New Challenges and New Initiatives in Ecclesiology

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A ll are familiar with the story of how the nineteenth century led in the twentieth to the ecumenical movement, the creation and initiatives of the World Council of Churches, and extensive interchurch dialogue. The extensive missionary movement generated concern about whether the Western sending nations were spreading division, more precisely Western divisions, in the mission lands of the developing world. This stimulated the Western churches to form the ecumenical movement which dominated ecclesiology during the course of the twentieth century. The flow of the ecumenical stream was so powerful that it drew the Catholic Church into its current at Vatican II. Many union churches were formed; most mainline churches have engaged in bilateral or multilateral conversations; many churches have entered into full communion with others. Through the World Council of Churches young churches throughout the world gradually gained their own voices. At the end of the twentieth century the whole church had shifted considerably from where it was at the end of the nineteenth century.

I outline in this essay new initiatives in ecclesiology to meet the new problems that have arisen for the world church. It is divided into two parts. First, I will describe how the generic and analogous discipline of comparative ecclesiology can help us address some of the problems that have emerged in the course of the twentieth century and face us as we begin the twenty-first. Then I will bring focus to bear on a particular sub-discipline or branch of comparative ecclesiology as one that holds

particular promise in the face of widespread fragmentation within the Christian movement or world church.

I. Comparative Ecclesiology

Most would accept the following formal truism: one century's developments in the church and its ecclesiology set up the issues and methods of the ecclesiology of the next. On this premise, one could say that as the nineteenth century missionary movement set the stage for the ecumenical ecclesiology of the twentieth century, so twentieth century developments in the world and among the churches present new challenges for the discipline of ecclesiology. This formula suggests the three sections of the first part of this essay. In it I describe how church expansion has led to three issues, related to inculturation, globalization, and religious pluralism, that have become prominent in the course of the past century. I then define "comparative ecclesiology" as an analogous term encompassing a variety of subdisciplines or at least distinct ecclesiological tasks. I conclude part one by indicating how different facets of "comparative ecclesiology" broadly conceived might provide a strategy for addressing the problems I have raised.

Problems Generated in the Twentieth Century

An extensive analysis would reveal many such problem areas that have become critical in the course of the twentieth century. I raise three issues that remain quite apparent and deeply problematic. The first concerns the need for and impulse towards inculturation on the part of churches in cultures outside the West. The second stems from the phenomenon of globalization. The third arises out of the close interaction between peoples of the different world religions. I will say a word about each of these three problems.

Inculturation. The term "inculturation" has a positive ring in most churches. Everyone recognizes that the Christian church is not culture-specific but aims at becoming incarnated in each culture which embraces Christian faith. In principle, inculturation subverts all attempts of a single culture to claim ownership or control over Christian faith and practice. Frequently enough, it becomes difficult to decide when certain formulas of belief, rituals, or practices spring from the core of faith or

are no more than cultural adaptations that are possibly inappropriate. This sets up tensions that can easily end up being divisive.

The responses of some churches of the developing world to the Faith and Order Commission's document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* [BEM], provide an example of what I am referring to.[1] It must be recalled that this document aims at designing language that the greatest possible number of churches might recognize as expressive of the apostolic faith, whether or not it corresponds exactly with the formulas and practices of a particular church. This document evolved over a long period of time and involved a great deal of careful work. Yet several churches of the developing world, that is, non-Western churches, could not identify with the document. A document for the *ecumene* will inevitably be general, but it will also invariably reflect a particular tradition and possess a certain style. To cultures in Africa and Asia, BEM has a Northern and Western bias in its language, imagery, and concepts.[2] Melanesian churches said this: "We must also confess that many of the theological problems addressed in BEM seem foreign to us, since they arise out of the history of Christianity in Europe and thus do not appear relevant to our Melanesian concerns."[3]

In sum, the classic language of the Western and Orthodox churches is not readily intelligible to the relatively young churches in developing nations and cultures that do not share Western history. The goal of the inculturation of the church in different cultures simultaneously makes communication between the churches, not to mention communion among the churches, a problem.

Globalization and ecclesial fragmentation. The phenomenon of globalization and all that the term connotes deserve attention. I use the term neutrally to refer to the compacting of our historical time and the shrinking of the space of our world to effect an increasing interdependence and interaction among peoples who in the past were distant from each other. This process has a double effect of both fusion

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[1] The document to which these responses are addressed is World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). This work is referred to as BEM.

