

Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: A New Paradigm for the Roman Catholic Church?

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In this paper I wish to raise and discuss certain questions concerning the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church in our times. I wish to explore the situation in which the church currently finds itself and to enquire into what strategies the church might employ to help it live out its mission in faithfulness to the gospel today. There has been an enormous amount of debate within theological circles concerning the notion of postmodernity and postmodern thought, which has even led to the emergence of 'postmodern theology' as a sub-discipline in its own right. This particular paper is concerned more with the current age, than the actual plethora of postmodern theories in detail, themselves. That is to say, it is primarily concerned with the impact upon church life of the fundamental changes in human social existence and culture, which have taken place in the present historical period. This paper shall contend that the Roman Catholic Church has been left somewhat in a state of limbo since Vatican II and still awaits an energising ecclesiological vision to take it into the future.

Introduction: The Dilemmas of Historical and Ecclesiological Paradigms

Although some may speak of the current historical epoch as the era of 'late-modernity', essentially, here I will say a little about what I understand postmodernity to mean. We will settle upon a 'working thesis' in 'naming the present', but also note the various dilemmas that present themselves to the construction and articulation of historical and ecclesiological paradigms, alike. Scholars and researchers from a variety of academic disciplines inform us that we live in an era known as 'postmodernity'. The term, as I have stated elsewhere:

...describes the current historical epoch and, on certain interpretations, stretches as far back as the latter half of the nineteenth century. For some, Nietzsche was both its prophet and its chief intellectual midwife. It is marked by the increasing disillusionment with all overarching explanatory hypotheses for the world in general and human beings and societies in particular. Thus 'grand narratives' such as religion, political ideologies and even science itself are no longer seen to have 'all the answers' to humanity's

questions. The postmodern era is thus marked by a shift from belief in certainties and truth claims to more localised and piecemeal factors. The individual is seen as creating his or her own meaning to a certain extent, rather than receiving it from without.¹

The postmodern era has presented many challenges to the church and to each of those individuals who see themselves as part of that church. Amongst all the debates surrounding the present age, whether one labels it the 'postmodern era' or not, the dilemmas to be faced are nonetheless real whatever nomenclature is settled upon.

Referring to the dilemmas of bracketing history within such paradigmatic strictures, Peter Hodgson states that 'Of course, the discernment of paradigms and of shifts between them is a matter of perspective'.² So here I will acknowledge the potential pitfalls of such historical analysis and suggest that if we allow the importance of realising that *perspective* plays a large part in our discourse of any era, then we may be permitted to proceed in speaking of the 'post-modern era' with reference to the church. In all, we bear in mind the warnings of John O'Malley that different forms of *historical consciousness* lead to notably differing assessments of, in particular, the church and the need for and form of its reform and renewal.³ However, it is not simply *historical* paradigms which concern us here but *ecclesiological* paradigms, also, which are as subject to flux and change as their historical counterparts (and inter-related with them in a number of ways).

As much of the work of Avery Dulles has illustrated, the self-understanding of the church in a particular era can often become so influential and authoritative, that the operational 'model' of the church itself, also takes on the status of a paradigm. More often than not, the most influential paradigms will be, not surprisingly, those espoused by the 'official' or the 'institutional' church authorities.⁴ The problem as many perceive it today, in our so-called 'postmodern era', is one related to the very possibility or, indeed, desirability of the notion of an overarching, uniform or 'privileged' paradigm at all. Do we need, should we and *can* we have an 'official' ecclesiology today? If we can and should, then what form might it

¹ Mannion, Gerard: 'A Virtuous Community – The Self-identity, Vision and Future of the Diocesan Church' in Timms, Noel (Ed.): *Diocesan Dispositions and Parish Voices in the Roman Catholic Church*, Chelmsford, Matthew James, 2001, 125.

² Hodgson, Peter C.: *Winds of the Spirit*, London, SCM, 1994, 54. Although he then somewhat commits the same 'offence' at the same time as trying to illustrate its danger (!)

³ O'Malley, John: "Reform, Historical Consciousness and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*", *Theological Studies*, 32 (1971), 573–601.

⁴ Cf. Dulles, Avery: *Models of the Church*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1988. By paradigm, Dulles is of course (as was Hodgson) utilising the work of Thomas Kuhn. Dulles' later work is more qualified and less conducive to any ecclesiological pluralism than this volume.

take to facilitate best the upholding of the values, principles and mission(s) of the Roman Catholic communities around the globe?

A. Vatican II – An ‘Unfinished Building Site’

For many the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) marked a turning point in the history of the church and in ecclesiology – the self-understanding of the church. However, the irony is that, just when the church finally seemed to have opened its doors to the modern world it found that world was already fast becoming conscious of itself as the *Post*-modern world.⁵

The main problem that I wish to address in this paper is fundamentally linked to Vatican II and its perceived agenda and effects for the church. A large body of opinion exists (from many differing and often competing perspectives), which contends that the vision of Vatican II has yet to come to full fruition throughout the Roman Catholic community and in the relations between the church and the (now *post*-) modern world. Indeed, it is Hermann Pottmeyer’s contention that Vatican II was primarily a *transitional* council – one clearer about what it was moving away *from* rather than what it was moving towards. In a now-famous metaphor, Hermann Pottmeyer has suggested that ‘the work of Vatican II has remained a building site.’ In doing so, he employs the image of the construction of the new St Peter’s Basilica in the sixteenth-century. Construction took place *around* the existing church at that time. Hence four pillars were first built up which remained incomplete until the church could raise the necessary funds to complete its task (and we know what pastoral, not to mention theological issues were raised in certain quarters of Europe in relation to some of the fund-raising devices employed by the church of that time!) Pottmeyer develops the image in relation to the church today:

Alongside the old edifice of nineteenth- and twentieth- century Vatican centralization arise the four mighty supporting columns of a renewed church and a renewed ecclesiology: the church as people of God; the church as sacrament of the kingdom of God in the world; the college of bishops; and ecumenism. While the building erected by centralization awaits demolition, as the old St. Peter’s Basilica did in its day, the four supporting pillars of a renewed church and a renewed ecclesiology wait to be crowned by the dome that draws them into unity. . . .⁶

If we wish to explore how the church might move forwards towards completing the work of Vatican II, we are confronted by a

⁵ A point made also by Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity*, New York, Continuum, 2003, 262–3.

⁶ Pottmeyer, Hermann: *Towards a Papacy in Communion – Perspectives from Vatican Councils I & II*, New York, Crossroad, 1998, 110.

multitude of further complications and it must be asked whether the church has the necessary ecclesiological, theological and moral 'funds' to complete its new jewel, just as it experienced many trials and tribulations in completing St Peter's. Foremost amongst those difficulties, is a plethora of ecclesiologies, of visions and models and paradigms of the church which seem to be fundamentally incompatible. Hence a further preliminary consideration must be undertaken.

