

## Recent Ecclesiology: A Survey\*

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**Abstract:** This article surveys recent developments in the area of ecclesiology, starting from the viewpoint of a methodological divide discernible in the field. The divide is between those who take an idealist approach, emphasising highly charged theological symbols for Church, and those who adopt a more realist approach, taking as starting point the historical data of the Church. The article critically surveys both tendencies, devoting somewhat more space to the second, and concluding with a critical review of two theologians (Edward Schillebeeckx and Roger Haight) who seek to integrate the social sciences into a theology of the Church.

ECCLESIOLOGY IS THE THEOLOGICAL STUDY of the Church.<sup>1</sup> Yet when we ask “what is the Church?” we encounter the first and major methodological divide in ecclesiology. As an experiment take up any available book on the Church and ask yourself what it refers to when it writes about the Church. Does it refer to people and structures, to dates and historical movements? Or does it seem to operate at a level that almost hovers above historical data, to talk about a Church that does not seem to exist in our real world, or at most refers to the recent history of the Church with no larger historical perspective? Sometimes it is a very attractive Church, a Church we would all like to belong to, but it does

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\* This article is the first of a *Pacifica* series surveying recent trends in various areas of theology.

1. For the purposes of this article I will take ecclesiology in the broadest sense to include not just studies of the Church but also of ministry and missiology. These later studies take up questions of the ministerial structures and the historical mission of the Church. Thus I would take the works of Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), and David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1991), as examples of works in ecclesiology.

not have buildings and parishes, let alone dioceses or other structures. One might characterise the difference between these two possibilities as one between an Aristotelian and a Platonic (idealist) approach to ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup> The Aristotelian (realist) approach takes as its starting point the historical data of the Church, a Church of historically constituted communities which develop and change over time. It will then seek to draw historical lessons for the current life of the Church, often by reflecting on some golden age, perhaps the communities of the New Testament, the patristic era, or the high Middle Ages. The Platonic approach will usually take as its starting point a highly charged theological symbol of the Church, such as the Church as a body of Christ, the people of God or a divine communion. It will then seek to draw conclusions from these religious symbols for the concrete operation of the Church we all live in.

This methodological divide, however, also reveals a similarity between the two approaches. Ecclesiology is different from other more classical theological topics. In studying the Trinity, for example, one may seek a new understanding of the Trinity, but one does not expect to change the Trinity in the process. However, in ecclesiology most authors are not simply seeking to understand the Church, they are also seeking to effect a change in the Church, in its structures or modes of operation. They learn the lessons of the past in order to suggest changes in the life of the current Church; or they draw from some dominant religious symbol of the Church to suggest that things should be different from the way they actually are. Implicitly or explicitly ecclesiology is a *normative* discipline. It does not seek simply to describe or understand the Church but to provide norms for the way the Church should be.

In this article I shall explore briefly ecclesiologies of the more idealist stance before turning to a fuller account of the problems faced by the more realist historical ecclesiology and those who adopt it.

#### IDEALIST ECCLESIOLOGIES

There has been a long tradition in ecclesiology to speak of the Church in ideal terms. When Paul refers to the Church as the spotless bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2), or as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:14-27), there is a

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2. I am following here the suggestion of Walter Kasper, who introduced this distinction in his debate with the then Cardinal Ratzinger in their discussions on the role and significance of the local versus the universal church. "The conflict is between theological opinions and underlying philosophical assumptions. One side [Ratzinger] proceeds by Plato's method; its starting point is the primacy of an ideal that is a universal concept. The other side [Kasper] follows Aristotle's approach and sees the universal as existing in a concrete reality", Walter Kasper, "A Friendly Reply to Cardinal Ratzinger on the Church", *America* 184/14 (2001) 8-14, see p. 13.

strong suggestion of idealism in his language. Paul's most evocative use of the body of Christ symbol is directed to the highly divided community of Corinth. Here his use of the religious symbol of the body of Christ can be understood as an attempt to create a new situation in that community where current divisions can be overcome. The language is not descriptive or explanatory, but seeking to effect a new reality within the community. It has a normative force. Without due care, this type of language becomes merely rhetorical and can be used to conceal as much as it reveals of the reality of the Church. Other symbols around which theologians seek to organise their ecclesiology are the Church as "people of God" or as "communion".