[2] Methodist Church of New Zealand, in Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM, I,* Faith and Order Paper 129 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), p. 78.

[3] Melanesian Council of Churches, in Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM, V,* Faith and Order Paper 143 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), p. 180.

and fission. By fusion I refer to the coming together of cultural forces that previously were different but separated. These new interchanges force a certain standardization that enables intercourse. With the term "fission" I refer to a reaction against a threat of homogenization that reasserts local identity in a strong, self-conscious way.

This global dynamic has a counterpart in the development of the world church. As the churches throughout the world interact, forces of communion seek a certain standardization of things frequently according to historic Western norms. This can make these efforts at communion look like cultural domination. At the same time, terms such as contextualization and inculturation are positive in mission theology and represent the desire that the Christian church, wherever it exists, become part of and indigenous to culture so that it may really communicate and be an organic part of the life of a given people. The success of the world-wide evangelical and Pentecostal movement, especially when compared with a relative decline of the mainline churches in the West, indicates that these churches may be better at inculturation than others. Yet this very inculturation poses the real possibility that the world church is in danger as never before of disintegrating into a million different churches.

Interaction between religions. Globalization and migration in the course of the second half of the twentieth century has resulted in a new proximity and interchange between the world's religious. This meeting is occurring on the ground in civic communities and neighborhoods. In this encounter, Christianity still appears imperialistic to other religious traditions, and the idea of mission bears negative values. Correspondingly, among many progressive Christians the very idea of missionary activity is accompanied by serious reservations when a new "general" historical consciousness concludes to the value of other religions for other cultures. Can the new openness to interreligious dialogue and other religions themselves be reconciled with classical missionary goals that in their turn seemed to reflect some basic and intrinsically important dimension of Christian faith?

These are not the only ecclesial problems on the horizon. But they are serious. Therefore I move now to a consideration of a strategy for addressing them.

New Ecclesiological Strategies to Meet the Times

In this and the next section I want to suggest that comparative ecclesiology provides a vehicle for addressing these issues. But the plausibility of this proposal rests on the premise that "comparative ecclesiology" be understood analogously as including several different types of method. I thus begin with a differentiation of various kinds of comparative ecclesiology.

Broadly speaking, comparative ecclesiology may be characterized as a method that explicitly engages pluralism by placing in conjunction two or more churches, or ecclesiologies, or traditional sources of data. Comparative ecclesiology is an analogous category; it includes several distinct sub-disciplines. Speaking in the expansive terms of types, I discern five different kinds of comparative ecclesiology. The divisions I specify are meant to be neither exclusive nor exhaustive.

A first type of comparative ecclesiology corresponds with what I did in *Christian Community in History*.[4] This type of comparative ecclesiology consists in laying ecclesiologies side by side so that they may be compared. It is a straightforward and common strategy.[5]

A second type of comparative ecclesiology uses the data provided by the many churches to construct a fundamental ecclesial anthropology. An example of this is found in the work of Edward Farley.[6] I would suggest that this level of comparative ecclesiology requires a strong contribution from feminist values and ecclesiological insight so that, in face of the church's long and deeply engrained history of patriarchy, ecclesial anthropology be egalitarian.

A third type of comparative ecclesiology finds its specific nature defined by the goal of churches coming together to create covenants that allow communion with each other. The bilateral dialogues between

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[4] Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, I-II (New York: Continuum, 2004-2005). Cited hereafter as CCH.

[5] See, for example, Paul Avis, ed., *The Christian Church: An Introduction to the Major Traditions* (London: SPCK, 2002). Another essay of this type is Edward LeRoy Long's *Patterns of Polity: Varieties of Church Governance* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

[6] Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). This work was preceded by an earlier foundational reflection which is propaedeutic to this one and was entitled, *Ecclesial Man: A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

churches exemplify this type of comparative ecclesiology.[7] They have as their goal mutual understanding which ideally would culminate in a consensus that allows for differences. Minna Hietamäki's description of what goes on in this process assigns a precise goal for close comparative work, namely, a differentiated communion.[8]

The Faith and Order Commission of the WCC in its document, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," reflects a fourth type of comparative ecclesiology. This method has as its goal the construction of a consensus statement that the widest possible number of churches might accept as representative of the apostolic faith. This method balances the common sources of any ecclesiology with the ecclesiologies of the many churches in a constructive statement. This kind of comparative ecclesiology implicitly appeals to a common vision of what constitutes the Christian church. I will develop this kind of comparative ecclesiology in the second part of this essay.

