

CHURCH PROFILES

AND THE SO-CALLED ECCLESIOLOGICAL DEFICIT OF PROTESTANTISM

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*We need a bit of negative ecclesiology, church theology in a minor key,
in order to do away with centuries-long ecclesiocentrism
of the empirical phenomenon of “Christian religion”: for the sake of God,
for the sake of Jesus the Christ and for the sake of humanity.*

Edward Schillebeeckx

ON THE CHURCH ECUMENICAL

Whether we like to admit it or not, ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, has always been a touch-me-not and yet forget-me-not subject. What is it that makes this doctrine a touchy and tetchy subject at the same time? My argument is that it has to do with the question of how the church’s identity is shaped, and that has always been a topic of dispute, even if it is not always discerned. But why? Because this identity is what gives the church its proper characteristics and defines its contours over and against what it does not stand for. But institutional identities are malleable; they wither or bloom due to a complex array of circumstances in the negotiation of what constitutes the unity of the church. The modern ecumenical movement serves as an exemplary case study of how the waxing and waning of forming identity and defining unity are displayed.

Protestant ecclesiology, which for some of its detractors is a contradiction in terms, is finding its identity far beyond the historically recognized mainstream Protestant churches, and well beyond its traditional geographic territories—central and northern Europe and North America. This worldwide Protestant phenomenon is in many respects faithful to the spirit of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. As was the case with the Reformation, a variety of Protestants still search for the unity of the church but without surrendering freedom and pluralism. Ecumenism is celebrated, but it is not a value of itself.

Serious criticisms have been raised with respect to the ecumenism of theological consensus, visible unity, or ecclesial approximation from the “underside

of history” (in the apt expression of Gustavo Gutiérrez),¹ that is, from the subaltern nations of the world. But simultaneously, some of the most vigorous ecumenical accomplishments have taken place within the same context. I refer not only to cooperation in social action. Ecclesial practice and ministry have also been affected by such an ecumenism, notwithstanding lack of agreement at the doctrinal level. In Latin America, for example, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Lutherans have not reached a doctrinal agreement over the Eucharist, but they often celebrate it together at the grassroots level without official sanction or even against it. Such celebrations are possible only under certain social and political conditions, which provide the context that justifies them. No confessional agreements regulate them. Nor do doctrinal differences prevent them, either in practice or in theological interpretations.

Such ecumenical accomplishments are extremely circumstantial. It is the circumstances that determine their power and also their limitations in defining a stable unity and identity for the church. The criticism of both ecumenism and ecumenical accomplishments themselves is framed by social, political, and economic relations, and by the conflicts and contradictions manifested in given historical junctures. And they simultaneously affect both the inner unity of an ecclesial institution and the relation among ecclesial bodies in practice and theory.² How are we to understand this phenomenon?

Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest who died as a guerrilla fighter in 1968, raised the problem and suggested an answer:

I have given up the duties and privileges of the clergy, but I have not ceased to be a priest. I believe that I have given myself to the revolution out of love for my fellow man. I have ceased to say Mass to practice love for my fellow man in the temporal, economic, and social spheres. When my fellow man has nothing against me, when he has carried out the revolution, then I will return to offering Mass, God permitting.³

He continues his commentary, reiterating Matthew 5:23-24: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.” His criticism is clear. To celebrate communion in a context of social injustice is

1. Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Theology from the Underside of History,” in idem, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (trans. R. R. Barr; London: SCM, 1983), 169–221.

2. See Julio de Santa Ana, *Ecumenismo e Libertação* (Petropolis: Vozes, 1987), 116–21; and Gerhard Tiel, “O Processo Conciliar de Mutuo Compromisso (Pacto) para Justiça, Paz e Integridade da Criação,” *Estudos Teológicos* 2, no. 28 (1988): 164–69.

3. Camilo Torres, *Revolutionary Priest* (ed. John Gerassi; New York: Vintage, 1971), 368.

hypocritical. Hence he also censured the church for permitting it and thus veiling in a pretense of unity a conflict that grows out of an unjust situation. This has been the suspicion behind ecumenical efforts. Meanwhile, accomplishments in ecumenical endeavors are celebrated in the context of the struggle for justice.

A few years ago the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser, raised a similar issue in a poignant manner, calling attention to the patriarchal implications of the quest for unity:

The notion of unity is part of a pattern of mind which has entered Christian thinking and practice through its inculturation in the classical Greco-Roman world. . . . The orientation of thinking and practice towards achieving and maintaining unity almost inevitably leads to hierarchical systems of order. . . . In view of this questionable ancestry of the key notion of “unity,” it is surprising that the question has been so seldom asked as to whether it is a suitable concept to express the ecumenical vision.⁴

The stronger the emphasis on unity, the more robust and domineering the church will be. New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing has shown that the very word *oikoumenē* is now associated often with tolerance, although in the New Testament it has always a pejorative connotation and is coextensive with the Roman Empire and has been implicated in the equation of unity and totality. Noting the irony that most of the critics of the “imperial ecclesiology” of *oikoumenē* are within the ecumenical movement, she asks, “[I]s an ecumenical understanding of the church and *oikoumenē* inevitably imperial, because it pursues globalized unity at the expense of local community?” And she answers, “Any attempt to reclaim or redefine the word *oikoumenē* for the agenda of ecumenism must begin by repudiating the imperial trajectory of the word, including the church’s own imperial legacy.”⁵

Enrique Dussel carries this reflection even further, suggesting that the problem is not simply that the overcoming of social divisions makes true unity possible, but that the very search for unity necessarily suppresses difference. And this “difference” has an ontological (not merely social or economic) status.

