

Catholicity of the Church and the Universality of Theology

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Abstract: The issue addressed in this essay is that of the Christian character or identity of Christian theology. Its "arguing partner" is that range of theological endeavours in which the particular context of a theological production is accentuated at the cost of under-valuing its necessary correlate, its Christian or "catholic" character. The essay offers a justification for a concern about "orthodoxy" – though not as an alternative to "orthopraxis" – for it still matters in all theology that God be spoken of rightly, which is to say faithfully. Christian theology should therefore not abandon its connection with Christian doctrine, even though the boundaries of theology may extend further than the boundaries of doctrine. There is, of course, no easy move from the universality of the Gospel to the universal validity of any particular articulation of this Gospel. However, it is argued that a modest claim for universality is both permitted and required by the double premise that all theology is in some sense *church* theology and that the church confesses itself to be "catholic". Support for such a position is found in the work of Robert Schreiter, a strong proponent of "local" theologies, who in recent work has also argued for a necessary engagement with the "tradition" and has identified new kinds of universal theology. Appeal is made also to the ancient idea of a *regula fidei*. None of this conflicts with the contextual nature and responsibility of theology, but "contextual" should never be equated with "narrow", let alone "isolationist".¹

I

OUR CONCERN RANGES FROM THE SHAPE and content of Christian identity to the nature of Christian theology. I understand Christian identity – especially the identity of a *person* as Christian – to be baptismal identity, which implies that it will have christological, ecclesial, eschatological, pneumatological and ethical dimensions.² The discussion of these terms brings us directly to the heart of the Christian

1. This essay was first written for an international seminar on "Christian identity in cross-cultural perspective", held by the International Reformed Theological Institute, The Netherlands, October 2002.

2. This follows the shape of the discussion in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith & Order Paper No. 111, Geneva, 1982) 2-7.

Gospel, namely the self-giving of the triune God in unfathomable love for the world and the inauguration of a new, reconciled humanity in and through Jesus Christ, actualised already – partly in fact and partly in hope – in a new community of people, the church. Many things follow from such a delineation of Christian identity, but what has to be said can appropriately be structured according to this baptismal pattern. Christian identity can also be understood as the Christian character of a theological or moral statement or position which purports to be Christian. The exposition of what constitutes Christian identity is one of the church's core theological tasks.

Christian faith gains its shape from the stories told about God in both testaments of the Christian Scriptures. What these stories mean for understanding God, one's communities and oneself and how they influence cultural, moral and political life in the world is the constant preoccupation of the Christian church. It makes Christian theology irreducibly hermeneutical; no theology would be Christian if it did not seek its fundamental inspiration in these stories. However, this commits the theologian to a serious engagement with complex questions about the meaning of these stories – or better, the reading of these stories for meaning – including the questions raised in the last four decades by intentionally "contextual" theologians.³

These irreducible stories, themselves implicitly doctrinal, have given rise to concepts, theories and doctrines, which in turn have governed the interpretation of the stories.⁴ These doctrines, of varying degrees of importance, are, on the one hand, doxological in nature and, on the other, explicatory and (not infrequently) regulative.⁵ For what is at stake here is speaking and thinking rightly about God: *orthodoxy*. No serious theology can surrender this concern, even if – as has clearly happened in much "liberation" theology – the task of informing and guiding right action, *orthopraxis*, has received the greater emphasis.⁶ Even then, arguably, insofar as God is to be brought to speech at all – in worship, teaching and exhortation – it still matters whether God is spoken of "rightly" or not.

3. I have in mind the almost simultaneous appearance of North American Black theology and Latin American Liberation theology, followed a little later by other kinds of liberation theology, notably African and Asian. Later still, other groups, identifiable in other, non-geographical terms, started to create their own "contextual" theologies. For an account of various models of contextual theology see S. B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992 & 2002).

4. See D. Ritschl, "Zur Freiheit des Umgangs mit klassischen theologischen Lehren", H.-R. Bedford-Strohm et al. (eds), *Freiheit Verantworteten, Festschrift für Wolfgang Huber* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 2002), esp. 550ff.