A fifth type of comparative ecclesiology is interreligious; it enters into conversation with one or more other religions in an attempt to provide a broader and richer reflection for the self-understanding of Christian community in a pluralistic context. This type of comparative method is described in a way that is closely tied to texts by Francis X. Clooney.[9] Keith Ward applies this method specifically to ecclesiology, and Reid Locklin makes the case for the necessity of this kind of ecclesiology today.[10]

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[7] See G. R. Evans, *Method in Ecumenical Theology: The Lessons so far* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), for an analysis of the various techniques used in ecumenical theology to find common understanding and agreement within difference. Another example is found in many bilateral dialogues between churches. See, for example, Randall Lee and Jeffrey Gros, eds., *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, X* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

[8] Minna Hietamäki, "Is Comparative Ecclesiology Enough for the Oikoumene? Remarks on Roger Haight's Comparative Ecclesiology in the Light of Recent Lutheran—Roman Catholic Dialogues," AAR (Washington, D.C.), November, 2006.

[9] Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993), and *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: University Press, 2001).

[10] See Keith Ward, "Comparative Theology: The Heritage of Schleiermacher," *Theological Liberalism: Creative and Critical,* ed. by J'annine Jobling and Ian Markham (London: SPCK, 2000), pp. 60-74, and *Religion and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon

Comparative Method and Current Problems in Ecclesiology

With this differentiated conception of comparative ecclesiology in place, I move to the question of how comparative ecclesiology relates to new ecclesiological challenges. This strategic statement should not be taken as some sort of messianic vision. No easy solution to these problems lies ready at hand. I simply want to say that these new problems call for some new attitudes and new strategies and projects. One way of being more definite about this is to propose a way of proceeding by addressing a particular form of comparative ecclesiology to each of the three problem areas I mentioned. Allow me to briefly indicate what this might look like.

Inculturation and being in communion. The first problem I considered has its foundation in the tension between the individual and the community, in this case the individual church and the community of churches. How can churches preserve their identity and autonomy and at the same time be open to and in communion with other churches across profoundly different cultures? There are, of course, many programmatic things the churches can do, not least of which is membership in the World Council of Churches, or international denominational communions of churches, or, more locally, national councils of churches. But on an intellectual level this situation also calls for a more self-conscious and broader effort at comparative ecclesiology of the first type that I described. This means, in addition to the study of one's own church, placing one's own church within the larger context of the many churches as a part of the whole. Without this parallel study, denominational ecclesiology will become tribal ecclesiology, an ecclesiology that not only distinguishes a given church from others but in some measure contributes to divisions between them. I do see this kind of comparative ecclesiology in a position of rivalry vis à vis denominational ecclesiology, but in a position of complementarity to it. As in an interchurch dialogue, the horizons of each church's self-understanding expands and becomes deeper when it is explicitly set

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Press, 2000). Also Reid Locklin, "A *More* Comparative Ecclesiology? Bringing Comparative Theology to the Ecclesiological Table," AAR (Washington, D.C.), November, 2006.

within a context of a wider conversation among different styles of being church.

Addressing ecclesial fragmentation. Another distinct project of comparative ecclesiology responds to the fragmentation of churches occurring across the world today. Against the threat of standardization and homogenization in a Western mode, churches forcefully insist on their particular local identity. Reacting to this, acting not against it but in a manner accommodating local identity, comparative ecclesiology can be deployed to express the "essence of the church" in the sense of those elements of being a Christian ecclesial community which all the churches share and can affirm in common. The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has been working on this project for eighty years and has achieved considerable success in the BEM document and the recent study document, "The Nature and Mission of the Church."[11] The logic of this project is subtle, but in its goals and as a way of proceeding it is designed to keep open the lines of communication among all the churches. I do not propose that this effort replace denominational ecclesiology; transdenominational ecclesiology, or better, constructive comparative ecclesiology, should not compete with the self-understanding of the particular traditions of being church. But this effort at trying to define what we share in common, in principle and in fact, is crucial at this time of global fragmentation of the churches. I return precisely to this issue in part two of this essay.