B. Competing Ecclesiologies in the Postmodern Era

Inherent to the church throughout the Christian centuries, but pursued with a renewed vigour and sense of urgency since Vatican II is the quest for a vital, energising and sustainable way of being the community called church, both at the local and the universal levels. Naturally, to borrow from Max Weber's wise warnings concerning typologies,⁷ we must realise the proper nature and function of our visions, models and paradigms of the church. Weber warned us that 'ideal types' serve a heuristic purpose (and Dulles added that ecclesiological paradigms also serve an *exploratory* purpose) but such 'ideal types' do not really exist in pure form in reality. Where ecclesiology diverges from Weber is that it is an *aspirational* undertaking, charged with eschatology and hope: the church sees its mission as being bound-up with trying to build that ideal community of justice and righteousness which Christians refer to as the Kingdom of God. Hence Vatican II's image of a *pilgrim* church.

The problem arises when we are faced with competing versions of this very quest. There is a multitude of post-Vatican II ecclesiologies, most notably the now legendary clashes between the various ecclesiologies 'from above' and 'from below', the wrangling over what constitutes an authentic ecclesiology of 'communion', differences which might perhaps be respectively termed the *Communio* and *Concilium* visions of the church (understood, respectively as more conservative and progressive although such terms are too descriptively limiting). What I wish to raise here, in drawing our introductory considerations to a close, is a further problem which this inharmonious situation of ecclesiological pluralism presents the church today, namely, what *sort* of ecclesiology would best help address these three sets of challenges of, firstly, the postmodern situation. Secondly, completing and building upon the work of Vatican II and thirdly, the

⁷ I have briefly discussed Weber's typologies in relation to ecclesial authority in Mannion, Gerard: 'What Do We Mean by Authority?', in Bernard Hoose (ed.): *Authority and Roman Catholicism – Theory and Practice*, Ashgate Press, 2002, 26–7, 31.

difficulties caused by competing and/or incompatible ecclesiologies being in operation within the church at one and the same time.

C. Institutional or Communitarian/Visionary Ecclesiology?

If postmodernity is characterised by the dethronement of the 'grand narrative' and the attendant consequences which such a situation brings (in epistemological, sociological, theological and moral/pastoral fashions), then is one dominant, centrally shaped and 'defended' 'institutional' paradigm the best-suited ecclesiology for the tackling the three problems identified above? Or would a more genuinely communitarian, indeed, visionary form of ecclesiology serve the church better for our times? We are questioning whether *one* fairly rigid and institutional ecclesiological paradigm⁸ is adequate to facilitate the mission and development of Catholic Christian communities in a postmodern world (institutional paradigm here meaning an 'official' and centrally, i.e. *Curially*, defined and promoted ecclesiology). A new situation exists for ecclesial identity, theology, ethics and ecclesiology and so, this paper suggests, perhaps a different *sort* of ecclesiology is now called for. Would a different *form* of ecclesiological undertaking serve the church better today and help overcome ecclesiological differences, as well as facilitating the fulfilment of the vision of Vatican II for the church and addressing the challenges of postmodernity itself?

To explore such a question, I turn next to outline some of those very challenges and shall then identify some ecclesiological responses which many believe have not have proved too successful in confronting our three difficulties. Of course, such problems must be confronted. It is no use merely jumping onto the 'postmodern bandwagon' and trying to grin and enjoy the ride. Postmodernity has brought many incisive and disturbing questions to bear upon the church today. But *how* we understand, interpret and tackle them will illustrate whether or not we have fallen for the postmodern agenda, itself.

I. The Challenges of Postmodernity

Here, I wish merely to outline the challenges posed to the church by the symptomatic features of postmodernism itself. Many of these trends are only relevant to certain societies, though forms of them have had an effect upon most, if not all postmodern societies.

⁸ Recent church documents would appear to endorse such a particular paradigm of what it is to be church, namely, a particular version of the '*Communio*' ecclesiology (e.g. cf. *Communio Notio* and *Dominus Iesus*).

A. *Relativism/Emotivism*

The dethroning of the 'Grand Narratives', the overarching and universal explanatory hypotheses has led to a process which some have called 'detraditionalisation'⁹ whereby there has been a rise in relativism and indeed emotivism which has gone hand in hand with the ongoing march of individualism. What this has meant, in effect, is not simply that absolutes are shunned, but that, for some, everything tends to be judged in relative terms and, indeed, in terms of individual preference and emotional bias. This has been influenced by a further process which emerged in the modern period and which has, in turn, influenced the further collapse or effective 'sterilisation' of ethical frameworks in many societies:

B. *Moral Fragmentation*

The competing moral frameworks of modernity have been so challenged by the reductivistic postmodern theorists and the practical consequences of their ideas and the trends of postmodernity in general, that we have seen a fragmentation of morality in general. In particular, moral absolutes are shunned and the possibility of transferable ethical norms either not considered to be possible or dressed up in political, legal or emotive garb, such as conceptions of 'rights', without due acknowledgement that even such a conception as 'right' in itself presupposes the existence of an ethical framework and basis for moral thinking. The 'pick and mix' relativistic mentality that predominates the 'consumer explosion' of the postmodern age has done great damage to the very notion of morality itself, effectively turning Nietzsche's perspectival hypothesis concerning objective morals into a self-fulfilling prophecy. What matters for many individuals now is not what is seen to be morally right or wrong, good or evil, etc., but what is right or 'best' for that 'me' which sits atop the consumerist age, like a new god, imprisoned in its own heaven and by its own volition.

Such developments pose stark challenges for the church in our times, for they fly in the face of that 'being-in-community' which Christianity seeks to develop and encourage. The church's very business is a *communitarian*, i.e., a social priority. To paraphrase T. Howland Sanks' reflections on an oft-quoted phrase, it is not simply that we should acknowledge that the church *has* a social mission, but, indeed, that the church *is* a social mission.¹⁰ He further

⁹ An informative collection of essays on this concept is *Detraditionalization – Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*, eds Paul Heelas, Scott Lash & Paul Morris, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

¹⁰ Howland Sanks, T: 'Globalization and the Church's Social Mission' in *Theological Studies*, 60 (1999), 626.

states: ‘... the church has understood salvation to pertain not only to individual ‘souls’ but to the transformation of the social, political, and economic order, indeed to the whole cosmic order...’¹¹ Being and community are two of the fundamental concepts of Christian ecclesiology, perhaps *the* two prime ecclesiological concepts, for Christianity bears witness to a God whose self Christians believe has been revealed as three co-equal, co-eternal and co-divine persons whose form of being is understood precisely as a perfect community.