5. Ibid. See also W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology, Vol. 1* (London: SCM Press, 1970), ch. 7.

6. See G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 10f.

The doctrines which were formulated, tested and given an official ecclesiastical status have formed the backbone of the theology of both the Eastern (Orthodox) and the Western (Catholic-Protestant) church.⁷ In this way, Christian theology and Christian doctrine, which are not co-terminous, were nonetheless closely related. With the emergence of theologies with other agendas – in particular, practical and political – this nexus has been weakened, if not altogether repudiated. The argument of this paper is twofold: first, that this connection with doctrine, which sets out in basic, summary form how we might rightly think about God, the world, humankind, the church (and many other things) is essential; second, that the catholicity of the church, which embraces the local church⁸ in a universal communion, calls for, as its logical entailment, theological reflection which affirms the local and particular (the “contextual”) in a framework that can be universally recognised as properly theological and authentically Christian.

I want to argue for such a view of the church and its theology in the face of some significant criticisms, political and cultural-philosophical. It might be regarded as too much tied to the dominant mode of doing theology in the past, whether this be called Eurocentric or North Atlantic, whereas the day now belongs to theologies that have been on the periphery, politically speaking.⁹ In other words, my position might be considered as rear-guard. It might also be dismissed as being culturally passé, still captive to the agenda of “modernity”, with its problematic assumptions about truth and reality. The day of the single (grand) narrative is over, it might be argued; we can only deal with the local narrative. I shall address this second criticism presently. As for the first, I concede that my theological journey has been predominantly Western, though not exclusively.¹⁰ Australian Christian theology, though shaped in its first hundred and fifty years predominantly by Anglo-Celtic theology, has in the last few decades been searching for its own distinctive voice or voices.¹¹ As I shall argue in the next section,

7. This is not to suggest that the ways in which this happened in the East and the West were identical.

8. The point remains valid irrespective of whether “local” is taken to refer to a diocese or a congregation.

9. Of course, some of these theologies come from places where the numerical strength of the church is greatest.

10. This, in itself, need not be regarded as problematic. I once heard Gustavo Gutierrez, whose “contextual” credentials are surely beyond reproach, say that he was basically Hegelian! (Dunedin, New Zealand, May 1991).

11. One “voice” of particular interest is that of Aboriginal Christians, whose “rainbow spirit” theology draws on indigenous stories about the “dreamtime”. There are also other Australian voices which, from a background of Western theology, offer theological interpretations of Australian culture and history. See V. C. Hayes (ed.), *Toward Theology in an Australian Context* (Adelaide: AASR Publications, 1979); J. Houston (ed.), *The Cultured Pearl: Australian Readings in Cross-cultural Theology and Mission* (Melbourne: Victorian Council of Churches, 1986); Allan Loy, “Australian Culture: an Attempt at Theological Penetration”, *Interchange* 25 (1979), 5-21; P. Malone (ed.), *Discovering an Australian Theology*

this is not a development which is to be (reluctantly) accepted *de facto*; it is right and good that “local” theologies should emerge which reflect their ethnic, cultural and political context. My contention is, however, that something more needs to be said.

II

It is not part of my purpose to describe the main features of the contextual theologies that emerged in the last third of the twentieth century, nor to trace the outline of a cultural-political history of the factors that gave rise to them. As Robert Schreiter points out, these theologies were new inasmuch as they placed a much greater emphasis than traditionally received theology did on the study of the political and economic context in which theological reflection was taking place, on a community’s history as a history of exploitation, oppression and suffering, and on the participation of ordinary (that is, non-expert) people in the process of theological reflection.¹² It did not take long for the dominant theological tradition itself to be seen as “a series of local theologies”.¹³ Indeed, it cannot be disputed that all theology is contextual; there is no possibility of escape from the issues and the cultural-conceptual framework in which people theologise. Strictly speaking, therefore, the term “contextual theology” is, in Douglas J. Hall’s apt phrase, a tautology.¹⁴ It would therefore be absurd to try to mount an argument against the contextual nature of theology in principle. As for these “contextual” theologies themselves, a general judgment on them would be inappropriate; they cover a very wide spectrum of theological endeavour, differ in substance and style, and require differentiated assessment – just as more traditional theologies do.