Certainly the most popular of these approaches at present is that of church as "communion".<sup>3</sup> As the book by Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*,<sup>4</sup> makes clear, the term can be used in such a way as to encompass approaches as diverse as Hans Küng and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner and Miroslav Volf. Works for which communion becomes the focal organising principle include the more popular work by Michael Lawler and Thomas Shanahan, *Church: A Spirited Communion*<sup>5</sup> and the more scholarly book by Jean-Marie Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*.<sup>6</sup>

Many of these approaches seek to draw parallels between the communion of the Church and the *communio* or *perichoresis* of the persons of the Trinity, drawing some inspiration from the writings of John Zizioulas.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most notable attempt in this regard is that of Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*,<sup>8</sup> where Volf compares and contrasts the ecclesiologies of Zizioulas, as representative of Orthodoxy, and Joseph Ratzinger, as representative of Catholicism, and examines the respects in which their ecclesiological positions reflect differing stances in Trinitarian theology. Key issues here are the ways in which ecclesial office operates within the Church and the relationship between the local

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3. An interesting article, by Edward Hahnenberg, "The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005) 3-30, spells out the parallels between "Body of Christ" ecclesiology and *communio* ecclesiology.

4. Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Vision and Versions* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2000).

5. Michael G. Lawler and Thomas J. Shanahan, *Church: A Spirited Communion* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

6. J.-M. R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1992). Also his more recent work J.-M. R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

7. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

8. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

and universal church. Drawing on the Trinitarian work of Jürgen Moltmann, Volf develops an ecclesiology suitable for his free-church tradition. It is this very “flexibility” which must cause us to reflect. If appeals to the *communio* of the persons of the Trinity can be used to justify such diverse forms of Church order, then what is the value of the appeal? And which concern is leading which? Are we constructing our Church order in terms of our understanding of the Trinity, or are we shaping our understanding of the Trinity to meet our ecclesial requirements? It is difficult to see how a normative approach to ecclesiology can emerge from this methodology.

Other idealist approaches draw on the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar, in particular his use of typologies drawn from the New Testament. Balthasar speaks of Marian, Johannine, and Petrine types operating in the life of the Church.<sup>9</sup> Such typological approaches are richly suggestive and moving, but their explanatory ability remains limited. As Doyle notes it can be used to “support the mystification at times engaged in by Church leaders who justify their institutional intransigence by a simplistic appeal to ‘mystery’”.<sup>10</sup> Again we find the potential difficulties of idealizing methods.

There are undoubted strengths in the idealist approaches that we find in the literature. The religious symbols they draw upon are effective in moving people into new perspectives, in motivating them into new patterns of behavior. They can be highly suggestive in helping us explore current ecclesial concerns.<sup>11</sup> However, the multivalent nature of the symbols they draw upon also means that they can be “read” in many different ways, and so lead to very different conclusions. Such religious symbols are exploratory but not explanatory. To develop a more explanatory account of the Church we need to move out of an idealist approach into something different.

#### REALIST HISTORICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

Once one moves away from the more idealist approaches to ecclesiology and begins to study historical ecclesial communities, one must face a new problem. If ecclesiology is concerned with the study of historical ecclesial communities, in what way does it differ from the well established discipline of Church History? Is it simply a matter of presenting an historical narrative of the Church and then attempting to draw theological conclusions? There is a problem here already. As we

9. See the relevant material cited by Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 98-100.

10. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 99.

11. For example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Women Priests? A Marian Church in a Fatherless and Motherless Culture”, *Communio* 22 (1995) 164-70.

have already noted, ecclesiology has an inevitable normative component. Whence then does this normative component arise? Are the norms simply “there” in the historical narrative waiting to be lifted from it? Or if the norms are extrinsic to the historical data then what is the purpose of engaging with the historical data? If we are already in possession of the norms then surely we can just apply them to our current historical context, making any historical narrative redundant.<sup>12</sup>

We can find examples of these tensions in the theological literature. The classical ecclesiological work of Hans Küng, *The Church*,<sup>13</sup> seeks to draw norms for the present Church directly from the context of the early Church. Küng’s detailed presentation has a specific purpose, “that the original Church may light the way once more for the Church of today”.<sup>14</sup> The practices, structures and beliefs of the early Church are the (sole) norm for the Church’s whole life. The pluralism of practices, structures and beliefs of the early Church is then used to critique the supposedly more monolithic reality of the Catholic Church’s current existence. One consequence of such an approach is that various developments, such as the three-fold order of ministry, are viewed as basically arbitrary, as possible forms of church order which have no normative force for the Church.<sup>15</sup> Another approach can be found in the work of David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*,<sup>16</sup> which presents an historical account of the Church and its mission. Unable to find norms operating in the historical data itself, Bosch invokes the notions of paradigms, identifying six distinct paradigms which have operated in the Church’s history. Nonetheless the normative forces of these paradigms and the shifts from one paradigm to another remain unexplained.

The problem of normativity is not unique to ecclesiology and in fact is a common problem within the human sciences.<sup>17</sup> These sciences stake their claim on being empirical – they provide an empirically based study of human existence. But the most vital questions of human living,

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12. Of course one might want to argue that the norms are theological and so independent of the historical data. However, as the theological norms themselves arise in the history of the Church, this does not solve the problem. One is still left with trying to understand how the norms arise out of the historical data itself.

13. Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

14. Küng, *The Church*, xiii.

15. One conclusion Küng draws from his historical investigation is that the three-fold system of offices, of bishop, presbyter/priest and deacon “is not simply *the* original way in which ministries were ordered and shared out” and that it is impossible “to draw clear theological and dogmatic line of division” between the three offices (p. 429). In an alternative direction, see Neil Ormerod, “On the Divine Institution of the Three-Fold Ministry”, *Ecclesiology* 4 (2007) 38-51.

16. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*.

17. Neil Ormerod, “A Dialectic Engagement with the Social Sciences in an Ecclesiological Context”, *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 815-40.

questions of meaning and existence, cannot be found in the empirical data alone. One response to the question of normativity is to suggest that such considerations are no longer “scientific” but ethical, and hence outside the field of study. Another response is to argue that the human sciences can only be truly scientific if they adopt a teleological approach to their study incorporating an ethical dimension integral to the whole understanding of human existence.<sup>18</sup>

The parallels here are actually quite strong and they produce a further methodological divide within ecclesiology, a divide between those who take dialogue with the social sciences as essential to their work, and those for whom the social sciences contribute little or nothing to their understanding of the Church. The main proponent for the inclusion of the social sciences as integral to the project of ecclesiology has been American ecclesiolgist Joseph Komonchak.<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*,<sup>20</sup> also argues for a more concrete form of ecclesiology which employs the social sciences. However, it is a position which has received little endorsement, or at least application, among ecclesiolgists. Even the recent chapter on method in ecclesiology by Pedro Rodriguez within the edited volume, *The Gift of the Church*, makes no explicit mention of the social sciences, despite the fact that Komonchak’s work is cited in the bibliography for the chapter.<sup>21</sup>

There have been of course some fine historical works on the Church with a strong theological interest, for example Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder’s *Constants in Context*<sup>22</sup> on the Church’s mission and Bernard Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*.<sup>23</sup> Also deserving mention are Christopher Bellitto, *Renewing Christianity*,<sup>24</sup> a study of renewal movements at key eras in the history of the Church, and Francis

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18. One could refer to the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Roy Bhaskar to name a few.

19. Most notably in his collection of essays, Joseph Komonchak, *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, ed. Fred Lawrence, vol. 11, *Lonergan Workshop Journal, Supplementary Issue* (Boston: Boston College, 1995).

20. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, *Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge UK; New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000). It is somewhat ironic, given his interest in a more concrete form of ecclesiology, that he should then evoke the aesthetic-dramatic categories of Hans Urs von Balthasar in his reflections.

21. Pedro Rodriguez, “Theological Method for Ecclesiology”, in Peter Phan (ed.), *Gift of the Church* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 129-56.

22. Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, *American Society of Missiology Series 30* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2004).

23. Bernard Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (Mahwah NY: Paulist, 2004).

24. Christopher M. Bellitto, *Renewing Christianity: A History of Church Reform from Day One to Vatican II* (New York: Paulist, 2001).

Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishop*,<sup>25</sup> a study of the emergence of orders in the early Church. Finally, one cannot ignore the five-volume work edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*.<sup>26</sup> The sheer magnitude of this study makes it clear how complex the task can be in relation to a single event, let alone the whole history of the Church.

#### THE USE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The use of the social sciences in ecclesiology raises its own set of complex theological issues.<sup>27</sup> Should the social sciences be approached as a completely autonomous discipline, separate from theology? Indeed the serious methodological divisions within the social sciences themselves would indicate that any claim to present a “scientific objective” account is fraught with difficulties. Further there are indications within the social sciences of the need for a “theological” perspective. The critical realist social theorist Roy Bhaskar has suggested the need to adopt something like Augustine’s account of evil as privation within the social sciences.<sup>28</sup> Or as Lonergan has argued, “the only correct general form of [the] understanding [of the human sciences] is theological”.<sup>29</sup> Such suggestions however are still far from being recognised within either theology or the social sciences generally.

The work of Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*,<sup>30</sup> was perhaps the first major attempt to integrate the social sciences into an ecclesiological study, in this case on the history of ministry in the Church. Schillebeeckx had a particular interest in analysing the emergence of the three-fold order of ministry in the first few centuries of the Church and to assist in this he adopted a particular social scientific tool, based on a conflictualist understanding of society. While a novel

25. Francis Aloysius Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Newman, 2001).

26. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II* (5 vols.; Maryknoll NY: Orbis; Leuven: Peeters, 1995-2006).