C. *Meaninglessness and a new context for Theodicy*

The processes above, along with the moral fragmentation and the spread, adaptation and further development of Nietzsche’s ideas (whether one believe he wished them to or not) has lead from the path of relativism in the direction of nihilism, which in turn has led to greater meaningless and despair in the lives of countless individuals and even communities. If we wipe away the ‘horizon of meaning’, as Nietzsche’s madman said we had,¹² then we can expect little else by way of result. For the church and theology in particular, this means there is now a new context in our grappling with the problem of human suffering and evil in the world. If trust in a living God and a sense of meaning, purpose, direction and fulfilment are becoming increasingly untenable for many people, then so, too, must our theodicing be approached in a very different fashion from previous eras. As George Pattison has illustrated, the contexts of the varied responses to evil and suffering, increasingly characterised by ‘outrage’ in the late and post-enlightenment era, also confront Christian theology and philosophy of religion with more demanding challenges than simply logic or trust can answer.¹³

D. *‘Consumerisation’ of the Church and Religion*

Indeed, recent studies show that all of the above trends have equally had the same effect upon religion in general as well as the church in particular. No longer are they perceived in terms of obligation, but rather in terms of choice. The ‘pick and mix’ individualistic mentality that is sweeping many societies is also applied to spirituality and even within the ecclesial setting in general. This is witnessed in a profound sense in the sphere of

¹¹ Ibid. 626 & ff.

¹² Cf. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Ed. Bernard Williams, ET Josephine Nauckhoff, Cambridge, CUP, 2001, no. 125.

¹³ Pattison, George: *A Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion*, London, SCM, 2001. See, especially, chaps 8, 9, 10. Cf., also, a study which specifically examines these issues in the context of postmodern theory itself: Lowe, Walter: *Theology and Difference – The Wound of Reason*, Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1993, where Lowe states that *all* theology is, in sense, a grappling with the problem of evil.

ethics and the churches' moral teachings. Peter Brierley has outlined this situation in relation to the Christian church in Britain:

It has become acceptable to make our own choices about a wide variety of aspects of life that were not options for previous generations. This is expressed in all sorts of ways, from the consumerism that has spawned the phrase 'I shop therefore I am', to changing sexual mores... [T]he changing pattern of church attendance is probably at least partly to do with personal choice... [and] people within the church are also exercising choice – about what to believe, who to follow, which church to attend. We have all played musical chairs as children; people now play musical churches as adults... This consumerist approach means that the whole culture in which the church and Christian organizations exercise their ministry is changing radically... [T]he church is facing competition of a kind it has not had to wrestle before. Choice in itself is, of course, neither right nor wrong, but this consumerist culture impacts leadership in a huge number of ways...¹⁴

Indeed, whilst some such developments are welcomed by some, this overlooks the fact that this descent into consumerisation, which has become the new postmodern 'religion', despite what Bauman may say to the contrary, has brought about not real or greater freedom at all, but rather a new form of enslavement.¹⁵

E. *Crises of Legitimation*

All such factors have led to a situation whereby religion in general, as illustrated here with particular reference to the Roman Catholic church in particular, has faced one particular dilemma in this era. That key challenge is to the *authority* of the church, hence the *legitimation* for its principles and moral guidance and so *relevance* in today's world. The challenge to religion and the church comes from a myriad of different sources. For example, there is the challenge posed to the authority of religion from those who reject the value, place and validity of religion upon atheistic grounds. In particular, the so-called 'New materialism' in science led by figures such as Richard Dawkins who reject that there is any positive role for religion to play in our societies today and who, instead, view religion as a pernicious influence and combat religion and theological enquiry at every level.

But, of course, the theories and agendas of reductivistic post-modernism have not gone unchallenged. This is so in both a positive and negative sense. In a constructive sense, just a few examples include those such as David Ray Griffin who seeks to construct a

¹⁴ Brierley, Peter and Wraight, Heather: 'Christian Leadership in a Postmodern Society' in John Nelson (ed.): *Leading, Managing, Ministering – Challenging Questions for Church and Society*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 87–8.

¹⁵ See Bauman, Zygmunt: 'Postmodern Religion'. For a recent study of this 'consumerisation' of the church, cf., Drane, John: *The MacDonaldization of the Church*, London, DLT, 2000.

more positive and communitarian response to the present times.¹⁶ So, too, Hugo Meynell's suggestion that 'a new enlightenment' has emerged to challenge the dilemmas of postmodernity and, in particular, to restate the case for ethics today.¹⁷ A further example is Paul Heelas who challenges the prevalence of 'detraditionalisation'.¹⁸ I shall touch upon other constructive approaches, below. Suffice to say here that a further positive and constructive response to the age comes from those who believe ecclesiology can and must continue to be done in our era.

F. Globalisation – a 'new' Grand Narrative?

Although some of the reductivistic and deconstructionist postmodern theorists have sought to suggest that our era marks a shift from an emphasis upon the universal to a greater attention being paid to the local and the particular, in many respects the exact opposite has actually been the case.¹⁹ We now live in an era of 'globalisation' which already functions, in a variety of ways, as a new 'grand narrative'.²⁰ The local and particular is now directly affected by events and decisions which may originate, literally, across the other side of the globe. Social, economic, cultural and political realities are inter-linked and inter-dependent to an intensity hitherto unparalleled. Technology and the communications revolution have facilitated the development of this phenomenon. T. Howland Sanks states that:

For theologians, our growing awareness and analysis of this phenomenon [i.e., globalisation] is part of the ongoing reading of the signs of the times... We are faced with a new situation that calls for new analysis and conceptualisation.²¹

However, the phenomenon of globalisation and its attendant social and economic consequences has led to a decline in social networks, co-operation and social 'capital' in a number of societies. These

¹⁶ Griffin, David Ray et al: *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, Albany, SUNY, 1989. Griffin's approach is discussed in Tilley, Terence, with Westman, Craig: 'David Ray Griffin and Constructive Postmodern Communalism' in Terence Tilley ed: *Postmodern Theologies*, NY, Orbis, 1996.

¹⁷ *Postmodernism and the New Enlightenment*, by Hugo A. Meynell, Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 2000

¹⁸ Heelas, Paul: 'On Things Not Being Worse, and the Ethic of Humanity' in *Detraditionalization – Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*, eds Paul Heelas, Scott Lash & Paul Morris, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

¹⁹ For a brief and accessible discussion of further challenges to the once 'prevailing' postmodern wisdom in its various forms, cf. the various essays in 'After Postmodernism', the Forum section of *The Philosophers' Magazine*, Issue 20 (Autumn 2002), 34–50.

²⁰ Indeed, globalisation has emerged from other 'grand narratives' and ideologies, not least of all neo-liberal economics and political philosophy.

²¹ Howland Sanks, T: 'Globalization and the Church's Social Mission' in *Theological Studies*, 60 (1999), 625.

changes represent a real and immensely powerful counter-force to the gospel culture and mission. Once again, individualism, driven by materialism, triumphs over community. Many places have witnessed developments little short of the very *death* of community. How does one 'do' ecclesiology against such a backdrop?

II. Problematic Ecclesiological Responses

There have been a multitude of ecclesiological responses to the dilemmas and challenges of the current age. Few doubt that there is any need for some response. Yet some responses appear to have compounded the difficulties for the church in this era. Here I wish to focus primarily upon the predominant 'official' or institutional response and to identify some of the further concerns which such a response has generated. In other words, we need to examine the problems posed by movements from *within* the church community itself, in reaction against the ills of modernity and postmodernity.