Christianity is an incarnational religion. The Logos became flesh; the Son lived among us as one of us in a particular time and place. He was ethnically, culturally and religiously Jewish, a point still in need of

(Homebush, NSW: St. Paul, 1988); G. R. Lilburne, *A Sense of Place: a Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); A. Kelly, *A New Imagining: Toward an Australian Spirituality* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990); G. R. Lilburne, “Australian Theology: Protestant Contributions”, *Colloquium* 28/2 (1996) 19-30; F. Rees (ed.), *Fair Dinkum Ministry: Stories of Authentic Australian Spirituality and Struggle* (Melbourne: Spectrum Publications, 1999); F. Rees, “Beating Around in the Bush: Methodological Directions for Australian Theology”, *Pacifica* 15/3 (2002), 266-293, and G. Goosen, *Australian Theologies: Themes and Methodologies into the Third Millennium* (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul’s Publications, 2000).

12. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM Press, 1985) 3ff. See also Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999).

13. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 93f.

14. Douglas J. Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 69. See also my paper, “The importance of general concepts and common language for theology”, forthcoming in the conference proceedings of the International Reformed Theological Institute.

emphasis in some Christian communities. One implication of this particularity is that the Gospel, taking human form, “is enacted in human idioms”,¹⁵ which are context-specific. The forms of theological construction and critique – as of liturgical expression and socio-political response – will necessarily vary. Schreiter makes the point this way: “The Gospel does not fall from the sky. Our faith is also a *fides ex auditu*, a ‘faith from hearing’, a faith we have heard from others. The Gospel is always incarnate, incarnate in the reality of those who bring it to us, and incarnate in those who help us nurture the beginnings of faith.”¹⁶ The issues of the day, variable from place to place and time to time, determine what we hear, what we enact and what we construct, including our theologies.

The emergence of emphatically “local” theologies coincides with another salient new feature on the cultural landscape of the last part of the twentieth century, the phenomenon popularly known as “post-modernism”. After the privileging of the universal – the universal, all-explaining system, the general, abstract concept, the grand, all-embracing narrative – postmodernism privileges the particular and the local. One cannot discuss culture in general, only particular cultures; there is no sense in defining the essence of religion, only particular forms of particular religions. By extension, in the church we no longer have a theology, only particular theologies, and the theology of the church – if there is such a thing – is accorded no priority over the theology of particular individuals or communities. Truth-claims of a general nature are relativised and reduced to the assertions and declarations of dominant groups.¹⁷ The pendulum swing from the general and universal to the local and particular is emphatic. At times – not necessarily without justification – this is accompanied in some “contextual” theologies by a very confrontational tone.¹⁸

None of this amounts – at least in the church – to a rejection of the universality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But there is no easy slide from the universality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the universal validity of any one theological articulation of this Gospel. To the recognition that in Jesus Christ particularity and universality coincide, there does not seem to be a corresponding acknowledgment that local and universal aspects belong together in Christian theology. They do need, however,

15. The phrase is used by Don Saliers in an unpublished lecture, “Christian Worship as an Eschatological Act”. See also his *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), esp. ch. 3.

16. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 21.

17. Alister McGrath notes that a major feature of postmodernism is the “rejection of Enlightenment paradigms of knowledge, and especially its appeal to ‘universal and necessary’ truths as oppressive or illusory”, citing a handful of commentators; see *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 13.

18. See e.g. James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Lippincott, 1970).

to be held together; they are not alternatives. We should not approach them dualistically but dialectically.¹⁹ This is not to devalue the particular, but the cultural and philosophical pressures toward the local and the particular call for an equal and opposite attention to the universal, the “catholic”. Thus it is not the contextual nature of theology as such that is problematic, but a contextual theology that is narrow and unwilling to open itself to the judgment of other theologies certainly is. Naturally, the requirement of openness and mutual accountability cannot be imposed selectively; it has to be a requirement of all theologies, irrespective of their location or their status. Western theology is slowly learning the lesson that it cannot be required of the newer theologies while being ignored by the older.

III

I stated at the outset my intention to argue for a connection between the idea of the church’s catholicity and a theology which, while intentionally and properly contextual, also makes a modest universal claim. In this section we note some important elements in the confession of the church as catholic and draw some implications for the church’s theology. This presupposes that all Christian theology is, to a greater or lesser degree, *church* theology. Much is to be learned from David Tracy’s distinction between theologies addressed to different “publics” – the church, the academy and the society at large²⁰ – but we must look to a theology’s provenance as much as to its hearers or readers. Inasmuch as Christian theology stands in the service of the Gospel, as distinct from being theistic speculation about the nature of the universe, and thus a form of philosophy, it is a word from or on behalf of the church.

