementary influences. The first is the neoplatonic doctrine of reality as a graded hierarchy. From where, if not from such an influence, did the notion of hierarchy derive? There is scarcely biblical evidence worthy of the name. But Aquinas implies, without ever spelling the matter out, that the hierarchy of the Church—that there is in the Church an ontological grading of persons—is modelled on that of heaven.

The second is the legal-political, which we have already met in Cyprian and will meet again. It is sometimes claimed that up to and including Aquinas in the West the conception of the Church was largely legal. The outcome can with little exaggeration be said to have been catastrophic, for the essence of a political institution, defined by its law, is that it employs constraint in order to maintain its unity. It can, therefore, be argued—with much support from the actual course of historical events—that the monistic drive with which this ideology has imbued the Church has, far from being the cement of Church unity, in fact been its solvent, because rebellion against its constraints has had its inspiration in Christian sources. It is then quite reasonable to speculate whether things might have been otherwise if the advice of Gamaliel in Acts (5:38) and Paul to the Corinthians had been heeded. In his Of Toleration and in dispute with Bellarmine, John Owen

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points out that according to 1 Cor. 11:19 'heresies' are 'for the manifesting of those that are approved, not the destroying of those that are not ...' Quoting 2 Tim. 2:25, 'Waiting with all patience upon them that oppose themselves, if at any time God will give them repentance ...', Owen comments: 'Imprisoning, banishing, slaying, is scarcely a patient waiting.' The point of this citation of past controversy is not to raise old spectres, but to argue that bad ecclesiastical practice is at least in part the outcome of bad theology, and that awareness of this is a necessary step for modern ecclesiology.

2. The 'Heretical' Contribution

The reference to heresy and its treatment brings us to the next stage of the argument, and the claim that there is much wisdom to be found in the history of those who have been called heretics because their teaching and behaviour endangered not so much the creed as the seamless unity of the institution. If the effect of Constantine's settlement was a movement towards the clericalism of the invisible-visible polarity, the waning of that social order is calling attention again to the need to rethink the structures of the Church as a community. If we look at some representative figures, we shall see a pattern beginning to emerge. First among them is Tertullian, whose denial that the Church consists in the number of its bishops is often cited. But its context is also important. The polemic of the De Pudicitia concerns in large measure the abuses consequent upon the arrogation of the power of the keys to the clergy. Tertullian realises that the other side of the coin is the need to call attention to the fact that the Church is first of all a community:

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The church itself, properly and principally, the Spirit himself, in whom is the trinity of the one divinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (The Spirit) gathers (congregat) that church which the Lord has made to consist in 'three'. And so every number which has combined together into this faith is accounted a church by its author and sanctifier.

The point is obscure, and the Latin almost untranslatable. But its point is clear in drawing links between three terms: the trinity, the community of faith and its free act of congregating.

Harnack's remarks on Novatian are equally illuminating, because they make a comment about the institutionalising of the Church and the relation between Church and gospel. Novatian appears to be in a measure of continuity with the Tertullian of the De Pudicitia on the question of the forgiveness of sins. He has a different ecclesiology from his opponents because he has a different soteriology and eschatology. According to Harnack, he operates, on the one hand, with a theology that limits the power of the bishop to absolve because he believes that gross sin must be left to the eschatological judgement of God; and, on the other, with a view of the Church not so much as the place where people are prepared for salvation (the 'orthodox' conception) as the community where salvation is now being realised—in both cases, positions which arguably have greater biblical support than those of his opponents.

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'To the Novatians . . . membership of the Church is not the sine qua non of salvation, but it really secures it in some measure.' Harnack's comment reaches the heart of the matter:

His proposition that none but God can forgive sins does not depotentiate the idea of the Church: but secures both her proper religious significance and the full sense of her dispensations of grace: it limits her powers and extent in favour of her content. Refusal of her forgiveness under certain circumstances—though this does not exclude the confident hope of God's mercy—can only mean that in Novatian's view this forgiveness is the foundation of salvation and does not merely avert the certainty of perdition. 12

As Harnack represents it, therefore, Novatian's position is a denial of the Constantinian view of the Church that we have met in this connection: it is not a mixed community existing in some contingent relationship to the 'real' Church but 'As the assembly of the baptised, who have received God's forgiveness, the Church must be a real communion of salvation and of saints . . .' (ibid.). In that respect, we can see a real link between this early protestor against the development of ecclesiology and the concern of, for example, the Puritans with Church discipline. It is surely not a historical accident that Western Christendom has thrown up a series of movements whose extremes have sometimes dabbled in millenialist violence, but whose more orthodox branches, labelled as heretical because of the extreme narrowness of the institutional definition of orthodoxy, have dedicated themselves to the same kind of community ecclesiology that seems to underlie the arguments of both Tertullian and Novatian. 13