A. *From the 'Open Church' to Neo-Exclusivism*

The current authoritarian stance taken by the institutional Roman Catholic church is one major response to the dilemmas facing religion and the church in the postmodern era. In order to safeguard aspects of its rich doctrinal and moral tradition, in order to maintain its position of influence in shaping communities for the better, the church has adopted a degree of intransigence with regard to voices of dissent within its own ranks. This approach is characterised by authoritarianism, a renewed hierarchical structure and governance of the church and ever-increasing centralisation of power and decision-making upon Rome. To many, this runs counter to the spirit and tone of the documents that emerged from Vatican II and the many theological and ecclesiological developments which they inspired. Still more, for some, it runs counter to a *pneumatological* understanding of the church.

David Ray Griffin has described the stance of the institutional church in relation to the postmodern age as 'reactionary conservative postmodernism'.²² Many ecclesialogists and theologians have viewed this development with concern. They believe that the institutional church is somehow trying to alter the boundaries of what counts as acceptable and orthodox belief and practice in the church and,

²² Griffin, David Ray et al: *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, Albany, SUNY, 1989. His assessment is based upon the teachings issued under the name of John Paul II, which naturally are shaped by and representative of the institutional and central church 'powers' in general. However, I do not wish to imply that Griffin would agree with the analysis offered here, but his terminology is helpful and his own analysis constructive.

likewise, the church is seeking to dictate a new and more restrictive role for the ‘Catholic’ theologian.

B. *Redrawing the Lines of Orthodoxy – The Postmodern Magisterium*

The chief ‘architect’ of such developments is the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (CDF), under the leadership of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Essentially, both these developments involve both a review and reinterpretation of the church’s teaching authority, i.e., its magisterium, itself (cf. the debates surrounding the ‘*Motu Proprio*’ *Ad Tuendam Fidem*). This in turn informs the current ‘official’ *Communio* ecclesiology which shapes church teaching, mission and policy. Commentators have been asking whether or not this is a true ecclesiology of communion – i.e. is it ecclesiological rhetoric or ecclesial reality?²³ I would add that any ‘imposed ecclesiology’ might be incapable of serving as a truly facilitating ecclesiology whereby community can be enhanced for the local churches which try to live out such an official ecclesiology by putting the gospel into practice. Two CDF documents which illustrate the developments mentioned here and the ecclesiology which informs them are *Domum Veritatis*, an instruction on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian which sets definite parameters to what constitutes legitimate areas of inquiry for Catholic theologians, as well as limiting the levels of permissible disagreement with official church teaching (dissent is ruled out), and, again, *Communio Notio* – the letter to bishops on the right and wrong interpretations of the ecclesiology of communion. This latter document aptly illustrates the ‘imposed’ character of this currently prevailing paradigm.

C. *Neo-Exclusivism – ‘Beyond Criticism’*

Indeed, such developments within the church seem to be somewhat hardening the stance of the church in relation to those who disagree with its teachings both within and without its walls. The radical openness to the world which Vatican II proclaimed seemed to have been transformed, firstly, into a much more cautious approach and, in recent decades, into a more hostile and antagonistic attitude towards the world and those Catholics who believe in greater dialogue than the official paradigm appears to allow for. It appears that the official church has adopted a position, which mirrors developments in other denominations, and even – in some respects – the postmodern slide towards a form of fundamentalism (i.e. a rigid insistence upon adhering to defined fundamentals), which sociologists

²³ See, also, the exploration of this question in McLoughlin, David: ‘*Communio Models of Church – Rhetoric or Reality?*’ in Bernard Hoose (ed.): *Authority and Roman Catholicism – Theory and Practice*, Ashgate Press, 2002, 181–190.

have identified as an alternative reaction to the current historical epoch.²⁴

For example, recent curial documents would appear to discourage many forms of 'comparative' method in theology, instead emphasising the unique and even superior character of Christian faith, doctrine and hence theology. This mirrors what Roger Haight has described as a *de facto* move towards the *isolation* of Christian Theology and the church from culture:

The localization and compartmentalization of theology is a temptation for many today. Some theologians have become seduced by the very systems of modernity and post modernity which they attack. That is, they try to escape them by isolating the church from culture and conceiving of theology as a purely confessional and fideist discipline.²⁵

George Pattison, referring to such movements in other denominations (albeit in the context of clashing methodologies in the philosophy of religion) has spoken of an attitude being adopted which is that certain positions, teachings and traditions are so privileged in relation to the human story, that they are 'beyond criticism' and thus immune to the blows of postmodernity.²⁶

Varieties of such views breed a most insular outlook which often leads to a refusal to enter into *genuine* dialogue with differing theological and philosophical perspectives, rejecting, in particular, the contributions of the social sciences towards promoting a harmonious communitarian outlook and anthropology. They also would appear to reject many of the claims of other faith traditions, out of hand. In contrast, there have recently been some attempts at countering such closed approaches by reinvigorating theological liberalism, especially by drawing upon the merits of developments in:

... the fledgling field of comparative theology, where a number of younger thinkers are perforce challenging current academic and theological boundaries to explore the Christian tradition in ways which should prove 'mutually illuminating'.²⁷

²⁴ Cf. Bauman, Zygmunt: 'Postmodern Religion' in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas, Oxford, Blackwells, 1998, 55–78.

²⁵ Haight, Roger: 'The Church as Locus of Theology' in *Why Theology?* (*Concilium* 1994/6, pp 13–22).

²⁶ Pattison, George: *A Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion*, London, SCM, 2001. Prevalent amongst such movements in recent times has been the (predominantly Anglican) 'Radical Orthodoxy' movement which, in some of its forms, appears to promote a neo-exclusivism and seeks to hark back to some imagined 'golden era' of doctrine and theology 'untainted' by separate philosophical interests and questions of secular relevance.

²⁷ Cf. Burrell, David: 'Radical Orthodoxy in a North American Context' in Laurence P. Hemming (ed.): *Radical Orthodoxy – A Catholic Enquiry*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, 28. For further aspects of comparative, as well discussions of additional forms of theological method and enquiry which are markedly different to the 'Radical Orthodox' and 'Beyond Criticism' forms of approach to the subject, cf. J'annine Jobling and Ian Markham (eds): *Theological Liberalism – Creative and Critical*, London, SPCK, 2000.

But there are also many Roman Catholic ‘varieties’ of such exclusivistic traits that exhibit parallel strategies arguments and agendas, which can be witnessed in other churches where even seemingly more ‘progressive’ thinkers offer long and drawn out apologies for the various forms of what Frank Kirkpatrick has called ‘the theology of difference’ which ‘argues that the ethics of the church and that of the state (the governmental form of society) are radically different’.²⁸ Such theologies encourage a renewed ‘siege mentality’ for Christians who should view themselves and their communities in relation to the world in terms of ‘alien citizenship’. The tendency is toward a sectarian mentality, despite whatever aspirational vision for the kingdom is attached to such an ecclesiology and moral framework. Beyond Catholicism, Stanley Hauerwas obviously represents one of the foremost examples of such thinking in terms of a developed ecclesiology and it is puzzling that he thinks the more outward-looking discipline of virtue ethics can supply the foundations for such an, in effect, sectarian ecclesiology.