4. “Ecumenism in Search of a New Vision,” in *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Texts and Voices* (ed. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope; Geneva: WCC, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 73. Thanks to Barbara Rossing for pointing me to this text.

5. Barbara Rossing, “(Re)claiming *Oikoumenē*? Empire, Ecumenism and the Discipleship of Equals,” in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (ed. Shelly Matthews, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and Melanie Johnson-Debaufre; New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 82–84.

Ecumene is the same as “totality,” a highly abstract technical term; “totality” obviously comes from “total”; we say: “the totality of meaning” of my day-to-day world, because everything in that world has meaning. What is in my world makes sense for me but it would not necessarily do so for another. . . . [T]herefore whoever understands the meaning of all that takes place there has to be in the center of the world. One in the periphery of the world does not know what it is all about.⁶

Dussel does not recognize either economic or social justice as a condition for a possible unity, for such unity already suppresses otherness or vilifies it. Therefore, the very search for unity as such—and therefore for identity—is already fraught with the spirit of domination and intolerance. However, the criticism of a possible total unity is not the total criticism of a possible unity. Herein rests the problem: What are the conditions for a possible unity, and not for a unity of all that is possible? Or is *unity* even the right word to describe a mark of the church?

The ecumenical movement, after it was instituted under the guidance of the World Council of Churches in 1948, reached the turn of the millennium in what has been dubbed as the ecumenical winter. After going from the 1960s through the 1980s with exuberance, conducting a “conciliar process” and defining the basic convergent outline of an ecumenical and pluralist conversation, it encountered in the last couple of decades a reaction that hit the core of its ecumenical project and liberal proclivities. The conciliar process catalyzed by the “Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation” program all but disappeared from ecclesial circles. The fragmented identity of confessions and denominations makes its return, privileging bilateral agreements for mutual church cooperation. The return to the question of confessional identity obfuscates earlier efforts in search of a post-denominational landscape of the Christian church. After all the openings offered by the Second Vatican Council in the wake of Pope John XXIII’s call for an *aggiornamento* (bringing the church up to date), the Roman Catholic Church similarly experienced a process of defining its own uniqueness. Shortly after signing with the Lutheran World Federation a “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,”⁷ the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000 issued the declaration “Dominus

6. Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and the Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978), 4–5. Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008), explores at length the connection between the search for unity or the “logic of the One” in the Christian church from Constantine through the twenty-first century, which has grounded its imperial enterprise throughout history.

7. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church in Augsburg, Germany, October 31, 1999.

Jesus,” denying Protestant communities the title of “church” for not keeping the historical episcopate and a “valid Eucharist.”⁸ This same position is repeated emphatically in a 2007 document by the same Sacred Congregation.⁹ Thus a process of re-Romanization of the Catholic Church is proceeding in tandem with the “ecumenical winter.”¹⁰

If this looks like a gloomy scenario to mark the end of a century with so many ecumenical achievements, there is another side to the picture. An impressive ecumenical convergence of historical churches in the Protestant tradition, and also with the Church of Rome, culminated in the landmark bilateral (sometimes plurilateral) agreements. Porvoo (1993), between Scandinavian Lutherans and the Church of England; Leuenberg (1973), between European Lutherans and Reformed; Call to Common Mission (1999), between Lutherans and Episcopalians in the United States; Formula of Common Agreement (1997), between Reformed churches and Lutherans in the United States; and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), between the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation, are a few examples that have been celebrated as accomplishments outside of the direct purview of worldwide ecumenical organizations such as the WCC. That these agreements have been by and large restricted to the North Atlantic world and among churches of traditional standing is in itself an indication of the problem, because most of these institutional accomplishments bypass the places in the world where Christianity has shown its most dynamic power over the last century. The ecumenical agenda as far as institutional accomplishments are concerned was set by the northern hemisphere of our planet with the undoubtedly earnest intention of encompassing the whole globe. But the south seems to have had other ideas.

The Pentecostal and charismatic movement, whose numerical size is notably substantial and its complexity defiant of typologies,¹¹ reconfigures the map

8. “The Churches which, while not existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united to her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, are true particular Churches. . . . [T]he ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense.” “Dominus Iesus,” subtitled “On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,” was approved by Pope John Paul II and published on August 6, 2000. By “valid Eucharist” what is meant is the doctrine of transubstantiation. See M. Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 31.

9. “Responses to Some Questions regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church,” written by William Cardinal Levada, head of the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on July 10, 2007.

10. Riolando Azzi, “A Romanização da Igreja a Partir da República (1889),” in *Inculturação e Libertação* (ed. Carlos Barndão et al.; São Paulo: Paulinas, 1986), 105–16.

11. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (trans. John F. Hoffmeyer; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 7–14; Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002), 68–78.

of what has been considered normative as far Christianity is concerned.¹² Contrary to the confessional resistance to ecumenical efforts of historical or traditional churches, be they of Roman, Orthodox, or Protestant persuasion, these “new” ecclesial expressions of the Christian faith have shown a vitality that not only dodges confessional disputes but also locates the focus of the Christian expressions of the church in territories that since Constantine have been geographically marginal or regarded only as mission fields. During the last hundred years the location of the majority of Christians has moved to the south and the east of the planet to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. With the increase in their numbers in the south and the east of the planet, there has been also a corresponding and substantial increase in their hold of world Christianity.

In his seminal work that opens the history of modern Protestant theology, *The Christian Faith*, Friedrich Schleiermacher, reflecting on the missionary work in distant lands, discusses the impossibility of new heresies appearing in Christianity. For him,

new heresies no longer arise, now that the church recruits itself out of its own resources; and the influence of alien faiths on the frontier and in the mission-field of the Church must be reckoned at zero.¹³

And then the great Berliner adds condescendingly:

[T]here may long remain in the piety of the new converts a great deal which has crept in from their religious affections of former times, and which, if it came to clear consciousness and were expressed as doctrine, would be recognized as heretical.¹⁴

But he is quick to dismiss any serious threat coming from that direction.

This confidence was expressed less than two centuries ago. At the turn of the millennium the missionary fringes of the still-robust churches of Europe and North America have not only gained in number, surpassing the “mother” churches, but have been facing new challenges to church and doctrine that Schleiermacher could not have dreamed of. This new majority, as mentioned earlier, is now found, particularly in Asia and parts of Africa, in places where Christians are minorities surrounded by other religions. The old certainties,

12. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 57–60.

13. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 96 (*Der christliche Glaube* [2 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960], 1:128).

14. *Ibid.*

built on centuries of debate over doctrines, were, from the fourth century, the resolutions of domestic quarrels within the Christian “house.” One such example is the dispute with Arianism regarding the *homoousios* versus *homoiousios*. While the former was about the Son being of the same essence of the Father, the latter affirmed the similarity of the two persons but not identity of the essence. The Arian controversy, among others that were crucial in the weaving of the early church, has recently met contemporary counterparts exemplified by the engagement with and response to the new challenges in the encounter of the Christian with the living faith of her Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu neighbor. And this phenomenon is largely due to the inheritance of the Enlightenment that shook the foundations out of which the “church recruits itself,” to use Schleiermacher’s expression.

THE NEW CHALLENGES TO THE CHURCH IN WORLD CHRISTIANITY

The Enlightenment pulverized the basic grounding certainties of the Christian faith: that the prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled in Christ, that the miracle accounts are historically reliable, and that the permanence and expansion of the Christian church are evidence of its truthfulness.¹⁵ In its aftermath, Christian theology has been able to find new foundations to regain the certainty that was shaken. The search for these foundations has taken many shapes, which began with Schleiermacher’s “feeling of absolute dependence.” A number of other rational, historical, empirical, or psychological groundings have been suggested. Alfred N. Whitehead expressed this quest for a foundation by saying that Christianity is a religion in search of metaphysics,¹⁶ an unshakable ground on which to built its edifice. Others evaded the challenge of the Enlightenment and clung to the inerrancy of the scriptures no matter what objection could be raised. Still others find the unbroken tradition of institutional and liturgical practices to be a self-evident guarantor of truth and certainty in a time of deep uncertainties.

Reflecting on this uncertainty, Reinhard Hütter, in his authoritative study of Protestant ecclesiology, celebrates the ecclesiological accomplishments of two leading contemporary theologians, George Lindbeck and Oswald Bayer. Even as he regards their proposals as offering a “constructive point of departure for

15. See Herman Samuel Reimarus, “Fragmente,” in *Lessings Werke* (Berlin: G. Hempel, 1879); and Gotthold E. Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Lessing’s Theological Writings* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1956), 51.

16. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making: Lowell Lectures 1926* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 50.

understanding how theology can be conceived as a distinct church practice,” for him they still “exhibit an ecclesiological deficit and specially an inadequate ecclesiological anchoring of church doctrine.”¹⁷ This is the basic concern that has been raised to modern foundationalist approaches that “anchor” its theology in something other than church doctrine. Lindbeck and Bayer, Hütter claims, “exhibit a thoroughgoing fundamental pneumatological and ecclesiological deficit.”¹⁸ Such a deficit will remain “as long as theology’s relationship to church doctrine remains undefined,” and turns it into “an inherently unstable undertaking.”¹⁹ This modern dénouement might indeed have revealed an ecclesial deficit and a theological instability as far as Western societies are concerned. However, it can also be seen as a denouncement of the impending end of the hegemony of the Christian ecclesiological discourse in these societies, where it flourished and was acculturated for almost two millennia.