What is theologically at stake in this contradistinction of 'orthodox' and 'heretics'? The heart of the matter is pneumatological. Somewhere between the disputants is a major difference on the way in which the Spirit is conceived to constitute the Church. On the one side is a drive for unity, and a corresponding and growing emphasis on the structure of the institution; on the other a rebelliousness deriving from a different priority. To each corresponds a difference in the temporal framework, the conception of history, of the two sides. The one is increasingly dualistic: this life is a preparation for the next, a training ground for a future destiny. The other stresses more strongly the community as the place where the conditions of the life to come may be realised in the here and now. The reason for the divergence is the major deficiency in the development of pneumatology in the West, certainly in so far as it is measured against the New Testament. In the latter, there is considerable emphasis on the eschatological dimensions of the Spirit as the one by whose agency the life of the age to come is made real in the present. When that is lost, the Spirit tends to be institutionalised, so that in place of the free, dynamic, personal and particular agency of the Spirit, he is made into a substance which becomes the possession of the Church. It can be argued, then, that the criticism of the mainstream common to many of the 'heretical' movements of European Church history is that they see the institution as claiming too much of a realisation of eschatology, 14 while

12 Harnack, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 119. Harnack's diagnosis is confirmed by a similar report made by von Campenhausen of Cyprian's position, that 'the assurance of real here-and-now forgiveness was replaced by a mere likelihood and possibility of salvation', op. cit., p. 188.


14 The underlying theological problem is that historical churches make dogmatic claims on the basis of an appeal to a history whose actual course often appears to contradict the claims.
expecting too little of the community as a whole. It is significant that the extreme millenarian sects are like the official institution in claiming on their side too a realisation of the last things. Both alike deny the freedom of the Spirit and the contingency and fallibility of their embodiment of the Church. Corresponding to the imbalance in ecclesi-ology and pneumatology that this reveals there is, inevitably, an equally problematic christology. How that may be conceived to be is the subject of the next stage of the enquiry.

3. Christ, the Spirit and the Church
When we seek the christological dimensions of ecclesi-ology, the enquiry is complicated by the fact that there are two interlocking factors in operation. There is first the matter of what can be called the historical determination of the Church, the way in which we may suppose that in the economy of things the Church was instituted by Jesus, and that, of course, means a Jesus conceived to have been invested with divine power or authority. Most would hold to the fact of the instituting; disagreements arise over the manner and character of the action, and how it affects the present. Second, distinguishable but not separable from the first, is the way the Church is conceived to be patterned or moulded by the shape and direction of Jesus’ life and its outcome: here the stress is as much on the dogmatic as on the historical significance of Jesus.

The effect of a belief in the christological determination of the Church according to the first, historical, category, is to be found in a number of places. Its force is determined by what is believed that Jesus is doing in, for example, choosing twelve disciples. If, on the one hand, the twelve represent a reconstituted Israel, the emphasis will be on the creation of a historical community—as, for example, it is understood in Schleiermacher; if, on the other hand, the disciples are the first of an order of clergy, to whom is transmitted authority over the community, a more strongly clerical ecclesiology will—and did—emerge. Even at this stage of historical enquiry we are presented with a dogmatic question, that of the end and direction of Jesus’ exercise of instituting authority. Both of the interpretations we have noted can be employed to create or to attempt to create direct causal and therefore ontological and logical links between past historical events and present conditions. But both are questionable. There is considerable doubt whether direct links should be drawn between past historical happenings and consequent ecclesiologies. The attempts of denominations to trace their Church order to dominical institution are now discredited, though not in such a way as to prevent the continuation of the practice. Worse, such a procedure runs the danger of introducing a rent in the fabric of history, overstressing the newness of the Church and underplaying its continuity with Israel. It is worth noting here that in connection with his point that Jesus institutes the Church, John Zizioulas has remarked that even Jesus has to be freed from past history.

Dogmatically—and now we move directly into the second of the factors which operate in this sphere—the point develops as follows. Christology’s tendency is to represent a reconstituted Israel, the emphasis will be on the creation of a historical community—as, for example, it is understood in Schleiermacher; if, on the other hand, the disciples are the first of an order of clergy, to whom is transmitted authority over the community, a more strongly clerical ecclesiology will—and did—emerge. Even at this stage of historical enquiry we are presented with a dogmatic question, that of the end and direction of Jesus’ exercise of instituting authority. Both of the interpretations we have noted can be employed to create or to attempt to create direct causal and therefore ontological and logical links between past historical events and present conditions. But both are questionable. There is considerable doubt whether direct links should be drawn between past historical happenings and consequent ecclesiologies. The attempts of denominations to trace their Church order to dominical institution are now discredited, though not in such a way as to prevent the continuation of the practice. Worse, such a procedure runs the danger of introducing a rent in the fabric of history, overstressing the newness of the Church and underplaying its continuity with Israel. It is worth noting here that in connection with his point that Jesus institutes the Church, John Zizioulas has remarked that even Jesus has to be freed from past history.