Thus versions of such ecclesiological thinking – as definitive responses to the challenges of postmodernity – are alive and spreading in the Roman Catholic church today. They ignore the pertinent observation of James Hanvey, in relation to Radical Orthodoxy:

The church is the locus and mediation of presence and knowledge, and as the community of discourse, it has epistemic and ontological depth; it is the most effective resistance to nihilism. If Radical orthodoxy is to develop, it must also develop an ecclesiology, for without it theology relies too much on personality; it becomes a deracinated and alienated activity, prey to every fad that offers relevance and recognition. If it is to develop an ecclesiology, then finally Radical Orthodoxy must develop ecclesially: it must fulfil itself as Churched. No more than any of us, can it duck the question most posed in a nihilistic age, that of authority.²⁹

Hanvey’s remarks actually can also be utilised as a warning to the Roman Catholic church, also, because all such thinking identified here in relation to the likes of Hauerwas, Radical Orthodoxy, and the ‘theology of difference’, including the ‘siege mentality’ and even ‘sectarian’ and isolationist tendencies (in sociological parlance, more ‘world-renouncing’ than ‘world-affirming’) are so prominent

²⁸ Kirkpatrick, Frank G: *The Ethics of Community*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, 104–5. As opposed to the following assertion by Edward Schillebeeckx: ‘There is no revelation in ethical matters; ethics is a human process. It is not God who says “This is ethically permitted or forbidden.” It is human beings who with reflection and experience must say this and establish it’, *I am a Happy Theologian*, London, SCM, 1994, 70. So there is no such thing as a ‘Christian ethic’. Though Kirkpatrick associates such a theology with the ‘philosophy of communitarianism’ (104) – which itself can have many forms and actually can work *against* an isolationist position in theology. Naturally, the divisions between ‘opposing camps’ can never be understood in simply black and white terms.

²⁹ Hanvey, James: ‘Conclusion – Continuing the Conversation’ in Laurence P. Hemming (ed.): *Radical Orthodoxy – A Catholic Enquiry*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, 169.

in much Roman Catholic institutional thinking and documentation and even more so amongst many of the conservative groups who currently enjoy most favour with Rome.

Such thinking and such groups fail to see that their failure to engage in true dialogue actually makes them prone to the temptations of the very modern and post-modern ills they despise. Their ecclesial vision contains serious gaps and has yet to be fully 'Churched'. Above all else, such thinking and such groups appear to refuse to address that central question of authority. A failure to do so is seriously impacting upon the effectiveness of church leadership at every level of the church, both local and universal alike.

Relativism can, indeed, be a serious threat to religion, morality and, above all, community. But is the correct reaction to the ills of our age to transform the community of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth into an authoritarian institution which tolerates little dissent for fear that the cherished traditions of that church will be lost?

I suggest not. Nor is the correct response a flight into Nietzschean perspectival and/or emotivism and consumerist individualism (where one pretends every significant factor in life is a matter of personal preferences and choice). This leads to the loss of community and to the absence of any agreed vision at all. But human rights, so steadfastly defended by the church, are often infringed and denied *within* the church itself. If the institutional church usurps fundamental human freedoms *within* its own confines, then it undermines the authority it has to address infringements of liberty across secular aspects of various societies. If the church seeks to inform moral debates and to intercede to uphold human dignity throughout the world community, then its own cherished teachings, in particular the deep and rich tradition of social doctrine, must be seen to be applied, first and foremost, within the church community itself.

III. From Confrontation to Conversation

What emerges from the foregoing is the need for a more durable, transferable and flexible ecclesiology that is always pastorally/praxis-oriented. This requires more self-critical ecclesiological reflection in a sustained and open fashion. Ecclesiology should and must be *empowering* – the key question in forming any vision of the church should be how to enable the enhancement of justice, freedom and love within and without the Christian community.

How might one settle upon a differing approach in relation to these issues in a more positive fashion? What methodological principles might be discerned in order to begin such a task? First and foremost, recent research and ventures suggest that one must embrace a *conversational* method. But a *true* conversation can never

be one sided.³⁰ There is a need to flesh out what a systematic and conversational method for dialogue might look like. In such a venture, one may both learn from ecumenical ventures and help make some contribution, however small, to further ecumenical undertakings in the future.

A. *Dialogue and the Priority of Love*

In moving towards suggestions which might contribute to a conversational *method*, the importance of dialogue and the priority of love (*caritas*) is attested to in much church and ecumenical literature (e.g. *Ecclesiam Suam*) but, given the forgoing, what is the ecclesial reality here and what is mere rhetoric? In particular, there is a need for a dialogical and empowering paradigm of *authority*? Furthermore here, we can learn *much* from the recent insights of comparative theology, in particular Keith Ward's notion of 'Pluralistic Christianity' and Roger Haight's call for a 'dialogical' mission to complement the church's mission of witness.³¹

The importance of *humility* in developing a method for dialogue (and in countering exclusivistic tendencies),³² wider issues pertaining to the nature and purpose of church authority, along with a return to a broader debate concerning the *Sensus Fidelium* and an appreciation of the *true* nature of authority should each be attended to as part of this task.

Much of the literature relevant to such debates indicates that authority is an interactive process, a two-way engagement which has communitarian implications and always requires assent. The Gospel model of authority shows us that its true purpose is to enhance justice, freedom and love. If aspects of Church authority fail to meet such criteria, then the church risks being devoid of true authority. The Community of faithful as a *whole* is the legitimate bearer of authority. The pressing question for our new millennium is *how* to enable the enhancement of justice, freedom and love and hence community?

To help clarify the theological thinking behind all these efforts, we would do well to reflect upon Leonardo Boff's Christology based upon a 'hermeneutics of the human'³³ and Teilhard de Chardin's

³⁰ Of related concern here is the fact that the Roman Synods of recent decades have, in effect, been nothing of the sort for the very same reason. Cf. Ludwig Kaufmann, 'Synods of Bishops – Neither "concilium" nor "synodos"' in J. Provost, K. Walf (eds.), *Collegiality put to the Test, Concilium* (1990, 4), 67–78.

³¹ Haight, Roger, 'The Church as Locus of Theology', *Concilium*, (1994, 6), 13–22.

³² Had Luther only observed his own theology of humility more in *practice*, who knows what might have been in his conversations with church authorities *before* the final break with Rome!