Sociologist of religion Peter Berger, some time ago in an article in the *Christian Century*, wrote:

In the course of my career as a sociologist of religion I made one big mistake . . . which I shared with almost everyone who worked in this area in the 1950s and '60s; [it] was to believe that modernity necessarily leads to a decline in religion.²⁰

The argument of Berger is that modern pluralism and relativism erode values and beliefs that once were taken for granted as being self-validated. This process, however, does not necessarily lead to secularization and the elimination of all values and beliefs as he formerly believed. On the contrary, by introducing incredulity, doubt, and uncertainty, modernity has even multiplied these values and beliefs in the search for new certainties, thus generating, on the one hand, fundamentalism and totalitarian beliefs and ideologies, and, on the other, a radical relativism that easily slides into nihilism. Between these two extremes there is a pendulum movement characteristic of modernity itself. The religious phenomenon, however, does not pertain only to either of these extreme options, absolutism or nihilism; it is also situated in the middle of this spectrum where certainties are weak and coexist with doubts in institutions that are fragile and malleable. This is the case with most of the mainstream

17. Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 94.

18. *Ibid.*, 26.

19. *Ibid.*, 26f.

20. Peter Berger, “Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty,” *Christian Century* (August 26–September 2, 1998): 782.

Protestant churches characterized by some liberal persuasions within stable and affluent societies.

By focusing on the experience of these “weak” churches, to use the expression of Berger, analysts were inclined to establish a strict correlation between modern reflexivity²¹ and the malleable or “weak” nature of these churches. In other words, the more modern reflexivity and criticism express themselves, the weaker the institutions become. And if the process continues—so went the argument—it will reach a point at which these institutions will simply dwindle into extinction.

However, this is where we find a surprise. These weak institutions can survive and will, as Berger has shown,²² not as a matter of course but out of a resilient and renewed commitment from those who are part of them. It was the dissolution of the taken-for-granted certainties and the “weakening” of modern institutions, particularly the churches, that led social scientists to the impression that modern pluralism would inevitably lead to the decline of religion. Pluralism, as the “coexistence and social interaction of people with different beliefs, values and lifestyles,”²³ does not necessarily lead to an increasing secularism, not even to secularization, though this has occurred in northern Europe, for example (which thus became the paradigm for predictions about the rest of the world).

We are bewildered in the face of an issue that we have falsely diagnosed, and often, in order to avoid recognizing it, we evade it. What needs to be recognized is that pluralism, which accompanied incredulity and doubt in the systems of belief and values, does not eliminate beliefs and values; it only makes them more diverse with very different levels of commitment depending on where one is situated in the spectrum of the pendulum movement between fundamentalism and nihilism.

21. “The reflexivity of modernity has to be distinguished from the reflexive monitoring of action intrinsic to all human activity. Modernity’s reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge. Such information or knowledge is not incidental to modern institutions, but constitutive of them—a complicated phenomenon, because many possibilities of reflection about reflexivity exist in modern social conditions.” Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 20.

22. Berger, “Protestantism,” 794. Berger here relies on the work of Helmut Schelsky.

23. *Ibid.*, 782. Berger concludes this essay with this comment: “The church, while it announces the coming triumph (indeed, that is the core of its message), still bears the marks of Jesus’ kenosis. Where is one to look for the presence of this kenotic Jesus? Probably not in the self-assured, triumphalist institutions that merit the appellation of ‘strong churches.’ I would think that he is more likely to be found in those ‘weak’ places—where people are unsure of themselves, groping for a few glimpses of truth to hold onto, even where it seems that the roof is about to fall in” (796).

In summary, amid the corroding former certainties, modernity launched the search for new ones, or else surrendered to nihilism. And, ironically, among the new certainties—the sciences, political economy, psychoanalysis, self-help techniques, and so forth—was inserted another one: that secularization and the decline of religion would inevitably be yoked together. The renaming of the present (as in “postmodernity”) is often an evasion of a problem caused by the misreading of the symptoms of modernity itself. In other words, the failure to diagnose a preexisting condition led to the renaming of the illness as if it were a new condition.

Since the Enlightenment the Christian church has been painfully aware of the challenge to its claim to truth. But in places where the Enlightenment has not been so decisive a factor as in the North Atlantic axis, the church is confronted by equally profound alternative religious convictions. Its vitality leads to new certainties regarding what grounds the church and its claims and gives it an identity. What is it that makes the church thrive in such contexts while its élan falters in its most traditional fortresses, as in the old continent?

PROFILES OF CHURCH AND MINISTRY

The answer to the question of what makes the church thrive may be found precisely in the contexts where the Enlightenment had its harsher impact and where the scientific worldview became dominant, sidelining other forms of knowledge.²⁴ In Europe and North America spirited responses to this crisis have come through the emergence of varied profiles of church and ministry, which in turn sheds some light on the process of understanding the Christian churches around the world.