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16 Zizioulas, op. cit., p. 130: ‘Now if becoming history is the particularity of the Son in the economy, what is the contribution of the Spirit? Well, precisely the opposite: it is to liberate the Son and the economy from the bondage of history. If the Son dies on the cross, thus succumbing to the bondage of historical existence, it is the Spirit which raises him from the dead. The Spirit is the beyond history, and when he acts in history he does so in order to bring into history the last days, the eschaton.’ Op. cit., p. 130.
universalise, and the way in which christology universalises ecclesiology determines the way in which we conceive of the createdness and, consequently, catholicity of the Church. Something of the force of the matter can be seen with the eyes given us by the doctrine of election. The logic of Barth’s claim that ‘God is none other than the One who in His Son or Word elects Himself, and in and with Himself elects His people’ has often been taken to imply a doctrine of universal salvation. The moment of truth in the contention is that if election is ordered christologically, and with greater emphasis on the divine Christ than on the human Jesus of Nazareth, the fate of us all appears to have been predetermined in eternity. A like ordering of ecclesiology to a monophysite or docetically tending christology has even more disastrous effects, and if I discern such monophysite tendencies in the christology underlying the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, it is not to suggest that the error is only found in the Catholic tradition. ‘As the assumed nature... serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a somewhat similar way, does the social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ...’

What kind of ecclesiology would derive from a greater stress on the fact that the ecclesiological significance of Jesus derives equally from the humanity of the incarnate? To hold, with Chalcedon and the Letter to the Hebrews, that Jesus is without sin does not imply that he is omniscient, or even infallible. ‘But of that day... no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father’ (Mk.13:32). It is part of the being of a human person to be contingent and fallible (though not, of course, to be sinful). If our christology take on board the full implications of the contingency and fallibility of Jesus, what of the Church? In view of the temptations and the trial in Gethsemane, may we claim even indefectibility of Jesus? He did, indeed, escape defection. But how? Not through some inbuilt divine programming, though that is the way it has often been made to appear, but by virtue of his free acceptance of the Spirit’s guidance. How far then may the Church, consisting as it does of still sinful people, claim more than we claim for him?

A second area in which we may examine the effect of the christological determination of ecclesiology is in the area of authority. The modern Church must acknowledge with due penitence that it has rarely exercised authority after the manner of Jesus of Nazareth. To discover whether there is any theological reason for this—any reason, that is, other than attributing it to human sinfulness alone—we return to the question of the relation of christology and pneumatology. What is the relation between the Spirit and the Church? Sometimes it has appeared that because a logical link has been claimed between Spirit and institution, the institution has made too confident claims to be possessed of divine authority. The outcome, as we saw in the previous section, has been too ‘realised’ an eschatology of the institution, too near a claim for a coincidence of the Church’s action with the action of God. Against such a tendency it must be emphasised that, as christology universalises, the direction of pneumatology is to particularise. The action of the Spirit is to anticipate, in the present and by means of the finite and contingent, the things of the age to come. This is true even christologically: it is only through the Spirit that the human actions of Jesus become ever and again the acts of God. Has the historical
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Church made the mistake of claiming a premature universality for her works and words instead of praying for the Spirit and leaving the outcome to God?\(^\text{19}\) Certainly, as James Whyte has argued, untenable and circular claims have been made for the operation of the Spirit in relation to the Church. He summarises the logic of the statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on authority.

The decisions of councils or pope on fundamental matters of faith are not true because they are authoritative. They are authoritative because they are true. They are true because they are authentic interpretations of apostolic faith and witness. They are authentic interpretations of apostolic faith and witness because the Holy Spirit guards from error those who have been given the authority to make such pronouncements.

He points out that such arguments are not only circular and self-justifying, but are dogmatically flawed, in making too much of the divinity of the Church, too little of its humanity.\(^\text{20}\)

What is required, therefore, is a reconsideration of the relation of pneumatology and christology, with a consequent reduction of stress on the Church’s institution by Christ and a greater emphasis on its constitution by the Spirit. In such a way we may create fewer self-justifying and historicising links with the past and give more stress to the necessity for the present particularities of our churchly arrangements to be constituted by the Spirit. Such a reconsideration would begin by re-examining the relation of christology and pneumatology in general. The persistent vice of Western theology has been, because it is so


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christologically oriented, a tendency to premature universalising, and in that respect the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* are at one with the tradition to which they take exception. The form that the universalising has taken has been docetic in direction, producing a tendency to conceive the motive force, so to speak, of Jesus’ life as being the eternal Word. The outcome, as we know so well, is that his humanity becomes problematic: it appears to be almost conceptually inevitable that it is either loosely joined to the Word as in classic Nestorianism or overridden by it. Modern critics of the whole tradition, attempting to correct the balance by an appeal to the historical Jesus have made the mistake of generalising too soon from the supposed historical base, and have turned Jesus into an instance of some universal characteristic. What is needed is, rather, a greater emphasis in the action of the Holy Spirit towards Jesus as the source of the particularity and so historicity of his humanity.\(^\text{21}\)

