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Churches in Europe and the Challenge of Cultural Witness

Edited by
Christine Schliesser, Graham Tomlin, Ralph Kunz and Benjamin Schliesser

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Preface

We gratefully acknowledge the cover art by Manuel Andreas Dürr. The cover art is taken from the work "Schwerter zu Pflugscharen II" ("Swords to Ploughshares II").

Manuel Andreas Dürr is an artist, painter and illustrator. He studied at the Russian Academy of Art in Florence. Manuel Andreas Dürr is the Creative Director of Schwarzfalter, a multimedia production firm located in Biel, Switzerland.

Christine Schliesser, Graham Tomlin, Ralph Kunz, and Benjamin Schliesser
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Churches in Europe and the Challenge of Cultural Witness

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It is a commonplace sentiment that the church in Europe is declining. Devotees of the secularization thesis would suggest that this is an inevitable process in any modern and sophisticated society, because the more prosperous, technologically proficient, and advanced a society is, the less religious it becomes. Yet, a strong case can also be made that this is a case of Western exceptionalism. In fact, 85% of the people on this planet claim adherence to a faith tradition (World Population Review 2022). Furthermore, almost all religions will experience growth in the 21st century as an extensive study by the Pew Research Center (2015) shows. China is fast becoming the world's largest economy, and yet religious faith, and in particular the Christian church, has grown there in ways unimaginable in recent history. The same is true in other non-Western countries where Christian minorities are growing larger, and is particularly true in Africa where, in the context of the development of African countries, the growth of Christianity is one of the most remarkable social movements in global history in the past century.

Much has been written about the reasons for the decline of the church in Europe and what might be done to reverse it. A sizeable literature has grown around such initiatives as Church Planting, Fresh Expressions of Church, the New Evangelisation, and other attempts to grow the church in Western European countries. To date, however, relatively little has been written about the church's public witness.

Several voices have pointed to the churches' lack of public voice as hampering attempts to grow the church at the grassroots level. As the Anglican priest Peter Owen Jones (2022) writes:

> Parish priests like me operate at the coal face: we baptise; we marry; we bury; we console where we can. This is the work of the Church of England at the micro-level. Where the Church does not have a compelling presence is at the national level, the macro level. It is here that there has been a complete lack of engagement, of witness, of imagination . . . Without effective national witness, work at the parish level has been made far harder.

One of the features of the increasing marginalization of the Christian churches in Western Europe has been the loss of a prominent Christian voice in public discourse. In many countries, churches retain either an established status within the constitutional and government structures of the nation, for example in the United Kingdom (UK), or retain a privileged place in national life in different ways. Mainstream media will often report on the church when there are deep internal disagreements within the church on wider hot button issues, such as human sexuality or euthanasia, or when there is a scandal within the church, or when there is conflict between the church and government. It is rarer, however, to hear intelligent Christian voices in public discourse, explaining and exploring the nuances of Christian theology.

In the 1960s, for example, John Robinson's book *Honest to God* (Robinson 1963), propos-ing a revised understanding of the relationship between God and the world in the light of developments in modern science and culture, was front page news in the UK. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was featured on the cover of Time Magazine in 1962. It is hard to imagine the pronouncement or profile of a theologian having anything like the same impact today. Theologians continue to produce learned articles, detailed monographs, and extensive discussion on issues in the various branches of theology, yet little of this gets read even in the wider church let alone in secular circles. While there is a clear public role for sociologists, psychologists, geographers, scientists, and specialists in other disciplines, that is rarely true for theologians. In the words of Volf and Croasmun (2019) from Yale University, "*[T]he number of people in the pew reading academic theology is negligible . . . (and) the wider public outside Christian communities perceives academic theology as so thoroughly irrelevant that it might as well not exist*" (p. 40f.). Neither the world, nor even the church for that matter, seem that interested in what academic theology has to offer.