We confess the holy catholic church; *credo in sanctam ecclesiam catholicam*.²¹ For a native speaker of English there is no difficulty about the adjective “catholic”. One can understand why Luther preferred to substitute the word “Christian” for “catholic” – and why the Dutch and German forms of the Creed (and perhaps others) do not include the word “catholic” – though Luther’s objection was not shared by Calvin.²² The regular use of the creed in worship, a far from universal practice, connects us with the faith of the church of all times and places. Neither the Apostles’ Creed nor the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed says all

19. Schreier sees this as giving attention first to one factor, then to another, until an expanded awareness is attained of the role and interaction of each; see *Constructing Local Theologies*, 20.

20. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (London: SCM Press, 1981) ch. 1. The point is that whether theology is systematic (assuming the truth of the claim to be based on divine revelation), fundamental (apologetic, philosophical, appealing to reason alone), or practical (political, socially transformative), it is in each case grounded in the Gospel.

21. The phrase comes from the Apostles’ Creed.

22. See J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, 1,2.

that one might consider it desirable to say about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the church, for example, but the frequent confession of the church as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”²³ is an important and constant reminder of the basic “marks” of the church.

There are four elements in the confession of the church as catholic which should be noted.²⁴

(1) The earliest and most obvious meaning of “catholic”, starting with Ignatius, is quantitative. The catholic church is the church that exists everywhere in the inhabited world; it is the universal church. This sense of “catholic” is found, for example, in Augustine, in his dispute with the Donatists. Even after the Reformation, and especially with the spread of “catholic” Christianity to Asia and South America, it was sometimes argued that the “catholic” church is the church to which the greatest number of Christian believers belonged.²⁵

(2) Before long a qualitative sense of “catholic” stood side by side with the quantitative. The catholic church is the church in which “orthodox” doctrines are found, as distinct from those churches in which erroneous doctrine is taught. Cyril of Jerusalem describes the church as catholic not only because it exists from one end of the earth to the other, but also because it teaches in their fulness all doctrines which people must know.²⁶ Catholic doctrines, required to be believed, were, in the well-known words of Vincent of Lérins, those things which were believed “everywhere, always and by all” – *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*.²⁷

(3) A further dimension of catholicity, noted more recently, accentuates the unity of the church and its faith. Here the confession of catholicity goes hand in hand with the confession of unity. Catholicity is that characteristic of the church by which it holds together in a universal communion all particular, “local” churches and their diverse forms of life and witness. The catholicity of the church is thus its capacity to hold in unity all diversity, all particularity. By virtue of its catholicity, the church’s teachings and ordinances ensure continuity across differences in faith and life.

23. These four words, basic for formulating the classical “marks” of the church (*notae ecclesiae*), come from the more ecumenical Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: *pisteuomen eis... mian hagian katholiken kai apostoliken ekklesian*.

24. See H. Berkhof, *De Katholiciteit der Kerk* (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, 1962). This study is still an excellent guide to the important exegetical, historical and systematic issues surrounding the idea of catholicity.

25. It cannot have escaped the notice of those who argued this way that the Protestant churches nonetheless vigorously asserted the *credo ecclesiam catholicam*, especially when, in the later Reformed confessions (and contra Calvin himself), they predicated this of the church visible. See Berkhof, *De Katholiciteit der Kerk*, 15f.

26. Cyril, *Catecheses*, XVIII, 23; see Berkhof, *De Katholiciteit der Kerk*, 13.

27. See “Vincentian Canon”, F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 1700.

Plurality and diversity of expression are legitimised if held in polar relationship with catholicity and unity. Attention to catholicity avoids excessive individualism and isolationism.