In view of the fact that the ecclesiology of John Owen will concern us later, it is not inappropriate to note here that his christology, in this respect anticipating by a century and a half that of Edward Irving, attempts precisely that reordering. In the first place, Owen limits the direct operation of the Word on the human reality of Jesus—in some contrast to Athanasius’ incautious talk of the Word’s ‘wielding his body’, using it as an ‘instrument’,\(^\text{22}\) talk that was, of course, formalised by Apollinaris to rather different effect. In answer to those who would in effect make the Holy Spirit redundant in christology Owen holds

\(^{21}\) It seems to me to be no accident that Schleiermacher, the father of modernist christology, was profoundly uncomfortable with the concrete Jewishness of Jesus. He was hurrying on to higher things. See *The Christ in Faith*, translated by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, Edinburgh, 1918, p. 384.

\(^{22}\) Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 17,43.
that 'The only singular immediate act of the person of the Son on the human nature was the assumption of it into subsistence with himself'. One implication of this is an assertion of the hypostatic union which does not entail 'a transfusion of the properties of one nature into the other, nor real physical communication of divine essential excellencies unto the humanity'. The humanity remains authentically human and is not subverted by the immanently operating Word. Wherein, then, consists its capacity to do the work of God? 'The Holy Ghost ... is the immediate, peculiar, efficient cause of all external divine operations: for God worketh by his Spirit, or in him immediately applies the power and efficacy of the divine excellencies unto their operation ..."'23

Such a conception does much to create space for a conception of the humanity of Jesus which gives due emphasis to his freedom, particularly and contingency: they are enabled by the (transcendent) Spirit rather than determined by the (immanent) word. It also has important implications for the doctrine of the Church, which has, in most times and places been tempted—and, unlike Jesus, has usually succumbed—to behave as if she were immune from error. And if the Spirit which constitutes the Church is the one who was responsible for the shape of Jesus' life, we are still free to teach that he will give the Church a christomorphic direction. But it will be a different shape from the authoritarian one of the past, because it will be more oriented to the humanity of the saviour. It is some such concern which, despite its relative lack of pneumatological content, has informed the ecclesiology of John Howard Yoder. In *The Politics of Jesus* his concern was to argue that the Church’s exercise of power should take its direction from the way in which Jesus bore himself in face of the political forces of his day.24 In more recent times he has turned his attention more explicitly to ecclesiology, arguing for a voluntary community which lives from the historical particularity of its origins.25 All such enterprises enable us to reappropriate an ecclesiology of the humanity of Christ. That is the first and crying need if responses to the collapse of Christendom are not to take the form of new authoritarianisms, as they are indeed doing. Christology, then is the starting point. But of itself it does not take us far enough along the road, because we are seeking an ontology, some understanding of the nature of the Church, that is rooted in the being of God. Christology is only the starting point, because it is so closely related to the question of the status of the events from which the Church originated. If we wish to say something of what kind of sociality the Church is we must move from a discussion of the relation of christology to pneumatology to an enquiry into what it is that makes the Church what it is: and that first necessitates a move from the economic to the immanent Trinity; or from the ontic to the ontological.

4. *Towards an Ontology of the Church*

The argument stands as follows: that on 'economic' grounds one source of the weakness of the ecclesiological tradition has been identified. An over weighting of the christological as against the pneumatological determinants of ecclesiology together with an over-emphasis on the divine over against the human Christ has led to a ‘docetic’ doctrine of the Church. To recapitulate the argument of previous sections, it can also be said that much ecclesiology

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25 John Howard Yoder, op. cit.
has been dominated by monistic or hierarchical conceptions of the Church, whose ontological basis is to be found in either neoplatonism or some other non-personal metaphysic. Where there is no explicitly Christian theological ontology, an implicit and foreign one will fill and has filled the vacuum. The contention is, accordingly, that a more satisfactory ontological basis will be found if we pay attention to the doctrine of the Trinity, which was, when first formulated, the means to an ontology alternative to those of the intellectual worlds in which Christianity once took shape, and must now reshape its form of life if it is to be adequate to the challenge of modern conditions. The doctrine of the Trinity, as it comes to us from the Cappadocian theologians, teaches us that the first thing to be said about the being of God is that it consists in personal communion. ‘Communion is for Basil an ontological category. The nature of God is communion.’

Suppose, then, that we begin with the hypothesis that the sole proper ontological basis for the Church is the being of God, who is what he is as the communion of Father, Son and Spirit. Where does it lead us? Great care must be taken in drawing out the implications of such a claim, and in particular the temptation must be resisted to draw conclusions of a logicising kind: appealing directly to the unity of the three as one God as a model for a unified Church; or, conversely (and, I believe, more creatively, though still inadequately) arguing from the distinctions of the persons for an ecclesiology of diversity, along the lines of the expression currently popular in ecumenical circles of ‘reconciled diversity’. That would be to move too quickly, playing with abstract and mathematically determined concepts and exercising no theological control over their employment.