Christian church in a religiously pluralistic world. People in the Western churches increasingly ask themselves the question of the status of Jesus Christ in relation to other religions. The discussion of the relation of the Christian church to other religions does not receive as much discussion outside of the subdiscipline of missiology. And yet this question goes to the heart of any consideration of the role of the church in human history. This problem is experienced much more existentially and realistically in churches in Asia where Christianity seems dwarfed when compared with other ancient, established, and vital scriptural religions. African churches too must

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[11] The World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement,* Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1005). This work is referred to as NMC.

live together with Muslims and Hindus and define themselves vis à vis traditional religions. New lessons may be learned by the whole church through comparative "ecclesiology" among religions and through the ecclesiologies that emerge out of this distinctive life situation. Thus I agree with Reid Locklin that comparative ecclesiology should include interfaith analyses for these can complement and complicate our study of particular experiences of church throughout history.

To conclude this first part, I have sought to reaffirm what we all know, namely, that as we begin the twenty-first century the Christian church is not in the same place as it was in the twentieth century when the ecumenical movement got under way and flourished. The demands of inculturation, reactions to globalization, and religious pluralism leave us with new problems. One way of dealing with these issues involves thinking pluralistically and comparatively. This imperative does not provide an alternative to the denominational thinking that all churches have to engage in. But denominational self-consciousness should be complemented with a more expansive vision of the world and the role of the church in it. Various comparative ecclesiological strategies can help here.

I turn now to the particular promise of the fourth type of comparative ecclesiology described above which employs a method of constructive comparative ecclesiology to describe a transdenominational ecclesiology.

II. The Promise of Constructive Comparative Ecclesiology

Earlier, I used the term "transdenominational ecclesiology" to refer to systematic work analogous to the documents of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" (1982), and, "The Nature and Mission of the Church" (2005).[12] These are its best examples. While the phrase "transdenominational ecclesiology" designates quite literally the content of these analyses, the phrase "constructive comparative ecclesiology" focuses on their method. It

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[12] Besides BEM and NMC, the following sources have been helpful in developing these ideas: WCC, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses*, Faith and Order Paper 149 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990). This work is cited FO-149.

indicates clearly that this is part of a larger disciplinary strategy and emphasizes its complex interpretive character. In what follows I analyze further the method used to generate such an ecclesiology, the logical status of the results of this discipline, the object of this study, and its usefulness. Finally, I will illustrate this usefulness with an example. I proceed here rather schematically, as if writing an extended outline and not a full argument. It is the "idea" of this project, which people are familiar with in the two works cited, that I wish to open up for conversation.

The Method of Transdenominational Ecclesiology:
Constructive Comparative Ecclesiology

The method for generating a transdenominational ecclesiology can be called a *comparative* theology. Its comparative character lies in the historical analysis of the ecclesiologies of the various churches and a comparison between them prior to making judgments and statements that are inclusive. This ecclesiology aims at characterizing the church,

> in lines broad enough that the many churches might identify themselves in it and thereby lessen any essential or major differences with other churches... Such an ecclesiology requires multilateral comparison between the ecclesiologies of the many churches. It must combine generalized, reconciling language with enough specific detail to formulate the many aspects of the church in a way that is not flat, bland, or a mere abstraction.[13]

The method of a transdenominational ecclesiology is also *constructive.* By that I mean it is not satisfied with mere comparison of ecclesiologies so that its judgments or conclusions are no more than a least common denominator among the given data, a product of a pragmatic negotiation. The proposals of this ecclesiology go beyond the results of social and historical comparison. Such a radical historicist position is represented by Wilfred Cantwell Smith when he proposes

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[13] Roger Haight, "Comparative Ecclesiology." This is an exploratory essay aimed at defining comparative ecclesiology which is to appear in, *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, scheduled to be published in 2007.

that the church is simply what it is at any given time; no period of the church has any more authority than any other.[14] In such a view, ecclesiology ceases to be a normative discipline and tends toward becoming a descriptive social science. But Christian theology has always been regarded as a normative discipline, and so too is ecclesiology on the basis of a conviction that something happened in Jesus Christ that must be preserved: hence the authority of the scriptures produced by the early church. The method is constructive, therefore, in the sense that it brings scripture, the origins of the church, and the history of the church to bear as having a role in determining not only what the church is, but what it should be.