Avery Cardinal Dulles, in his influential *Models of the Church*,²⁵ uses “models” to perform two functions. One is called the “explanatory” function. This is when a model describes a given ecclesial formation, offering the outline of its most prominent features. In this sense, models are similar to what Max Weber called “ideal types,”²⁶ which his colleague and friend Ernst Troeltsch applied to his ecclesiological studies. They do not correspond to any actually existing reality (this is why they are called “ideal”), but lift up dominant characteristics

24. See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (ed. Colin Gordon; New York: Pantheon, 1980), 81–82.

25. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

26. “[A]n ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view” according to which “concrete individual phenomena . . . are arranged into a unified analytical construct” (*Gedankenbild*); in its purely fictional nature, it is a methodological “utopia [that] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality.” Max Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,” in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (ed. and trans. E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch; New York: Free Press, 1949), 90.

that help the observer to recognize and categorize the characteristics of a given social formation. The second function of models is “exploratory.” Models, for Dulles, are exploratory when they play a prescriptive role, as in the model of a car that is built to envision and test its possible actual construction.²⁷

Different from models and types are “profiles.” Profiles, similar to ideal types, can be descriptive, but they are not ideal in the sense that they detect an actual reality that they aim at representing. They might be similar also to the exploratory function of models, but not as a goal or perfection to be achieved. Instead, a profile exposes characteristics that are real but that may not be so obvious for the casual observer. Profiles detect and expose. Akin to case studies, however, they offer glimpses into patterns that far exceed the characters and communities they describe. In their detecting and exposing function, profiles register a search for certainty in an era shaken by uncertainties.

A refreshingly ingenious source for describing these robust profiles that express the church’s search for certainty can be found in literature that presents sketches of the church and its ministry. Fictional works of literature like novels work with profiles, detecting and exposing actual realities. Novels that deal with the church and its ministries do precisely that, and they are legion. Three novels will suffice to present some of the different profiles of the church that have become normative, revealing their promises and exposing their quandaries. They all come from a particular period in the history of the West, the period between the two world wars.

The choice I have made among an array of novels that can help in drawing profiles of ministry is somewhat arbitrary, though in this case not entirely. These novels are from a particular period in places that were experiencing turmoil, excitement, and dreadful prospects, thus heightening uncertainties. Two are from the United States and a third from Spain; all reflect a state of affairs in which the world was reconfiguring itself. Fascism was reaching out its tentacles to grip several European countries, while the United States was emerging as the new hegemonic center. Consequently, sociologists and theologians were attentive to the social, political, and economic formation of religious life. Near the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Max Weber,²⁸ Emile Durkheim,²⁹ Ernst Troeltsch,³⁰ and H. Richard Niebuhr,³¹ to mention the most celebrated, all attempted to classify and examine the social

27. Ibid., 16–18.

28. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and Other Writings* (ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells; New York: Penguin, 2002).

29. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (trans. Joseph Ward Swain; New York: Free Press, 1965).

30. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (trans. Olive Wyon; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

31. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Holt, 1929).

structure of emerging forms of religious consciousness, communities, and ecclesial formations.

Immediately after these towering figures in sociology and theology made public their work, Bonhoeffer published his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* (1930), which carries the revealing subtitle, “A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church.”³² In his work, Bonhoeffer, while affirming the phenomenological approach to the social formations or types of ecclesial communities, draws theological implications that sociological observations might provide, without being restricted to them or using them as a limiting matrix for ecclesiology. He raises the question of what it means to make a theological (*dogmatische* is Bonhoeffer’s term) study of social phenomena. Certainly he meant nothing less than to witness or discern God’s presence in the very fabric of the social matrix. Bonhoeffer was in search of a theological approach to reading the data collected under the auspices of a methodological atheism in which the “God-hypothesis” plays no role, or in his now-famous expression, *etsi deus non daretur* (as if God did not exist).³³

Works of fiction instead of sociological analysis or an intra-textual study of ecclesiological dogmas proffer the possibility of finding a third option. Novels are not sociological studies or theological treatises. A work of fiction does not do that. It is not theology, and if it pretends to be, it is bad theology; and it is not sociology either, but it does often combine the description of socio-cultural realities and the delineation of religious convictions even when it exposes a deep, pervasive anti-religious stance.

A novel, any novel, in the words of Georg Lukács, is “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.”³⁴ As defined by Lukács, it always has a theology encoded as if in the negative of a film, *sub contraria specie*, to borrow an expression of Luther’s theology of the cross. And it relies also on social observation and keen perception of sociological phenomena. It provides evidence of a perceived abandonment, yet the same abandonment is already a profound theological statement. The social sciences remain at the phenomenological level of social formations and interactions. Novels do not share their scientific precision but detect the spiritual void of their times, the frantic search of the ever-elusive meaning of the “vanishing present,” in the apt expression

32. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (DBWE; trans. Richard Krauss and Nancy Lukens; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); German edition: *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1986).

33. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. E. Bethge; New York: Macmillan, 1968), 158, 168–69.

34. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (trans. Anna Bostock; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 88.

of Gayatri Spivak.³⁵ This is the reason why, unlike the sciences, the novel is ruled not by analogy but by irony, the use of words to convey a negation by affirmation, or concealing something to reveal it. As Lukács says again, “For the novel, irony consists in this freedom of the writer in his relationship to God. . . . Irony, with intuitive double vision, can see where God is to be found in a world abandoned by God.”³⁶ By detecting an absence in the appearance of a presence, or vice versa, a presence in the appearance of an absence, novels are capable of crafting visages and detecting profiles that are more nuanced than sociological taxonomies yet more generalizable than the hair-splitting exercises that theological or dogmatic scholarship often ventures into.