(4) A final aspect of catholicity relates to the fullness of the faith or the wholeness of the Gospel. In this aspect, the church's catholicity is inseparable from its apostolicity, especially if this is understood in terms of a material continuity with the faith of the apostles, rather than a continuity of apostolic (episcopal) succession. At any time and in any place the whole of the faith has to be declared in its meaning for the whole of life.²⁸ By virtue of its catholicity, the church, taught by the Holy Spirit, meets partial and one-sided accounts of the Gospel – not to mention misleading or false accounts of it – with the fullness of the Gospel; or so it is claimed. This is a bold claim to make, for the catholicity of the church is as much a goal yet to be attained as a gift already received.²⁹ It also begs the question of the machinery by which the proclamation of the “whole Gospel” is to be ensured. Any church has some form of teaching authority, whether it is a matter of explicit claim or not, but the particular exercise of the *magisterium* in the Roman Catholic Church, including the provision for “infallible” *ex cathedra* papal pronouncements, is regarded as problematic by many Christians. An alternative would be a process in which, in open communication, those who articulate the church's theology see themselves as mutually accountable for their presentation of the Gospel, across national, confessional and ideological barriers. Practical difficulties aside, the question whether the *whole* church, the universal church, can enlarge and correct the necessarily partial accounts of the Gospel that can be given in any one time or place is a serious one. It goes without saying that any such enlargement and correction could come only from other accounts which themselves are no less limited. It is only in “earthen vessels” – and in the totality of these – that the treasure of the Gospel can be contained (2 Cor 4:7).

The idea of the wholeness of the Gospel or the fulness of the faith comes up against the problem of the unicity and the plurality of truth and revelation.³⁰ God's self-revelation – if it is really a *self*-revelation – is one, but it is given in many acts or events of self-disclosure. Even the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, unique and definitive though it is, is a

28. This idea comes from a publication by Daniel Jenkins, *The Nature of Catholicity* (London: 1941), written in part in response to A. M. Ramsay, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London, 1936). See Berkhof, *De Katholiceit der Kerk*, 36f.

29. On the idea of the “marks” of the church as messianic or eschatological predicates, as “statements of hope”, see J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1977) 339.

30. This problem is instructively discussed by Berkhof, *De Katholiceit der Kerk*, 74ff. The same point can be made about God's Word and God's act.

revelation of God, along with *other* revelations of God, as in the history of Israel. Likewise, there is one “economy” of salvation, begun and (to be) ended by the one triune God. But in speaking of this one “economy” we distinguish creation, justification, sanctification, eschatological redemption and new creation, to name only the major metaphors. They encompass one reality, yet are spoken of discretely. It is striking, as Berkhof remarks, that in speaking of the many realities of the faith the New Testament makes repeated reference to the *one*: one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Eph 4:4).³¹ In their plurality they all express one salvation, but none does so exhaustively. For behind it all stands the inexhaustible being and work of God, which even an unlimited series of doxological and explicatory descriptions could not encompass.

From this discussion of the catholicity of the church, together with the unicity and universality of the “economy” of salvation, the question arises whether there are implications for doing theology. Having earlier accentuated the unavoidable and proper contextuality of all theology, what might now be said about the catholicity and the universality of theology? If there is no simple step from the universality of the Gospel to the inter-contextual, even universal, responsibility of theology, have these remarks about catholicity provided a bridge?

IV

I have suggested that every theology is in principle an articulation of the one Gospel about the one “economy” of the triune God. Bearing in mind Tracy’s reference to different “publics”,³² a theology may seek to explain or unfold this Gospel, to defend it from attack by critics or commend it to sceptics or agnostics, or to expose injustices in a social, economic or political system and offer a vision for an alternative society. However, it will to a greater or lesser degree be concerned with a faithful understanding of the being and action of God, the subject of this Gospel, or with a praxis which faithfully furthers the project of God in the world. Its local or contextual nature does not change the fact that its impetus comes from this one Gospel, which has been given to the whole inhabited world (the *oikoumene*). However, it will have a variable degree of openness to the fact that people in other places are seeking to be faithful – or in other times have sought to do so – to the same Gospel.

Robert Schreier, who has “mapped” the contours of the “local” theologies of the last part of the twentieth century with sensitivity and sympathy, argues that “any local theology that is truly Christian has to be engaged with the tradition...”, understood as “the Scriptures, great

31. Berkhof, *De Katholiciteit der Kerk*, 74ff.

32. See note 20 above.

conciliar and confessional statements, the magisterium". He adds, "without that engagement, there is no guarantee of being part of the Christian heritage".³³ Thus he reinforces the point that contextual focus does not justify narrowness of vision. The foundational place of the Scriptures, containing the great stories of the faith, was commented on early in this essay. The reference to the magisterium is, as was noted above, not unproblematic.³⁴ But the point that a local theology has to have an extra-local dimension if it wishes to be regarded as Christian deserves emphasis, even when the content of this "extra-local" or "trans-contextual" element is not yet specified.