1. The crucial intermediate stage involves a trinitarian theology of creation. As many great thinkers, Coleridge prominent among them, have realised, a theology of the Trinity has important implications for the ontology of the creature. First, it forbids all monistic or pantheistic identification of the creation with the creator. More important, perhaps, in refusing to develop a logical link between creator and creation, it prevents back-door collapses into monism. The reason for this is to be found in the second, more positive, point, that the doctrine of the Trinity replaces a logical conception of the relation between God and the world with a personal one, and accordingly allows us to say two things of utmost importance: that God and the world are ontologically distinct realities; but that distinctness, far from being the denial of relations, is its ground. Such relation as there is is personal, not logical, the product of the free and personal action of the triune God. The world is therefore contingent, finite and what it is only by virtue of its continuing dynamic dependence upon its creator; or, to say the same thing in another way, by the free action of the Spirit on and towards it.

An inescapable characteristic of the Church in this context is that as part of the creation it, too, is finite and contingent. That is to repeat the point that was made in the previous section as an implication of conceiving the Church in the image of the humanity of Christ. The gospel is that the Father interrelates with his world by means of the frail humanity of his Son, and by his Spirit enables anticipations in the present of the promised perfection of the creation. What, then, is it for the Church to reflect, as part of the creation, the being of God? The answer, as John Zizioulas has shown, lies in the word koinonia, perhaps best translated as community (or perhaps sociality, compare...
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the Russian Sobornost). One implication of the threefold community that is God is its dynamism: the being of God is a community of energies, of perichoretic interaction. As such, it is difficult to conceive its consistency with any static hierarchy. Such a hierarchy tends to generate or justify an ideology of permanent relations of subordination, as is instanced by Richard Roberts' telling use of the Hegelian phenomenology of the relation between lord and bondsman. Commenting on Kenneth Kirk's ecclesiology, he writes:

The ministry has a final status in relation to the church; the Essential Ministry of the Episcopate creates and has contingent upon it a Dependent Ministry of the Presbyteriate and then, beyond that are the distant, dependent laity. 12

We may glimpse behind such a conception further echoes of the imperial analogy, and there may also be traces of a misuse of trinitarian appropriations. But that takes us to a further stage in the argument.

2. We have seen that a central feature of the conception of the Church is the way in which its historical shape is formed by its (supposed) relation to the economic Trinity: to the Spirit-led Jesus in its past and to the Christ-shaped Spirit in its present. But caution has also been advised about arguing directly to the Church from the immanent Trinity. That is particularly important when appropriations are attempted from supposed patterns of relationship between persons of the Godhead. Moves of that kind can be used to justify theologically the dependent status of the laity because it is supposed that the hierarchy is in some way more directly a reflection (ikon?) of the Father or Son. 28 The point can be illustrated by Derrick Sherwin Bailey's perceptive criticisms of Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 11:7 that 'a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man'. 29 Paul's exegesis and theology are both questionable. According to Genesis 1:26, it is man and woman together who are the image of God, a point which is itself of profound ecclesiological significance. Moreover, on a duly apophatic treatment of the trinitarian relations, it is illegitimate to attribute Fatherly, and so apparently superordinate, functions to man; but Son-like, and so subordinate, functions to woman, as Barth continues to do. 30 Rather, we should not claim such detailed knowledge of the inner constitution of the Godhead that we can attempt direct and logical readings-off of that kind.

What kind of analogy between God and Church, Trinity and community, may there then be? If there is one, it should be of an indirect kind, in which the Church is seen as called to be a, so to speak, finite echo or bodying forth of the divine personal dynamics. How might this operate? Let me introduce the topic by developing a contrast between the Cappadocian and Augustinian conceptions of the Trinity. The latter is modalist in direction, if not actually medalist, in the sense that the three persons of the Trinity tend to be conceived as posterior to an underlying dettas or being of which they are, so to speak, outcrops. By contrast, the Cappadocian development, which Augustine so