27. Perhaps the most polemic approach to this issue is John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1991). Milbank argues that ecclesiology is itself a form of sociology and that the social sciences can make no contribution to theology in general or ecclesiology in particular. A more considered approach can be found in Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

28. See Roy Bhaskar and Andrew Collier, “Introduction: Explanatory Critiques”, in Margaret Archer et al. (eds.), *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998) 389.

29. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Theology and Understanding”, in Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (eds.), *Collection: Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 130.

30. Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face* (see n. 1 above).

and creative approach, his conclusion that the process of emergence betrays “a gradually increasing theological legitimization of relationships of subjection and power which are essentially contrary to the gospel”,<sup>31</sup> is actually determined by his choice of a conflictualist approach in the social sciences. If nothing else it indicates that one’s choice of a particular approach within the social sciences cannot be theologically neutral.

A more recent approach to the problem has been that of Roger Haight, *The Christian Community in History*.<sup>32</sup> This two-volume work is a major attempt to present an historical ecclesiology which is conversant with the social sciences. Haight seeks to cover the whole of Church history from the beginning to the present day within a consistent theological program. The first chapter deals with the methodological issue of the development of an historical ecclesiology including a discussion of the use of the social sciences.

From the outset Haight is clear that “the primary object of the study of ecclesiology is the empirical church”,<sup>33</sup> and that the Church is “not only an empirical and human reality, it is also a historical reality”.<sup>34</sup> He eschews any attempted “theological reductionism” which would neglect or deny this and turn ecclesiology into some idealised form. Haight then sets up his ecclesiological problematic in the following terms. “The church is simultaneously a human, historical, social reality on the one hand and a theological reality on the other hand. These two dimensions of the church are quite distinct...”<sup>35</sup> Drawing on the work of Schillebeeckx, he argues that “the church is a single reality in history, but one that must be understood in two irreducible languages”,<sup>36</sup> a theological language relating the Church to God and a critical, historical sociological language to deal with the human dimension of the Church. Nonetheless he insists that “these are two dimensions of one reality; there are not two churches. We need a theological method that respects these two dimensions of the one church, that does not hold them in balance over and against each other but integrates them into a single understanding.”<sup>37</sup>

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31. Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*, 69.

32. Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History* (2 vols.; New York: Continuum, 2004-2005).

33. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 1.35.

34. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 1.37.

35. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 1.38.

36. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 1.39. He references Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*, 210-13, which to my mind does not support his assertion of “two irreducible languages”.

37. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 1.39.

There are clearly complexities here and personally I am not convinced that Haight does justice to the question. Initially he speaks of a human, historical, social reality and a theological reality. So already we are speaking of two realities. The language then shifts to “two dimensions” of the one reality. Nonetheless these two dimensions require “two irreducible languages” to give expression to them, which again gives the impression of two distinct realities.<sup>38</sup> Further, if one of these languages is already theological, why do we need a further theological method to bring these two dimensions into some further integration? If we already have a theological language to describe the relationship of the Church to God, then what does the critical historical sociological language add to that? Is not the Church that is in relationship to God the same historical church? I would also add that Haight’s discussion of the social sciences themselves is disappointingly superficial. Nonetheless his work is an indicator of what is required of a truly historical ecclesiology and it will be some time before the other authors match the breadth of its coverage.

#### CONCLUSION

Five years ago I argued for the need to develop a systematic ecclesiology that was empirical, critical, normative, dialectical and practical.<sup>39</sup> It must be *empirical* and *critical* in its dealings with the historical data of the Church. It must recognise *normativity* as it arises out of the historical data itself. It must be *dialectical* in that it will analyse the ways in which the historical life of the Church fails to live according to its own immanent norms, in patterns of breakdown which recur within the historical data. Finally it must be *practical* in the sense that its dialectical analysis suggests the necessary therapeutic turn needed to correct a situation of dialectical breakdown. To achieve such an outcome for the whole of the Church’s history is the work of a bevy of scholars collaborating across multiple disciplines. Nonetheless some sense of the possibility can be suggested through an analysis of individual historical events, such as the Second Vatican Council.<sup>40</sup> Of course at present

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38. Haight further confuses the matter by referring to Lonergan’s distinction between general and special categories. Lonergan never speaks of these as irreducible languages. For Lonergan theology always involves both general and special categories even if it is just speaking about God, as in matters of natural theology.

39. Neil Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology”, *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 3-30.

40. For example in my article, Neil Ormerod, “The Times They Are A’changing – a Response to O’Malley and Schloesser”, *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 834-55. Also see the forthcoming work of John W. O’Malley et al., *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, ed. David

studies in ecclesiology deal with each of these concerns, but usually in a piecemeal rather than a systematic manner. The challenge for ecclesiology is to become a truly systematic discipline. Haight's work moves in the right direction, but more work is needed, particularly in the area of the relationship between ecclesiology and the social sciences.

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Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007), particularly the contribution of Joseph Komonchak.

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