Schreiter makes clear that a local theology's engagement with the tradition – the apostolic tradition, the doctrinal tradition, the broad theological tradition of the church – is no easy task.³⁵ The tradition is for many a "foreign country",³⁶ something unfamiliar, unknown. Access to it is made difficult by conceptual and linguistic problems, problems arising from dominant readings of doctrine which leave no room for other readings, and problems resulting from cultural differences. Inequality of power and rejection of paternalism further complicate the engagement with the theological-doctrinal tradition. There is also the perennial problem of treading the fine line between legitimate freedom to think and act differently and the disregard of the tradition that creates division. If a theological writer or community comes to feel that the tradition, the "heritage of faith" that Christians supposedly share, is alien or excluding, its claim will be easily disregarded. This is generally more likely among Protestant theologians and communities than their Catholic counterparts.

In Schreiter's judgement, the tradition's claim to be taken into account is strong, though he is sympathetic to those who see it as outsiders rather than insiders. In his view, the tradition has a normative function, akin to that of grammar in a language.³⁷ The grammar has a relation to all use of a particular language, though it will be explicitly appealed to only rarely. Schreiter sees the tradition as having a similar

33. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 95. In a later work, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), Schreiter identifies new global theological "flows" which, whilst not uniform, represent linked, shared, mutually intelligible discourses; 16. Moreover, these new global theological flows can, because they are so ubiquitous, "lay claim to being the new 'universal' theologies", 20. He wishes therefore to speak, as the title suggests, of a "new catholicity"; see ch. 7.

34. Nevertheless, the question of the nature of the church's teaching authority should be regarded as significant in all churches.

35. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 96-101.

36. I am using Lowenthal's idea of the past as a "foreign country"; D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: University Press, 1985).

37. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 115. He expresses indebtedness to Noam Chomsky's work on language; see 114.

regulative function. Given his strong support for “local” theologies, it is worth quoting him on this at some length.

What of normativeness in all of this? The loci of grammar in Christian tradition would be the loci of orthodoxy.... And just as grammar is more successful in determining what is not a well-formed phrase than what is always a well-formed phrase, so too the loci of orthodoxy, even though sometimes positive in formulation, are really negative or delimiting in function. Creedal formulations set boundaries on belief but do not attempt to describe all possible combinations within these boundaries.

...the loci of orthodoxy do not...create theology for a community. Theology will not flow from these loci any more than performances flow from grammar. Thus while a kind of magisterial theology can be articulated...it of itself cannot be the theology of a community. To derive the community’s theology solely from a magisterial (or biblical) theology is like trying to derive idioms from grammatical rules.

...what of the tradition in all of this?... Tradition is more than the loci of orthodoxy, but it includes that, And tradition is more than the history of theology, but includes that. Without the competence of faith, the loci of orthodoxy are barren. Without the performance texts of communities [the local theologies], Christianity is mute. Without the grammar of orthodoxy, the performance texts disintegrate into babble.³⁸

The point is clear: local theologies cannot be created without some reference, explicit or implicit, to something outside their immediate context. Whatever this “something” is called – tradition, magisterial theology, the loci of orthodoxy, the faith of the church, the body of Christian doctrine – it stands in relation to *all* local theologies; there is no exemption for any theology, irrespective of its provenance. Thus it has a universal scope of applicability. It may be difficult to define precisely – and here the analogy with a grammar breaks down – but it represents the accumulated wisdom of the whole church. Any local theology that closes itself to it risks isolating itself from the wider community of faith and its theological discourse. Essentially, what is at issue here is faithfulness to the Gospel, faithful speaking about God (and acting in God’s name) in the light of the Gospel.

It is not easy to describe in detail a process through which such reference to the heritage of faith might happen. Schreier’s reference to the *magisterium* will not be heard universally as offering an attractive mechanism for considering the wider heritage of faith. The official reception of the work of Latin American liberation theologians is likely

38. Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 116f.

to be a discouragement. At best, a particular community and its theological spokespersons would itself take the initiative for seeing its local theological work within the larger, "ecumenical" framework ("ecumenical" in the literal sense of its reference to the whole inhabited world). This, for many, will not be exchangeable with a body of censorship, a universal court of appeal, with the authority to give or withhold its imprimatur. The informal process of free and open response to the theological work of any community or theologian should be sufficient to ensure assessment of it in terms of its fidelity to the universal heritage of faith.