³³ Cf. Leonardo Boff, 'Images of Jesus in Brazilian Liberal Christianity', in J. Miguez-Bonino (ed.), *Faces of Jesus* (1977), where Boff, himself, states that this phrase best describes his monumental work, *Jesus Christ Liberator*. (English trans. London, SCM, 1978)

statement that 'Fuller Being is closer union...'³⁴ and definition of love as 'an internal propensity to unite'.³⁵ Such reflection might enable us to appreciate how *community*, 'koinonia' should be interpreted as, literally, '*being* concerned with love', above all else, and hence we should turn our attention firmly towards striving to overcome divisions. Where might all such considerations lead us?

B. *The Science of Bridgebuilding*
– *Towards 'An Ecumenical Intercultural Hermeneutic'*

This process begins with reflection on the subject of the nature of 'true' Catholicity and the *dynamics* of tradition and truth. The rise and importance of historical consciousness informs such a debate, as should Hans Küng's principle that 'Being Catholic, then, means being ecumenical in the fullest sense',³⁶ along with Roger Haight's argument that there now exists, within Christianity 'many magisteria', which must be engaged with. As T. Howland Sanks argues, the social mission that the church is/has 'is and always has been socially and culturally contextualised',³⁷ so the task to be addressed here is how the Roman Catholic church in particular and, indeed, all other churches in general, can go about facilitating *true* unity in diversity.

Furthermore, in order for our efforts to bear fruit, we need to channel our energies into further developing what liberation theologians call 'macro-ecumenism' (or what Gregory Baum calls a 'wider ecumenism') governing our relations with those within and without the church, mirroring the openness to the world which much of the teaching of Vatican II sought to foster for, if anything else exhibits a positive dimension to the postmodern age (and thus for our notions of ministry) it is the fact that the world can and often is a much more open place, for all the risks involved in it being so. At the 5th Faith and Order Conference of the *World Council of Churches*, held at Santiago, the WCC General Secretary, Konrad Raiser, issued the theologians with a challenge: to foster a constructive dialogue amongst cultures without dissolving difference into consensus. In other words, he was espousing the need for an 'ecumenical intercultural hermeneutic'. Such a challenge brings together not just divided Christians, but human pilgrims of each and every background onto common ground. It is a call to *communion in mission*.³⁸ So, in particular, we must take up this challenge posed by Raiser, i.e., to foster constructive dialogue amongst cultures that, as well as his

³⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *Phenomenon of Man*, New York, Harper, 1959, 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁶ Küng, Hans: *The Church – Maintained in Truth*, London, SCM, 85.

³⁷ Howland Sanks, T: 'Globalization and the Church's Social Mission', 626.

³⁸ Echoing the ARCIC document *The Gift of Authority*, London, CTS, 1999.

call for measures towards ‘Opening space for a culture of dialogue and solidarity’.³⁹

1. *Method and Meaning*

The concern here is not simply with method for its own sake. Any methodology, by nature, should be facilitating, a means to end: the prime concern, of course is the end in itself, that community enhancement about which I shall say more, shortly. The method, to facilitate conversation, true dialogue should be aimed towards overcoming polarisations and factionism for example, striving to establish some common ground between the *Concilium* and *Communio* ecclesiologies within Roman Catholicism. In shaping the conversational method, naturally, those theoretical experts and professional practitioners of God-talk – the theologians can help. That, after all, is their vocation whether they see this or not. How *exactly*, might they help? What themes need to be examined in more detail to facilitate the shaping of this method?

2. *The Role of The Theologian*

a. *Humility in Method: Learning to Listen, Informing the Debate*

Echoing our earlier reflections, the theologian, in going about his or her task, should not adopt a disposition of arrogance, nor encourage absolutism, nor seek to promote the *imposition* of fixed views, ways and answers. Rather, it is the theologian’s task to attempt to *discern* the mystery which Christians call God, as well as the mystery of human existence and, also, to discern signs of the times, as John XXIII urged us. (No true theodicy could exist without doing so for the challenge of evil comes anew in each and every age in a multitude of ever-new forms).

b. *Building Bridges through Insight and Dynamic Traditions*

The Pope is known as the ‘Supreme Pontiff’ and thus should be a master ‘bridge-builder’, as the name suggests. It is the theologian’s task to build bridges too, and to suggest ways in which this noble art might be done. The theologian can help do so through her or his reflections, through a variety of conversations, through drawing from the well of wisdom and experience that contains an abundance of treasures from the history of the church and humanity in general. So, too, must theologians avail themselves of the light of reason – in their

³⁹ Cf. Raiser, Konrad: ‘Opening Space for a Culture of Dialogue and Solidarity – The Missionary objectives of the WCC in an Age of Globalization and Religious Plurality’, Lecture at the *SEDOS* Seminar, Ariccia, 19 May, 1999, (this can be viewed at www.sedos.org/english/raiser_2.html).

own work and lives and through learning its gifts in the life and work of other fellow travellers on the journey towards meaning and salvation. Of course, the theologian must *articulate* all this, too, for it is the very ‘stuff’ of God-talk: words about that which gives us being and somehow sustains us in that very being.

c. *Ecumenics: “an attempt to think Christianity as a whole.”*

This phrase was John Macquarrie’s definition of Systematic Theology (*On Being a Theologian*, SCM, 1999, 35). But, from a methodological standpoint, it could easily refer to theology in general. Indeed, it could just as well describe the science of Ecumenics: for no theological discipline is more totally systematic in its embracing of *every* aspect of that human quest for meaning and salvation which we know as Christianity. Because theology can encompass such features of the lives of human individuals and communities alike (a *shared* quest) so, too, can it thus help shape a *vision* for that *empowering* ecclesiology which is the purpose of our quest. In doing so, it must acknowledge and investigate the inter-relation between anthropology, ecclesiology and theology: the tradition of moving from a greater understanding self to that of society/the world, and onto that of what we know as God.

Where might the development of such a method lead us and what is the end in itself to which this methodology might provide a means? Firstly, we might gain a new, dialogical and empowering paradigm of *authority* itself, by showing the importance and priority of:

3. *Pastoral Vision and Community Enhancement*

Those in positions of particular influence and authority in the church need to realise that their exercise of that authority, their governance of the communities, local, national and universal, must be shaped by a vision of the church, an ecclesiology that puts pastoral needs and community enhancement at the forefront of the priorities and policies. It is those in authority who are entrusted with the tasks of facilitating religious liberty and enhancing community in the present age.

Such a model of authority would need to encourage the following:

a. *Collaboration, Service and Leadership*

If we look at MK 10:42–45, we see a model of authority based upon the humble service of all. In such a model collaboration is not seen as a threat, but instead brings the community beyond new frontiers, and allows a communal grasp of new discoveries concerning being and fulfilment. In political philosophy, there is much talk today of ‘subsidiarity’. This concept, from an earlier phase of Roman Catholic

social teaching can be reclaimed and reinvigorated by theology and the church once again. A model of true subsidiarity might be built upon traditions such as Mt 18:20. Whatever the recent apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Gregis* (October 16th, 2003) states about subsidiarity not being applicable *within* the church, it is undeniable that this has not always been the case (and nor should it be so). This document simply follows the synod of 1985 in contradicting even Pius XII on this very matter.⁴⁰

b. *Moral Vision and the Wider Community*

Praxis, of course must always be the result of all method and every theology in general – and of ecclesiology in particular. The key to real, positive and successful praxis is the building and maintenance of partnerships, both within and without one's own Christian and religious and existential traditions.