> In sum, this form of comparative ecclesiology is also constructive; it transcends report and analysis of the actual churches by proposing that which is both constitutive of the existing churches and simultaneously ideal in the communion between them. It appeals to the normative origins of the church and the eschatological fulfillment that together judge division and urge communion in what transcends particular traditions but exists in all of them because it can be recognized theologically as representing the apostolic tradition.[15]

The Logic of this Ecclesiology

What is the logical status of this ecclesiology? In the case of denominational ecclesiology, the logical status of the discipline leaves little mystery: it interprets the existing church in its internal relations and its relationship to God in the light of the scriptures and history of its self-understanding. But since no transdenominational church exists, what is the logical status of a discipline studying it? What is being examined?

Much light can be thrown on what is going on in this kind of ecclesiology by an analytical account of four distinct acts or processes of the mind that combine in making judgments: the first is consideration of the data, the second abstraction, the third comparison, and the

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[14] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), pp. 154-61.

[15] Haight, "Comparative Ecclesiology."

fourth a formal statement.[16]

The ecclesiologist is presented with a great deal of analogous data about the church today given the pluralism among the churches and their ecclesiologies. "Church" here refers to the whole Christian movement. This ecclesiology requires a synoptic view of the church in the churches and in its history. Thus in one way or another the ecclesiologist has to amass the data. This could be done in many different ways including forming a committee as did the Faith and Order Commission.

Secondly, the process requires comparison between the various pieces of data. This transpires at many different levels. For example, the churches and their ecclesiologies can be compared holistically; they may be compared in various aspects of ecclesial life: polity, sacramental activity, relationship to the world and human culture. The church in various periods of history provides important data. The church in the New Testament enters the equation here in a privileged normative way. The success of this ecclesiology will depend on the ability of its authors to use scriptural language in an open and inclusive way.

Thirdly, the construction of a transdenominational ecclesiology depends upon a mental act of abstraction. I take the meaning of this term from an Aristotelian and Thomist description of the process of knowing. One discovers and formulates a general unity of intelligibility from the data that, insofar as it is abstract, is no longer bound to the individual pieces of data from which it is drawn. At the same time, the data remain the source and basis of the conceptual understanding so that it can never be completely or imaginatively severed from them. Abstraction or what may be called insight finds intelligible meaning within the data and not apart from them.

Finally, comparative ecclesiology at this stage then proposes affirmations and judgments about the subject matter that are synthetic, intelligible, and representative of the data.[17] I take it that these

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[16] Although this fourfold account of the cognitive process of producing a constructive comparative ecclesiology resembles the cognitional analysis of theological method proposed by Bernard Lonergan in *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1972), it is conceived here on the basis of the process of writing *Christian Community in History*, III, *Ecclesial Existence* which is scheduled to appear in 2008 and a projection of how the study documents, BEM and NMC, were written by their authors.

[17] More could be said about the interpretive character of understanding that occurs in these judgments from the perspective of the hermeneutical theories of Gadamer and

statements are formal statements as distinct from material statements. That is, they do not apply directly to a particular church as such, but to the whole church in a formal idealistic sense. Two well known examples from the history of ecclesiology exemplify what I mean by a "formal" statement. When Luther and Calvin say the true church exists wherever the word of God is preached and the sacraments are authentically administered, this is a formal statement. These statements are not describing a particular church, but laying down archetypal conditions transdenominationally that must be met for a true church to exist. When they are, a true church exists because it embodies them. An analogous logic underlies the change in the characterization of the true church by Vatican II when it shifted its language from the last draft to the final version of *Lumen Gentium*. The draft had said that the true church is the Catholic Church; this was changed to say that the true church subsists in the Catholic Church. The difference is that the true church is not exclusively identified with the Roman Church but could also be found subsisting in other churches.

The Object of Constructive Comparative Ecclesiology

Another way of considering the logical status of comparative ecclesiology and its product, a transdenominational ecclesiology, follows the path of defining its object. What is the referent of this ecclesiology? If it is not a particular church, what is it?