The first profile that detects a condition and describes an option in search of certainty in a world that no longer takes for granted its grounding in the reality of God is *Elmer Gantry*, by the Nobel Prize-winning author Sinclair Lewis. The novel was published in 1927, just a couple of years after the “Scopes Trial” in Dayton, Tennessee. The trial received mass media treatment and marked the public triumph of evangelical creationism. Lewis makes reference to the trial,³⁷ but his main concern was portraying a fictional preacher for whom the novel was titled. The Reverend Gantry was not the type of fundamentalist whom the prosecution in the Dayton trial vindicated. He was the embodiment of what Max Weber had described some years earlier as a charismatic leader,³⁸ surrounded by followers filling his bank account to the brim and moving with ease through a variety of “evangelical” denominations and nondenominational churches as well. While “charismatic leader” is a type, “Elmer Gantry” is a profile. The novel is celebrated as one of the most acute analyses of hypocrisy in recent times. Nevertheless, its greater merit is to diagnose in its latency the emergence of a profile of ministry that would become a worldwide phenomenon some decades later. What marked this form of leadership and the sense of certainty it provided to the flock that followed was not dependent on dogma, church structure and polity, inerrancy of scriptures, and, most importantly, not even his persona as such; he offered himself as a depository of longings, failures,

35. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

36. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 92.

37. Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry* (New York: Penguin, 1967), 374.

38. “As Weber treats charisma in the context of authority, its bearer is always an individual ‘leader.’ His charismatic quality has to be ‘proved’ by being recognized as genuine by his followers. This is not, however, as Weber is careful to point out, the ordinary case of leadership by ‘consent’ of the led, in the usual democratic meaning. The authority of the leader does not express the ‘will’ of the followers, but rather their duty or obligation. Furthermore, in the event of conflict there can in principle be only one correct solution.” Talcott Parsons, “Introduction,” in Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons; New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 65.

and desires. His leadership was to be a catalyst, eloquently giving the people the assurance of their self-righteousness. So Lewis describes Elmer Gantry's call to be a player on "Christ's team":

He had but little to do with what he said. The willing was not his but the mob's; the phrases were not his but those of the emotional preachers and hysterical worshipers who he had heard since boyhood. . . . He was certain . . . of being the center of interest in the crowd.³⁹

Lewis presents the profile of an emergent form of evangelicalism in which what sustains the church is not the deposited faith it holds, the binding doctrines of Protestant orthodoxy (*fides quae creditur*), or the teaching office of the church, as in Roman Catholicism (*magisterium episcoporum*). However, it is also not the pietistic inner certainty of faith (*fides qua creditur*), nor the holiness movement of the puritan awakenings. It was rather the collective experience of spontaneous and structurally flexible doctrine and morals catalyzed by a charismatic leader intuitively aware of the mechanisms of mass psychology.

While the bilateral agreements have been a beacon of hope for those of ecumenical persuasion, the emergent phenomenon that Lewis describes completely bypasses them and is oblivious to their relevance or irrelevance. His description of this profile combines inspirational sentimentalism with biblical literalism surrounded by an aura of hypocrisy.

At the same time, a different option presents itself in the form of power and splendor. In the same year that *Elmer Gantry* was published (1927), another monumental name in North American literature, Willa Cather, offered to the public *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. While Lewis presents the rootlessness of a church in a society in the effervescent process of urbanization and its gravitation toward charismatic leaders, Cather reverts to an earlier context and its ensuing results. She locates her narration of events in the second half of the nineteenth century while the Roman Catholic Church was going through a vigorous moment of ecclesial renewal while trying to establish its ground on that bastion of world Protestantism, the United States.⁴⁰ The work covers the vocational trajectory of a French Jesuit priest, Father Latour ("the tower"), who is sent to New Mexico, a territory that has recently been part of Mexico and incorporated into the U.S., to establish the church among many indigenous

39. Lewis, *Elmer Gantry*, 53.

40. It is worth noticing that this period coincides with the conversion of Cardinal Newman from the Church of England to Roman Catholicism (1848) and of the Oxford Movement trying to bring the Church of England back to Rome. It is also the time of Vatican Council I (1869–1870), in which papal infallibility was declared, and just after the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary was promulgated (1854).

people (Hopi and Navajo) who had been evangelized by earlier Spanish and Mexican Catholic missionaries, but whose parishes, now in U.S. territory, were outside of any episcopal jurisdiction. As the consecrated bishop of Mexico, Father Latour starts to implement the Romanization of the local parishes, often clashing with the indigenous clergy and their autochthonous piety. An elderly indigenous priest thus describes his church to the bishop in defiance of the new imposing ecclesial policies zealously implemented by the bishop:

We have a living church here, not a dead arm of the European church. Our religion grew out of the soil, and has its own roots. We pay a filial respect to the person of the Holy Father, but Rome has no authority here. . . . Our people are the most devout left in the world. If you blast their faith by European formalities, they will become infidels and profligates.⁴¹

Cather represents the Hopi and Navajo people with sympathy, but for all their indigenous inculturation, they were missing the most important lesson: the virtue of church discipline, church structure, and obedience to Rome and the ordination vows attached with it. And that was what the bishop was bringing to them. The “European formalities” were “catholic,” meaning of universal validity. Certainty is guaranteed by this universal foundation that preserves truth from its inculturation in values that are regional and indigenous, therefore relative. While Lewis exposes and denounces the search for certainty in the volatile cult of charisma, Cather presents with certain irony the self-assured importance of institutional “formalities” of power (in her description), and even as she reveals fascination with aesthetic-ritual institutionalism.

A third literary profile again has a distinctly different emphasis: praxis. The practical and pragmatic results of a model of the church have been championed in early modern time by pietism. Its remarkable herald, Jacob Spener, put it in the most succinct formula when he said that Christianity is not about doctrine, but about practice. “[I]t is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice.”⁴² In the strange company of fellows to abide by this pietistic motto are liberation theologians as well as the promoters of the prosperity gospel. “You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16) is the biblical injunction that supports this stance. Certainty is assured by the results. Again, Max Weber, the sociologist, is helpful in diagnosing the impact of pietism on Protestant ethics.⁴³ In their popular interpretation

41. Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 146f.

42. Phillip Jakob Spener, “From the Pia Desideria: 1675,” in *Pietists: Selected Writings* (ed. Peter C. Erb; trans. Theodore G. Tappert; New York: Paulist, 1983), 36.

43. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 87–98.

of the Calvinist doctrine of election, the Puritans emphasized the causal relation between election and prosperity. So if one is prosperous in life, that would be the litmus test of whether one belongs to the blessed elect. Election belongs to God alone and nothing we can do may change it, but if prosperity and a holy life are its fruits, Weber argues, then an implied argument of backward causation takes place: if one is industrious, disciplined, and successful in life, that evidence will in fact decide divine election. The results are valid as a criterion for certainty. Orthopraxis becomes the gauging tool for orthodoxy; epistemology precedes ontology.

Three years after Lewis and Cather published their works, yet another but distinct profile of the church was offered. Miguel de Unamuno, in 1930, wrote *San Manuel Bueno, Martyr*,⁴⁴ a short novel that narrates the story of a priest in a little Spanish village, Valverde de Lucerna. The story is narrated by a young parishioner, Angela Carballino, who, totally devoted to the priest, discovers that he has lost his faith in the course of his ministry. But with unreserved dedication he faithfully continues to serve his parishioners under the guise of “his pious fraud.” Angela’s brother, Lazarus, after returning from “America” as an atheist and believer in human social progress without religion, turns into Don Manuel’s faithful disciple. He becomes an ardent follower of the priest, eventually knowing that Don Manuel is himself an atheist, yet convinced by his ministry and works of charity.

The great Spanish writer, in the tradition of giants like Cervantes or Calderón de la Barca, concludes his novella with a brief reflection regarding the manuscript by Angela that he presumably found and transcribed:

I would like also, since Angela Carballino injected her own feeling into the narrative—I don’t know how it could be otherwise—to comment on her statement to the effect that if Don Manuel and his disciple Lazarus had confessed to the people, they, the people, would not have understood. Nor, I should like to add, would they have believed the pair. They would have believed in the works and not their words. And works stand by themselves, and need no words to back them up. In a village like Valverde de Lucerna one makes one’s confession by one’s conduct.

And as for faith, people scarce know what it is, and care less.⁴⁵

Unamuno gives voice to a profile of church and ministry that provides another distinct foundation for certainty, in the midst of the most profound doubt, about what works and helps people here and now. Part and parcel of this help is not

44. The English edition can be found in Miguel de Unamuno, *Abel Sanchez and Other Stories* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1996).

45. *Ibid.*, 266.

only charity carried out by the priest and his disciple, but preservation of the parishioners' belief in the afterlife, which their actions are perceived to attest but their hearts and minds in secret deny. Sanctification becomes the guarantor of justification.

These three profiles, one charismatic-fundamentalist, another aesthetic-ritualistic, and the third cynical-pragmatist, represent the literary answers to the contemporary world and its search for certainties, whether we call it modern, late modern, or postmodern. The label does not matter. As Octavio Paz reminds us, "Humans have never known the name of the age they live in, and we are not an exception to this universal rule."⁴⁶ The description of its condition does matter, because it is a negative description: the *lack* of certainty that assails a culture and triggers the search for unassailable certainties. What characterizes these options is precisely a response in search of certainty in an inerrant writ, in the visible splendor of an institution, or in a pragmatic driven yearning for results.