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12 Richard Roberts, 'Der Stellenwert des kirchlichen Amtes', Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 83, 1986, 381ff. Alan Sell similarly questions the Lima document's assertion that the ministry is constitutive of the Church's life and ministry. 'This would be to place the ministry above the gospel,' Ecclesiastical Integrity and Failure, Society for the Study of Theology, 1987, p. 15.
19 Henri de Lubac, The Splendour of the Church, London, 1956, p. 71, alludes to the possibility of deriving the hierarchy from the trinitarian processions.
signally failed to appreciate, is that there is no being anterior to that of the persons. The being of God is the persons in relation to each other. The different Trinities generate correspondingly different ecclesiologies. Corresponding to the Augustinian conception there is an ecclesiology which conceives the being of the Church as in some sense anterior to the concrete historical relationships of the visible community. Such a conception is recognisable by two symptoms. The first is a platonising conception of the invisible Church which operates as ontologically prior—because it is the real Church—to the 'mixed' historical community. The second is the correlative teaching that an order of persons or ecclesiastical structure in some way undergirds or frames the personal relationships of the community: that the real being of the Church is to be found underlying the relations of the people rather than being a function of them. Such a conception is illustrated by a point made by de Lubac: 'no constituted assembly without a constitution, which includes a hierarchy...no realised community (Gemeinschaft) without a society (Gesellschaft) in which and through which it is realised'.

That gives the ontological game away. Why should there be no community without a society? May not the actual relations of concrete historical persons constitute the sole—or primary—being of the Church, just as the hypostases in relation constitute the being of God?

That things might conceivably be such is suggested by the ecclesiology of the seventeenth-century Puritan, John Owen. Owen is interesting because he is clearly seeking, as perhaps one of the first to do so, an ontology of the Church as a community. He is aware that he is breaking new ground, for he remarks that the Reformers, believing that the reformation of doctrine was all that was needed, failed to develop a theology of the community.\(^{33}\) That for Owen the being of the Church consists in its communion is clear from the use he makes of the terminology of Aristotelian causality. Speaking of what he calls the 'visible Church-state', he distinguishes between

1. The material cause of this Church, or the matter whereof it is composed, which are visible believers.
2. The formal cause of it, which is their voluntary coalescence into such a society or congregation, according to the mind of Christ.
3. The end of it is, present or local communion, in all the ordinances and institutions of Christ...\(^{33}\)

That is from an early essay, and in the later True Nature of a Gospel Church, he expands the idea slightly:

By the matter of the Church we understand the persons whereof the the Church doth consist, with their qualifications; and by its form, the reason, cause, and way of that kind of relation among them which gives them the being of a Church...\(^{34}\)

What is interesting about the later formulation is the fact that the Aristotelian terminology now takes a back seat so that terms deriving from Cappadocian trinitarian theology—person, cause, relation—may come into the lead. The result is that Owen's definition of the Church is an echo of their theology of the Trinity. The being of the Church consists in the relations of the persons to each other.

A more speculative concern is whether we may develop an analogy between the free relations of the persons of the Godhead and the resulting conception of the Church as a

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\(^{31}\) de Lubac, op. cit., p. 75.


\(^{34}\) John Owen, Works, op. cit., Vol. XVI, p. 11.
voluntary society, if one whose voluntary coalescence is also and first conceived as the work of God the Spirit. The basis would again be the Cappadocian teaching that God is what he is in virtue of what the Father, Son and Spirit give to and receive from each other. There is, hardly surprisingly, in Owen a strong note of the voluntary exercise of membership in the visible Church. Is it possible to discern behind this the influence of the theology of the Trinity, for he is undoubtedly a deeply trinitarian thinker? At the very least, it is clear that ecclesiology is for him rooted in the freedom of obedience to the gospel. ‘Wherefore the formal cause of a church consists in an obediential act of believers ... jointly giving themselves up unto the Lord Jesus Christ, to do and observe ...’

Nor is the resulting conception of the Church a static one. The Church is the work of the eschatological Spirit and so there is in Owen an emphasis, derived from the New Testament, on the newness of what is happening:

If (the Church) constitute new relations between persons that neither naturally nor morally were before so related, as marriage doth between husband and wife; if it require new mutual duties and give new mutual rights among themselves ... it is vain to imagine that this state can arise from or have any other formal cause but the joint consent and virtual confederation of those concerned unto those ends ... For obvious historical reasons, Owen repeatedly emphasises the voluntary nature both of membership of the local church and of the federating of local churches with each other. All the most interesting developments in theology have come under the constraints of some historical pressure, and the fact that under the impact of his particular circumstances he moved so far towards a conception of the Church as a community of freely relating persons must be accepted for what it is: an ecclesiology which echoes God’s eternal being in relation. It is also to be observed that Owen uses what can be called the more subordinate of the Aristotelian causes to account for the voluntary combining of the people. It is clear that for him the ‘efficient’ and ‘moving’ causes of the Church—though he does not use such terminology—are the ‘two hands’ of God (Irenaeus), the Son who institutes and the Spirit who constitutes. We shall return to the point raised by that observation.