I designate the object of constructive comparative ecclesiology "ecclesial existence." Ecclesial existence refers to human existence as it is lived socially within a Christian church. To characterize Christian existence, therefore, means to describe in a specifically religious and social way the Christian life, or Christian life in community, or a Christian social existential anthropology. The term "ecclesial existence" combines the concreteness of existential Christian life with the formality referred to earlier: this social existence is always historically structured but possesses an identity of sufficient height and depth that it can support a variety of different structures. For example, Christian social existence needs government, but the governments may vary, and so on. Within different ecclesial forms, the single object of constructive

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Ricoeur. I take a short cut and bypass this route in this essay.

comparative ecclesiology is ecclesial existence.

The object of constructive comparative ecclesiology or transdenominational ecclesiology is also apostolic and normative. I already referred to its normative character in its use of or appeal to scripture and the history of ecclesiology. I add to this the character of "apostolic." Closely related to the normativity of scripture is the church's apostolicity: what subsists today as Christian church should stand in a relationship of continuity or congruence with the apostolic origins of the church. Most churches consider themselves apostolic insofar as they recognize apostolicity as a mark of an authentic church. Another way of describing the object of constructive comparative ecclesiology would call it the apostolic church within the churches. All churches identify with the apostolic church. But no church can exhaustively represent the apostolic church. Rather, the apostolic church subsists in the churches and acts as an implicit norm. This object will never be completely circumscribed but remains the ideal object towards which this ecclesiology strives.[18]

Usefulness of Constructive Comparative Ecclesiology

One has to make the case for the usefulness of constructive comparative ecclesiology because it appears somewhat theoretical when compared with denominational ecclesiology that articulates for the members of a given church an understanding of their particular ecclesial existence. This usefulness generally finds its rationale within the ecumenical movement and the quest for unity in a world church

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[18] "The goal of this instance of this kind of comparative ecclesiology is succinctly stated in Faith and Order's draft for a common statement on the church: 'to give expression to what the churches can now say together about the nature and mission of the Church and, within that agreement, to explore the extent to which the remaining church-dividing issues may be overcome' (NMC, 5). More specifically, it attempts to develop specific documents which can be recognized by the churches as the 'faith of the church through the ages'" (FO-149, 8). The subject matter is not any denomination's ecclesiology but 'our' Christian ecclesiology. It does not strive to determine the developed ecclesiology of a particular church but seeks recognition of a formulation of something that can be agreed upon and held in common as authentically Christian by all parties. The phrase 'convergence document' is used to describe 'the fruit of what all of [the churches], after a long period of dialogue, [are] now able to affirm together beyond their different theological perceptions' (FO-149, 9)." Haight, "Comparative Ecclesiology."

that should not be divided even though differences will always prevail. In other words, like all comparative theologies, it is dealing with pluralism. I believe that the usefulness of constructive comparative ecclesiology appears best in a comparison between the ecumenical ideas of "full communion" and what may be called "partial" communion or perhaps "initial" communion.

Brief shorthand definitions of these two types of communion between or among churches will illustrate their differences. Full communion roughly means mutual recognition in every essential aspect of the church despite differences that do not make a substantial difference.[19] In short, the churches recognize in the other(s) a possession of all the elements of what it means to be church according to apostolic standards. By partial communion I mean mutual recognition despite differences that do make a difference, despite differences that can be quite substantial or essential from the different perspectives of the churches. The further implications of partial communion will appear by contrast with full communion in what follows.

Communion by definition means unity amid differences; it names a unity between two or more distinct churches. The idea of full communion sets a high ideal and often requires considerable work even when the churches are somewhat congruous with each other. Despite the fact that many churches have entered into full communion with each other, the idea of "full" communion proposes a standard that seems unattainable for many churches relative to others. Enter partial communion: communion despite serious differences.

The object and goal of transdenominational ecclesiology using a constructive comparative method creates the conditions that may allow for partial communion among churches. Transdenominational ecclesiology proposes to churches positive reasons for entering into a relationship of communion with another church which may be seriously

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[19] O. C. Edwards, Jr. describes the results of an extensive study of the meaning of the phrase, "full communion," among many typical church traditions, and finds a large range of different meanings or expectations or conditions for it to occur. There are also many churches for which the concept bears little meaning at all. See "Meanings of Full Communion: The Essence of Life in the Body," in *Speaking of Unity* 1 (2005), pp. 9-35. *Speaking of Unity* is an electronic journal published by the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Its address is http://www.ncccusa.org/speakingofunity/.

different from themselves. Notice that the idea of partial communion is itself a fluid historical concept that admits of many degrees. Negatively, it is not possible to determine the limits of partial communion, that is, what can prevent it. No standard exists to measure unbridgeable differences. The constant shifting of history excludes an a priori determination of the nature or degree of differences that would stand in the way of partial communion. Perhaps there are none at all. But three constructive aspects of a transdenominational ecclesiology positively open the way to possible partial communions among churches which seriously differ on important matters.