IN DEFENSE OF A CHURCH PROTESTANT

Protestantism is a datable historical phenomenon. The word has its origin in the Second Imperial Diet of Speyer in 1529 in which the followers of the Reformation, being a minority in representation, were overruled in their appeal for religious freedom. They left the diet and returned with a "Letter of Protestation," defending their faithfulness to the scriptures and their freedom of conscience. Since then the word *Protestant* has been attributed to the followers of the Reformation cause. Three constitutive features, therefore, define the use of the word. Those who protested were a minority. Second, they claimed the scriptures as the principle for the judgment of doctrine (as opposed to Roman edicts, papal encyclicals, or the decisions of councils). Finally, they asserted freedom of conscience on matters pertaining to religion. Beginning in 1529, these three factors together shaped the definition of what "Protestant" means when applied to ecclesial formations. To phrase it negatively: as minorities, they did not have their share in the hegemony that controlled religious and political power; faithfulness to the Word of God meant that they did not submit unconditionally to human ordinances; freedom of conscience meant the rejection of an authority that rules against their minds and hearts.

Poignant in this historical description is that the definition of the word *Protestant* does not immediately entail any material content attached to it, as in a confessional document, a creed, or a catechism. It is strictly formal. Even the scriptures are not defined as to their content and limits. The canon, even if accepted *prima facie*, is not provided with a definition of what it entails. It

46. Octavio Paz, *La otra voz: Poesía y fin de siglo* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990), 51.

remains open!⁴⁷ This formal definition, however, describes more than a historically demarcated phenomenon. It describes an ethos proper to minorities who are open to the Word of God and who discern its implications in freedom. Where this is found, there is the church protestant.

The historical manifestation of such ethos is necessarily tenuous. Its existence is constantly at risk, because there is always the temptation to gravitate to a stable ground where certainty is ensured. The history of the historical mainstream Protestant churches is itself a documentary that attests to the betrayal of protestation, when it settles in the secure grounds of historical Protestantism. The ecumenical movement, notwithstanding its noble efforts toward doctrinal appeasement of divisive factions and its social service, has never been exempt of conjuring totalitarian spectra.

Juan Luis Segundo suggests a connection between the present—articulated and globalized—economic system, on the one hand, and the evolution of the ecumenical movement, on the other. This connection presents the reverse side of the Reformation that split the Western church in the initial phase of the capitalist system (“financial capitalism”), when plurality was required to overcome the objective moral and doctrinal unity of the Middle Ages. Segundo writes:

The so much championed “unity of the Christians,” with its pastoral consequences, constitutes a clear ideological element. The ideal of the unity for liberation turned into the ideal of the unity to cover up conflicts, to minimize them in face of something more important and thus to serve, in an indirect way, to maintain the status quo . . . the ideology that places the [ideological] superstructure at the service of the existing order is, in most cases, not a conscious maneuver: it is an unconscious sliding of ideas through furrows that will prevent them from clashing with that order.⁴⁸

Born from a historical event in 1529, the appellation “protestant” came to describe an *ethos* to be found where God-fearing faithful minorities exercise their freedom, often outside of what is currently defined by the proper noun *Protestantism*.⁴⁹ These minorities live in the almost unbearable tension between

47. In the extensive later confessional writings of the Lutheran Reformation, the canon as such is never defined as to what belongs to it or not. Luther (WA 2:325, 18–20) and Calvin (*Institutes* 4.9.14) explicitly rejects the church’s need for a definition of the canon.

48. Juan Luis Segundo, “As Elites Latino-Americanas,” in *Fé Cristã e Transformação Social na América Latina* (ed. Instituto Fe y Secularidad; Petropolis: Vozes, 1977), 186. See also Vítor Westhelle, “Ecumenics and Economics: Economic Justice and the Unity of the Church,” in *El silbo ecuménico del Espíritu: Homenaje a José Míguez Bonino en sus 80 años* (ed. Guillermo Hansen; Buenos Aires: ISEDET, 2004), 157–76.

49. I will use “protestant” with lower case to designate this ethos as opposed to the proper noun “Protestant” that denotes a historical phenomenon.

the uncontrollable manifestations of the Spirit's charisma and institutional embodiment of the church.⁵⁰ They are found within and outside every denomination. To discern and detect their occurrence, when their visibility is so faint, is the task of an ecclesiology protestant.

Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, in one of his last works, *Church: The Human Story of God*, expresses this protestant ethos in what could be taken as a testament to his witness:

The church never exists for its own sake, although it has often forgotten this (as have many religions). For that very reason, in this "ecclesiological" book I shall not be saying too much directly about the church. We need a bit of *negative ecclesiology*, church theology in a minor key, in order to do away with centuries-long ecclesiocentrism of the empirical phenomenon of "Christian religion": for the sake of God, for the sake of Jesus the Christ and for the sake of humanity.⁵¹

Schillebeeckx's plea for a "negative ecclesiology" should not be understood as implying the tradition of negative or apophatic theology, which asserts that the majesty of God is such that it can be approached only by denying any human assertion about God. The reason for a "bit of negative ecclesiology" is that descriptions of its "majestic grandeur" have so often obliterated where and when it happens. The church protestant happens; it is always an event that points and testifies to its own end, both as goal and as consummation or extinction. This can be expressed only by a paradoxical statement: The "nature" of the church is eschatological.

50. Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

51. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), xix.