The construction of a methodological basis for a conversational disposition to facilitate the dialogue of authority that the postmodern age needs could help meet such a challenge. Thus, this paper offers but a tentative contribution in the form of various suggestions towards this task. What emerges as a further defining methodological and practical principle from such considerations is the need to harmonise *ethics* with ecclesiology – our understanding the fundamental relationship between what the church *is*, and what the church *does*.

c. *Ethics and Ecclesiology – The Ethics of Community*

In our attempts to flesh out what a systematic and conversational method for dialogue might eventually look like, our quest builds upon other recent ventures which seek to integrate ecclesiology with ethics, in order to emphasise that what informs the building of the community must always be morally consistent with the gospel ethic and, in turn, that our moral frameworks are always shaped by our communitarian needs and values.⁴¹ Such attempts might likewise be informed by studies from the social sciences and political philosophy in fields such as international relations, conflict resolution and the broad field of postmodern studies itself. In particular, the recent work of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC should be engaged with here, along with other discussions from various church

⁴⁰ See the discussion by Peter Huizing 'Subsidiarity' in G. Mannion, R. Gaillardetz, J. Kerkhofs and K. Wilson (eds.), *Readings in Church Authority – Gifts and Challenges for Contemporary Catholicism*, Harmondsworth, Ashgate, 2003, 207–09. The full article appears in G. Alberigo, J. Provost (eds) *Synod 1985 – An Evaluation, Concilium* (1986), 118–123.

⁴¹ I discuss the relation between the two in greater detail in two forthcoming articles, 'Ethics and Ecclesiology in a Postmodern Age – Comparative Considerations', and 'Systematic Preliminaries on Ethics and Ecclesiology – Act and Being in the Church'.

groups and by individual theologians which examine various aspects of the inter-relationship between ecclesiology, ethics and ecumenism.

III. Transcending Competing Ecclesiologies

Finally, I turn to more substantive explorations of the way forward for the church today.

A. From 'Emerging Theologies' to 'Emerging Ecclesiologies'

Theological thinking can help inform the development of such a 'conversational method', and hence empowering ecclesiology, not least of all because, I suggest, theology and the ethics of community both help inform the theoretical beginnings of such dialogue – e.g. how Trinitarian theology (God understood as a community of persons) helps inform our own ethics of community-building and how that in turn factors into shaping a self-identity for the church today which is neither exclusivistic nor stuck in the past. Furthermore, just a glance at the works of some of the great theologians demonstrates how the priority of love, which we outlined above, ties in with this – each of Schleiermacher, Aquinas and Augustine on the Trinity, for example, suggest that love is the *key* to the mystery of God *and* of what it is to be human in community: Trinity and society. Ontological questions become important again, both for the being of the church and its own being-in-relation to the wider communities and societies.

In particular, ontology is revisited in our highlighting the desire for union amongst Christians. Liberation theology champions a 'monistic view of history' (i.e., no secular/sacred divide) and in allowing such a principle to govern our thinking here, we may come to appreciate more fully how authentic being has love as its pre-requisite and that love needs the other, whether this be in individual or communitarian terms. In one sense, this offers partial articulation of an ecclesiological application of the thinking of Teilhard de Chardin and, in particular, his belief that love unites living beings by what is deepest in themselves⁴² and that closer unity is brought about through greater consciousness: that is to say, through vision, seeing.⁴³ Obviously, we might add, that engaging in the art of conversation, i.e. dialogue, aids this quest for unity.

With that in mind, it is important to remind ourselves just exactly *how much* the Euro-North American world can learn about how to meet our ecclesiological challenges from those other parts of the world where a great deal of new theological thinking and hence

⁴² Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 265.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 264.

ecclesiological practice has been taking place for some time now. The priority of praxis is a common theme in many of these ventures. As Marc Reuver's comparative analysis has shown, we see themes emerge such as, in Latin America, an emphasis upon love, peace and justice over oppression and death; in Africa the rise of 'Prophetic theology', very much focusing thinking and energies on the here and now; whilst in the radically pluralistic cultures of Asia we see an energising 'Contemplative commitment' which goes in tandem with a 'Spirituality of Action'. In all, ethics and ecclesiology are naturally entwined.⁴⁴

From such emergent theologies, we have witnessed the birth of new forms of ecclesial thinking, organisation and practice – i.e., 'emerging ecclesiologies'. The Euro-North American world has much to gain from these communities in its efforts to confront the dilemmas of postmodernity.

In seeking to integrate aspects of these positive ecclesiological developments in our own contexts and churches, particularly in our efforts to provide the church with a renewed and continued relevance today, to enable the gospel to be put into practice in our communities, and to resist the rise of neo-exclusivism, we might adopt and build upon the four theses 'against sectarianism' offered by Roger Haight: i.e., radical transformations which our age has witnessed in our understanding of the idea of *place*, the idea of *church*, the *idea* of theology and, finally, the *focus* of theology.

Let us examine each of these theses in turn, which afford us insight into the nature and role of theology today, vis-à-vis the church as Haight contends that the inter-relationship between theology and the church has been transformed as a result of developments in knowledge, ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue and the movements for human liberation.

1. **The Idea of Place:** By this, Haight means the complexification and explosion of knowledge has transformed our very understanding of what a 'place' actually is. He argues, however, against any compartmentalisation and localisation of theology – (as some have advocated in a reaction to the developments of postmodernity). Theology transcends church and addresses *all* reality. The reality of human life is one

2. **The Idea of Church:** Echoing some of our earlier discussion, Haight here address the rise of historical consciousness and the ecumenical movement. The church cannot be restricted to one confessional movement. And any genuine ecumenical theology must transcend particular authorities and particular magisteria. The *entire* Christian church is

⁴⁴ Reuver, Marc, 'Emerging Theologies – Faith Through Resistance' in *The Ecumenical Movement Tomorrow*, eds. Marc Reuver, Friedrich Solms & Gerrit Huizer, Kampen, Kok Publishing, 1993, 263–80.

theology's primary context. His analysis leads him to argue that we cannot confine theology to patently ecclesial matters alone, nor can one church alone authorise and dictate the shape and form of theology in our ecumenical age.

3. **The *Idea of Theology***: Here Haight addresses the encounter of Christian theology and the church with world religions. Theology has much to learn and gain from its dialogue with other faiths, which establishes new horizons for its sources and norms. Again echoing our earlier discussion, he reminds us that we now live in a 'dialogical situation' which calls for unending conversing *and* learning from such encounters. Thus Haight speaks of such dialogue complementing the mission of church, with the sources and data for theology greatly expanded through this dialogical situation.