First, the goal of constructive comparative theology is to express as fully as possible the common apostolic ecclesial existence that all churches claim subsists in them or that they possess. This constructive comparative theology strives to express in abstract but existentially relevant language that ecclesial existence which is the equivalent in our time of the apostolic ecclesial existence. In the measure that it succeeds in constructing an account of the apostolic existence in which all claim to participate, it provides the basis for a communion that transcends all differences. If churches recognize ecclesial apostolicity in the results of this constructive effort, they should also recognize and have no reason not to recognize bases for a partial communion with other churches.[20]

Second, an elaborated transdenominational ecclesiology that succeeds in approaching a contemporary expression of apostolic ecclesial faith demonstrates the complex hybridity of ecclesial identity.[21] Ecclesial existence is not simple, neither historically nor theologically.

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[20] Ormond Rush expresses what is going on here in the context of a bilateral ecumenical discussion: "Instead of comparing and contrasting traditions, both parties attempt to interpret together the apostolic tradition. If each can recognize in the other's interpretation 'the apostolic faith,' then surprising agreement and common ground can be achieved." Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), p. 67. This describes the intention of the convergence documents of Faith and Order: they aim to state in a commonly accepted language the common apostolic faith.

[21] I take this line of argument from Jeannine Hill Fletcher who develops this principle relative to the problems of interreligious dialogue and relationships in *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 82-101. "Using the resources of feminist theory, we can challenge the logic of identity and rethink 'specific difference' to recognize that the categories of all religious are made up of diverse identities." *Ibid.*, p. 88.

A reading of the Faith and Order's study documents, BEM and NMC, although they are brief and schematic, illustrate the amount of complex data that have been digested and carefully formulated. This complexity shows Paul's seemingly simple aphorism, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one Spirit," will not yield to a simple exegesis. Each church's identity is a hybrid of multiple factors from history and from theological interpretations that cannot be reduced to simple terms. But this complexity also implies that the bonds of relationship that join the churches are many. The churches that seem most distant from each other at the same time share an enormous legacy of common tradition that relates them to each other. The fallacy of specific difference proposes that an individual or a group can be captured in a single trait or a specific defining quality. For example, a church is "hierarchical," or a church is "congregational." The fallacy reduces complexity to a single focused element and thereby neglects the full historical reality of the person or group. Constructive comparative ecclesiology effectively breaks the imaginative hold of this common tendency and shows both the complexity of ecclesial existence and the degree to which sometimes seemingly radically different ecclesial bodies share a large body of common defining elements. These constitute the basis for partial communion.

The third condition for partial communion among churches lies less in objective data and more in the subjective will of the churches. The churches have to want to affirm the other churches. To do this a church must strive to transcend its own self-understanding in order to grasp the apostolic ecclesial existence in the other despite its otherness. Any church can resist communion on the basis of difference from itself. It does so on the basis of a rationale that sets up its own ecclesial form as the norm for apostolic ecclesial existence. On this basis, it says communion is not possible because we embody the integrity of the faith and others do not. We must protect authentic ecclesial existence against others who distort it. The integrity of faith cannot be compromised. Somehow, in a historicist and pluralist world, recognizing pluralism is taken as a threat to authentic ecclesial existence. This stance mistakenly takes a particular version of apostolic tradition to represent the whole. The impulse of the Spirit, according to Schleiermacher, always leans toward unity; it is the drag of sin which exists in all the churches that

militates against it. But, as Ignatius of Loyola recognized, the angel of darkness always poses as the angel of light.

Dealing with the Hard Questions

To conclude this proposal on the promise of constructive comparative ecclesiology, I draw attention to one of many hard questions in ecumenical theology. These are places where there seem to be differences that are impossible to bridge, surely in the terms that are suggested by conceptions of full communion, but even for partial communion. I want briefly to characterize how constructive comparative ecclesiology might generate attitudes that would allow partial communion across these divides. I have chosen one such area of difference, an aspect of ecclesial existence that raises the hard question of the possibility of communion. The issue consists in two foundationally different concepts of the church. I will briefly characterize, or better, point to, these differences of which all are aware, and then indicate attitudes toward the problem that flow from a constructive comparative method and thus indicate its promise.