Another more recent essay in ecclesiology has produced some similar results. Edward Farley’s *Ecclesial Man* is primarily an attempt to produce a phenomenological study of the Church as a community of redemption. On the face of the matter, phenomenology is the foe of ontology, in appearing to bracket ontological questions in order to describe appearances. But the way in which it is done in Farley’s study appears to achieve not so much ontological agnosticism as a shedding of the weight of traditional ontological assumptions so that the structure of the visible community may be seen. The result is a description of the actual relations in which members of the community have their being, an ontology of the community which lives by its own descriptive strength rather than needing the support of—say—an ideal invisible background. A crucial passage is as follows:

*(Ecclesia) is not an exclusive form of social organisation such as a nation or tribe ... It does, however, involve a determinate intersubjectivity ... (I)n its concrete, everyday actualisation, ecclesia involves interpersonal relationships and reciprocities which occur in conjunction with its characteristic activities such as worship. These reciprocities presuppose an intersubjective structure in which participants constitute each other as believers.*

Once again, there are echoes of the Cappadocian Trinity. The participants constitute each other as believers, as the persons of the Trinity constitute each other as persons.

It is in the final clause of the extract from Farley that is to be found also the weakness of the phenomenological approach, and it corresponds to its strength. In saying that the participants constitute each other as believers, Farley appears to be ascribing to members of the Church the work that belongs to God the Spirit. By so doing he appears to have developed a rather idealising picture of the visible Church, and in two respects. First he has claimed too much for what is, as we are constantly reminded, a company of sinners, albeit of sinners forgiven and on the Christian way; and, second, he has read too directly from the being of God to that of the Church. He has, in sum, failed to distinguish satisfactorily between the divine and human determinants of the being of the Church.

Farley's phenomenology calls attention to the perils of attempting a theology of the Church, prominent among which is the danger of what could be called a printing of social reality in blithe disregard for the way things happen to be. Any ecclesiology must accordingly attempt to hold together two conflicting pulls. On the one hand if, with the New Testament, we are to speak of the Church of God, the being of the Church must be rooted in the being of God. On the other, however, a resulting ecclesiology must make due allowance for the fact that even such the Church belongs to the created world, and that all finite organisms may fail to be nourished by their roots or may even be torn away from them. The Church remains this side of eternity a highly fallible community existing in a measure of contradiction of what it is called to be, and if as a matter of fact it has maintained a measure of integrity through the vicissitudes of its history, that may not be attributed to some inherent indefectibility. To be honest about our own history there is need to bear constantly in mind the temptations, by no means always resisted, to regression into a fallen past.

Too much is therefore not being claimed for the theology of the Church that is being attempted in this paper. The hope is to have created the framework by which a link may be drawn between the being of God and that which is from time to time realised by the Spirit. It is a kind of analogy of echo: the Church is what it is by virtue of being called to be a temporal echo of the eternal community that God is. What, then, is the point of such theoretical activity? 1. An attempt is being made to develop concepts with the aid of which the things we say about the Church may be understood. One simple example will suffice. Much has been made of the metaphor of the body of Christ, but, as the differences within Christendom reveal, it is by no means clear how it should be construed. It is an organic metaphor, and as such could be taken in a number of ways, totalitarian or pantheistic for example. There is much talk of organic unity of the churches, but the equally much used text from the Fourth Gospel (17:11), 'that they may be one, even as we are one' should give us pause, especially if we are aware of the trinitarian control. It is speaking not of an organic, so much as of an interpersonal unity: the personal unity of distinct but freely related persons. It is in some such light that we should approach the interpretation of the Pauline metaphor of the body, for we shall be aware that it is used in a number of senses: not only as a warning against disunity, but to stress the plurality of the Church's gifts and graces (1 Cor. 12:1ff, Rom. 12:4ff). The trinitarian ontology helps us to appropriate something of the richness and openness of that central ecclesial model.
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2. Paul's misuse of trinitarian attributions has already been mentioned, and in fairness to him we should refer to another point made this time with his help by Sherwin Bailey, who in general refutes decisively the myth of Pauline misogyny. Drawing on and correcting Barth's trinitarian anthropology, he concludes:

Man . . . is in the image of God in its Manward aspect primarily by virtue of his essential structure as a bi-personal male-female unity in which (relationally . . . not numerically) the coinherence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is reflected in terms of finite existence.

Bailey's anthropology brings with it important ecclesiological implications, for if the image of God is primarily or even only largely realised in terms of the unity of the sexes, a major aspect of the Church's calling is to be a community of women and men:

Against all one-sex institutions and orders . . . as against all vows of celibacy (compulsory, and even voluntary), there is set an insistent question mark; they are only justified if they do not hinder free and healthy partnership between the sexes . . . Nor are celibacy and monasticism alone in question; there are numerous Church societies, guilds and associations which are constituted on a single-sex basis, and are hardly calculated to uphold the obligation of partnership.

What that implies for the argument about the ordination of women should not be too difficult to realise. At the very least, it must be seen that the ecclesiology of community relativises, and not before time, the whole question of an ordained caste. More positively, as Bailey proceeds to argue, renewal in the image of God is essentially directed to 'harmonious creative relation between man and woman'.