The underlying issue in this discussion is that of Christian character or Christian identity. If the Christian character of any theological work matters – and it is the argument of this paper that it is essential for any theology that seeks acceptance as Christian – there have to be criteria for determining whether it is coherent with the shared heritage of faith. Very early in the life of the church, before there were fixed creeds, there emerged a "rule of faith", a *regula fidei*, to establish that any given teaching or theology spoke with an authentic Christian voice about the "economy" of salvation. It was a summary of Christian teaching which, it was believed, went back to the Apostles themselves.³⁹ It was especially used in the catechesis of candidates for baptism. Irenaeus' "canon" or "rule" of faith was an outline of Christian teaching, expressing the faith of the church. Formulated over against the teaching of the Gnostics, this faith, he asserted, was one and the same in every place.⁴⁰ In Kelly's phrase, the rule of faith was "the doctrinal content of the Christian faith".⁴¹

The heritage of faith is, of course, more than Christian doctrine. It also includes the spiritual, liturgical, ethical and political wisdom of the church, which teachers of doctrine are sometimes inclined to overlook. But the "doctrinal content of the Christian faith" is nonetheless a constitutive part of the universal heritage of faith, since it expresses with care what is believed and taught in the church about God and the "economy" of salvation, from creation to eschaton. The structure of Irenaeus' rule of faith, foreshadowing the later fixed creeds, was trinitarian, as was the church's worship. The doctrine of the Trinity has to be regarded as one of the basic elements in the church's doctrinal

39. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1972) 2, 29.

40. "...the Church, having received this preaching, and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points of doctrine just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart." *Adversus Haereses* 1.3; J. Stevenson and W. H. C. Frend (eds.), *A New Eusebius*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1987) §93, 112.

41. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 76. The same point can be made about the "rule of faith" of Tertullian, as well as others; see 81-88. It represents a summary, in a variety of formulations, of essential Christian doctrine.

heritage.⁴² Fortunately, it has become clear that this doctrine, far from being abstract and esoteric, is vitally connected with the experience of faith.

V

I have argued that theological work, which on the one hand must be free to explore the relationship between any phenomenon or event and God, must on the other hand remain connected to “the doctrinal content of the Christian faith”.⁴³ Speaking rightly and faithfully about the God of the Gospel requires a grounding in Christian liturgy and life – the prayers and sacraments of the church and Christian action – but it also needs to have a strong anchorage in what the church has taught over the centuries. I have connected this point with an emphasis on the catholicity of the church. The church not only exists universally, but is committed to seeking the fullness of the faith in and through – and over and above – all local and partial expressions of it. In any theology, wherever formulated, the faith of the whole church is at issue. Its Christian character or identity is at stake in this. Other communities of Christians must be able to recognise it as an authentically Christian word (or action). Christian identity, whether the identity of persons or the identity of statements and actions, is properly established broadly and ecumenically, not narrowly and parochially. Contextuality requires particularity, but not isolation. Contextuality and catholicity are not characteristics between which one should be required to make a choice. The local and the universal belong together, mutually enriching and challenging each other. Just as a baptism or a eucharist in one Christian community is a baptism or eucharist of the whole church, so a theological work of one community or its theologians is a theological work of the whole church.

If this is true, it matters whether a local church or its theologians are willing to have their work submitted to the judgement of other churches and other theologians.⁴⁴ Willingness to acknowledge the heritage of the church of the past, and to be bound *to* it and *by* it, is an important element in being a *church* theologian. In addition, the insights and contributions of other churches – in one’s own area and in the *oikoumene* – are a necessary complement (and sometimes a corrective) to what is said and done in one’s own particular place or context. But the converse is also true: a local theology also has something to offer to the whole

42. Developments in trinitarian theology during most of the twentieth century, in marked contrast to the previous one, reinforce this view. It is notable that, whereas some of the more conspicuous “contextual” theologies are strongly and explicitly trinitarian, in others it plays little or no part.

43. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 76.

44. This is one of Schreier’s criteria for determining Christian identity, or fidelity to Christian tradition; *Constructing Local Theologies*, 118.

church, and therefore it must not look only to its own immediate issues, though these will mostly be in the forefront of its concerns. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet 'I have no need of you'." (1 Cor 12:21). What the apostle Paul said about the body, the church, can surely be extended to the church's theology.