Among the variety of different ecclesiologies one can discern at an extreme distance from each other what appear to be two antithetical conceptions of the church: the large hierarchical institution and the congregational free church. These are called foundational because they exert their influence upon every major area of ecclesiology. The one experiences and conceives of the church as a large, hierarchically structured community with an order that relates back to Jesus Christ; the other experiences and conceives of the church as a relatively small community, or a large congregation of shared faith, which possesses within itself the authority of Christ and the Spirit which it delegates in turn to its ministers. Both of these views could be subjected to a typological elaboration that would show the deep and distinctive character of these grounding experiences, and the extent to which their corresponding conceptions have gone.[22] Hierarchal orders are

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[22] See CCH, II, 276-88. Note that both of these "types" of church and ecclesiology are represented positively as apostolically valid. One can, of course, construct or find actual ecclesiologies that coherently synthesize themes and values from these two seemingly antithetical types. But that would constitute a third type or model. The problem consists precisely in the antithetical character of these two different types which will always be

antithetical to the church in one view; a human and infinitely variable polity eviscerates the divine grounding of the church in the other. One set of churches places the demands of communion so high that they are practically unreachable; another set of churches is not convinced that a regulated communion among congregations is at all desirable for the church. Can a constructive comparative approach mediate between these seemingly irreconcilable differences?

Constructive comparative ecclesiology to some extent dissolves this problem by not resolving it. First of all, constructive comparative ecclesiology does not describe a common polity that unites these types of churches. It is a theological discipline and not a formula for communion. The product of its reflection, a transdenominational ecclesiology, displays bonds of communion that transcend the differences between churches but do not necessarily alter them. This ecclesiology aims at generating insight into what the churches share in common despite their most fundamental differences. Through a consideration of the data of the origins of the church and of the churches today it finds that all churches have some polity, that no standardized polity is reflected in the canonical literature, that church polities developed historically, and that they are always understood to be subject to the influence of the Holy Spirit at any given time. The historical data and the theological witness to the church thus suggest that both organizational types are coherent, valid theologically, and inspired by the Spirit in continuity with the apostolic church. Constructive comparative ecclesiology thus suggests that both kinds of churches could accept, not the other church's order, but the *apostolicity* of its order.[23] It also suggests that, on the basis of a

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actualized in some churches because of their correspondence with a certain fundamental kinds of experience.

[23] How are churches able recognize the apostolicity of a structure of the church which they do not share and thus remain in partial communion with the others? Two basic insights are the condition for the possibility. The first recognizes a depth and complexity of the apostolic tradition that allows for pluralism. No single tradition can exhaust the historical possibilities of the apostolic tradition. History seems to prove this, and the pluralism produced across cultures and societies at any given time is structurally identical to the pluralism produced across time by history. No particular, no historical part, can exhaustively contain the whole. The second insight consists in a recognition of the values represented in other traditions. Every form of church structure mediates values not as fully represented in other structural forms. Positive assessments of pluralism require recognition that two different orders of ministry, for example, can

host of other aspects of a complex church identity which are shared in common, two churches with such different church orders could enter into a formal covenant of partial communion. It would be hard to see how they could enter into a relationship of full communion because of the major differences that these two fundamental views of the church imply. But a constructive comparative method in ecclesiology so refocuses the imagination on the size and depth of what binds churches together that this positive connection allows even major differences to become more like subjects of an internal conversation than a debate between aliens.

To conclude these far-reaching and somewhat idealistic reflections I return to the point of departure. Because the human race is entering into some radically new conditions for its life together in the world, so too is the Christian church facing some new challenges. These must be met with new attitudes and new theological initiatives. This essay aims at opening up an ecclesiological imagination that will begin to reckon with these exigencies and inquire which way God as Spirit in the church is inviting the churches to move. Comparative ecclesiology in its many forms accepts our historical and pluralistic condition as a given, finds the Spirit of God at work in it, and seeks new ecclesial initiatives that will follow where it leads.

both be inspired by and bear the Spirit of God.