4. **The *Focus of Theology***: Here, Haight reflects upon the population explosion and the attendant massive suffering which the world has witnessed through this and other global developments. The methodological lesson to be learned here is that theology must address *real* lives and it must always bear in mind the fundamental social and public dimensions of human existence, as well as the interpersonal and transcendent. In other words, theology should never be a purely individualistic discipline, with regard to its chief areas of concern.

Essentially, Haight is seeking to answer the question: 'what constitutes authoritative theology today?' in a manner that seeks to move theology beyond all narrow, sectarian, absolutist and universalising stances: 'theology transcends the church'. There is a new reality for the church to take account of, and this naturally means a new reality for authority, structures and theology throughout the Christian church. This further develops the particularly ecclesiological implications of such arguments.

B. *The Church and the Churches*

This returns us to our considerations concerning neo-exclusivism and the imposition of an 'official' ecclesiology. We need a full and informed debate on the true relations between the local and the universal church. The focus of this debate might be as follows. Firstly, an open and frank discussion of the ecclesiological intentions behind such documents as *Communio in Notio* – which aptly, being a letter to bishops on the right and wrong interpretations of the ecclesiology of communion, – for some – illustrates the 'imposed' character of this currently prevailing paradigm. Secondly, a 'deconstruction' of documents such as *Dominus Iesus*, which should involve

a sustained discussion of the recent protracted debate between Cardinals Ratzinger and Kasper.⁴⁵ Thirdly, there should be an analysis of the wider ecumenical implications concerning the relation between the *churches* local and the church universal. A critical engagement with some aspects of the recent work of Cardinal Avery Dulles and Jean-Marie Roger Tillard would be of great relevance here.

C. From Virtue Ethics to a 'Virtue Ecclesiology' for Today

Drawing all the foregoing analysis and discussion together, and in an attempt to provide suggested starting points for such systematic foundations for contemporary and future ecclesiology, we can draw ecclesiological parallels with modern moral philosophy, in particular in relation to the *After Virtue* debate and subsequent developments in virtue ethics.⁴⁶ The ecclesiological dilemma of the church, local and universal, mirrors the dilemma in modern moral philosophy to which virtue ethicists refer.

In particular, the current ecclesiological situation mirrors that famous parable which Alasdair MacIntyre sets out at the beginning of *After Virtue*, where he compares the current situation with regards to ethics and morality to some futuristic scenario where scientists and science have been assailed and persecuted to extinction (having been blamed for a series of environmental catastrophes). When, many centuries down the line, people try to reconstruct science from various fragments of textbooks and artefacts which remain, the task is impossible because no one is sure any longer of the context in which such things gained meaning and were useful. MacIntyre believes that morality today resembles such a situation – assailed by the Enlightenment and modernity, most forms of ethical theory no longer make sense, having been taken out of their original contexts and wider frameworks in which they made sense.

Ethics has a history and is not timeless, universal, absolute and changing in nature. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre offered a bleak picture of modern ethics, whereby too many competing and contradictory moral frameworks were jostling for primacy. Many such frameworks had long since been rendered meaningless, having been divorced either historically, culturally or intellectually from the contexts in which they arose and were hence applicable and relevant.

I suggest an analogous situation exists in relation to contemporary ecclesiology. And hence the solutions which MacIntyre and

⁴⁵ With regards to this debate, Kilian McDonnell has 'set the ball rolling' in 'The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal and the Local Churches', *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 1–24.

⁴⁶ The arguments put forth here have developed out of my earlier 'A Virtuous Community'.

like-minded figures offer to address the plight of morality are also relevant to our ecclesiological debates. MacIntyre's preferred solution is to advocate a return to the transferable disposition of virtue ethics, which is relative to context and hence more durable against the poundings of the ebb and flow of culture and history alike.

What form would might such an analogous solution to that offered by virtue ethics take? Just as, in that debate, dispositional virtues (as against, for example, an emphasis upon rules or consequences) were recommended as the foundation for a flexible and more transferable moral framework, so, too, should we seek to develop a character-oriented ecclesiology (i.e., our considerations of what the church is and what the church does, must *always* go hand in hand). Such an ecclesiology would better enable the church to confront the 'culture of death' and the prevalence of destructive forms of relativism which it perceives in our postmodern age.

It would be able to do so, because such an ecclesiology would be less fixed, less imposed and less alien to certain cultures and contexts because it would be based upon a fundamental orientation of the individual and community towards the good and hence God (and vice-versa). This, in contradistinction to an ecclesiology based upon rigid conformity, authoritarianism and fixed absolutes in orthodoxy along with a restrictive understanding of theological enquiry.

But this would *not* be akin to Stanley Hauerwas' attempts to appropriate virtue ethics in his ecclesiological thinking. Instead, I suggest Hauerwas is mistaken in his interpretation of the nature of virtue ethics. If he were not, then his ecclesiology would not have developed into the neo-exclusivistic and insular 'resident aliens' concept which characterises his recent thinking. Again, parallels with Roman Catholicism can here be illuminating. Though there already exists a rich vein of material which brings together concerns the concerns of Christianity with the discipline of virtue ethics, our concern here differs, in its attempt to explore how one might seek to integrate valuable contributions from virtue ethics into the particular debates concerning authority, governance and ecclesiological vision in the Roman Catholic church as it attempts to meet the challenges of a postmodern age. The gospel of life is commended as being a radical and transferable ethic of virtue, in itself. It is both dispositional and communitarian in outlook.

D. 'Reinventing the Church?' – From The Church and the Future to the Church *of* the Future

I have offered a short portrait of the 'postmodern situation' of the church and identified particular challenges which it must face, as well as identified problems with some of the strategies which have been employed in attempting to do so. I have introduced a number of

themes and considerations to help consolidate the case for the methodological principles of a new kind of ecclesiology which might prove more profitable in the current age and beyond.

This is not the point at which to attempt to reach a *definitive* conclusion, except to say that our task is not about 'reinventing the church' anew. Indeed, this article has *not* sought to develop or offer a *new* overarching and universal ecclesiological paradigm as such. Rather it has sought to argue that our task is to explore the means which will enable us to transcend the competing and negative ecclesiologies currently in vogue in order to allow our communities to flourish in their witness to the gospel. The emphasis upon the role of *ethics* in ecclesiology is here paramount. Indeed, a case has been made for Christians to realise that the gospel is a call to see and hence practice ethics *as* ecclesiology.

Above all, we should seek to make the case for understanding mission today and the life of the church in terms of a combination of 'seeing the world aright' and transformative action. Both of these demands due attention to our ecclesiology and ethics in tandem, for in understanding ourselves, our communities, in understanding reality, we come to see how far from the true goal for humanity, reality, we are. Thus there is simply a need to remind ourselves of the need to travel along the way together, to commit ourselves to that *syn-hodos*, the common way towards transformative communion. But all of this demands resolute moral and hence political praxis -in unison- in order to go further along that way

Above all, our conversation must be never ceasing, even if, at times, we listen to the silence of the mystery that brings us into being and whom Christians call God in a threefold way.