THE CHURCH ON EARTH: THE ROOTS OF COMMUNITY

That final point serves to introduce a more general consideration. Relations in the Church have so often been construed in terms of the permanent subordination of one group to another, even though the superordinate group has for the sake of appearances dignified its position with the rhetoric of 'service'. If, however, the attribution of particular positions to particular groups or orders is to be replaced by a pattern more reflective of the free personal relations which constitute the deity, should we not consciously move towards an eccesiology of perichoresis: in which there is no permanent structure of subordination, but in which there are overlapping patterns of relationships, so that the same person will be sometimes 'subordinate' and sometimes 'superordinate' according to the gifts and graces being exercised? And would that not more nearly echo the relationships of which Paul is speaking in 1 Cor. 12-14, from which the notion of a permanent order of leadership is completely absent? The concept may be thought to be hopelessly idealistic, but is that because we have so long been in thrall to the inherited stereotype? Whether that be so, the chief point of this section remains: that to base a theology of the Church in the Trinity is of great practical moment, because ancient questions tend to receive different answers if the primary control on ecclesiology is the tri-personal community of God. If it is true, as the opening sections of this paper held, that early ecclesiology failed to exercise appropriate control, and as a result produced authoritarian and monistic doctrines of the Church, it is important that the whole matter be reconsidered.

5. The Visible Community

In the previous section there has been attempted an ontology of the Church, in which it was suggested that a
movement, carefully controlled by an apophatic doctrine of the immanent Trinity, can be made between a doctrine of God and a doctrine of the Church. The relation between the latter and the former has already been described as an ‘echoing’: the being of the Church should echo the interrelation between the three persons who together constitute the deity. The Church is called to be the kind of reality at a finite level that God is in eternity. Can further account be given of this analogy? Most obviously, it can be said that the doctrine of the Trinity is being used to suggest ways of allowing the eternal becoming of God—the eternally interanimating energies of the three—to provide the basis for the personal dynamics of the community.

Unless, however, everything is simply to hang in the air, there is need of some intermediate linkage, and this will be sought with the help of a return to some of the matters treated in the third section. What is the relation between the ontology of the Church—the so to speak theoretical framework with the help of which it is thought—and its actual being? That is to say: the source of our ontology of the Church is a doctrine of the Trinity; but how is God the three in one related to the actual historical and visible community? In what sense is our ecclesiology any more than a theory which is abstractly derived from an equally theoretical concept of God?

An essential intermediate step is that we ground the being of the Church in the source of the being of all things, the eternal energies of the three persons of the Trinity as they are in perichoretic interrelation. The primary echoes of that being are to be heard in the ways of God to the world in creation and the perfection of that creation in both Jesus and the Spirit. It is noteworthy that both of the supposedly deutero-Pauline letters to Colossae and Ephesus ground the being of the Church in the purpose of the Father to reconcile all things to himself through the Son and in the Spirit: that is to say, in the fulfilment of the destiny of creation. Scholars have sometimes argued that Col. 1:18a, ‘He is the head of the body, the Church’, is an interpolation into the logic of a hymn otherwise dedicated to a celebration of the cosmic Christ. But the text as it stands is precisely the point: the Church is the body called to be the community of the last times, that is to say, to realise in its life the promised and inaugurated reconciliation of all things. It therefore becomes an echo of the life of the Trinity when it is enabled by the Spirit to order its life to where that reconciliation takes place in time, that is to say, to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The concrete means by which the Church becomes an echo of the life of the Godhead are all such as to direct the Church away from self-glorification to the source of its life in the creative and recreative presence of God to the world. The activity of proclamation and the celebration of the Gospel sacraments are temporal ways of orienting the community to the being of God. Proclamation turns the community to the Word whose echo it is called to be; baptism and eucharist, the sacraments of incorporation and koinonia, to the love of God the Father towards his world as it is mediated by the Son and Spirit. Thus there is no timeless Church: only a Church then and now and to be, as the Spirit ever and again incorporates people into Christ and in the same action brings them into and maintains them in community with each other.

To return whither we began, with an attack on the monism of the Church and its dominance by an ontology of the invisible, it must be said that there is no invisible Church—at least not in the sense in which it has usually been understood—not because the Church is perfect, but because to be in communion with those who are ordered to
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Jesus by the Spirit is to be the Church. Whether a community of those who claim the name of Church is justified in its claim is a question which may always be asked. But should our criteria be those of monistic, legal and 'organic' structures, or the trinitarian ones concerned with whether a community freely orders [sic] and disciplines its life so as to echo the community of Father, Son and Spirit? It is with that directedness to the Trinity that this endeavour to understand something of what the Church is should appropriately come to an end.

4 It is always illuminating to interpret such expressions as those of Paul's about being 'in Christ' in a social rather than an individualistic or mystical way. It is because Paul has such a strong sense of the fact that to be related to the community is to be related to Christ that he can make remarks like that of 1 Cor. 7:14, that 'the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband'.

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