The occasion for this edition of the Religions journal is the launch of a new initiative within the Church of England seeking to address this issue. The *Centre for Cultural Witness* was set up in September 2022, led by Bishop Graham Tomlin, who until that point had been the Bishop of Kensington in the Diocese of London after a long career in academic theologi-cal teaching. The new Centre is based in Lambeth Palace, the home of the Archbishop of Canterbury, at the invitation of Archbishop Justin Welby. It focusses on three main activities: (i) *Communication*—comprising a major new opinion website offering Christian perspectives on contemporary cultural issues and themes; (ii) *Learning*—a program of training in public communication for senior Christian leaders such as bishops, members of parliament, and community leaders; and (iii) *Research*—projects emerging from partnerships with university theological faculties into aspects of the church's public witness today.

At present, at least in the countries that we as editors stem from, there is a large gulf between the different public spheres, the world of theology, and the church's public witness. The *Center for Cultural Witness* is an attempt to bridge that gap by encouraging theologians to reorient their work outwards as part of the church's public witness, providing a format for such work to find a much wider audience as an explicit part of the church's witness, and generating new avenues of theological enquiry related to the public witness of the church.

The phrase "cultural witness" was deliberately chosen as a way of indicating that this is an attempt not to convince a skeptical world by means of rational argumentation, or to offer yet more theological and historical research abstracted from contemporary life, but to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the particular circumstances of contemporary cultures. "Cultural witness" bears a resemblance to other projects, such as public theology (*Öffentliche Theologie*) in the German speaking world or the discipline of apologetics, yet at the same time lays emphasis in different places from either of these.

The articles in this edition of the journal *Religions* explore various aspects of the church's public witness and, in particular, the theme of "cultural witness".

The opening article by Bishop Graham Tomlin (Center for Cultural Witness, UK) outlines the approach this initiative takes that distinguishes it from previous trends in the discipline of apologetics. Andrew Davison's (Cambridge University, UK) article explores the multifaceted nature of the word "cultural" in the phrase "cultural witness." Ralph Kunz (Zurich University, Switzerland) examines a figure of thought that has gained prominence in the Reformed tradition and for which the concept of the prophetic office has stood. The church is a community that not only reproduces religious knowledge but brings it into public discourse as a provocative voice. Public theology as cultural witness and its Chris-tological implications is the topic of Christine Schliesser's (Zurich/Fribourg University, Switzerland) paper. Discussing the implications of cultural witness on theology, Ulrich Körtner (Vienna University, Austria) deliberates the kind of theology that the church of the future needs. In their co-authored article, Carmody Grey (Durham University, UK) and Oliver Dürr (Fribourg/Zurich University, Switzerland) call for the retirement of the "religion/secular" frame, as these terms increasingly lack salience in our cultures. Cardinal

Reinhard Marx (Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, Germany) tackles the fundamental question of how viable, reliable, and sustainable decisions can be reached in our quest to contribute to the common good.

Benjamin Schliesser's contribution (Bern University, Switzerland) portrays innovative and distinct features of local Christ groups of the first decades, who were also forced to face the challenge of cultural witness. Renie Chow Choy (Westcott House/St Paul's Cathedral, UK) encourages a discussion on how broadening the engagement with sensitive memories associated with the cultural heritage of the Church of England can enhance its visibility in the public sphere. Benno van den Toren's (Groningen University, The Netherlands) paper addresses the nature of and questions about the church's public witness in a multi-faith context.

Alister McGrath (Oxford University, UK) engages key themes of Tomáš Halík's approach to cultural witness in a time of change and uncertainty. Meego Remmel (European Federation of Baptist Churches, Estonia) tackles the issues surrounding church-state relationship in the secularized context of Estonian culture. In his article, Christophe Chalamet (Geneva University, Switzerland) argues for a middle ground between the two temptations of Christians, either to "retreat" from the world, or to more or less completely "merge" with contemporary society. Finally, Sara Schumacher (St. Mellitus College, UK) offers thoughts on the cultural witness of church art and its patronage.

As editors, our hope is that this set of essays stimulates a new engagement between the different public spheres, the world of theology, and the church's public witness, and which helps develop a renewal of confidence in the contribution of Christian faith to the wider discourse of our societies in Western Europe, to the strengthening of the church, and to the flourishing of our communities.

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Article

Apocalyptic Apologetics and the Witness of the Church

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Abstract: The discipline of apologetics has always been somewhat controversial in Christian theology. In the early church, the Greek-speaking apologists were often opposed for their attempts to express the gospel in the terms of Greek thought. In more recent times, the critiques of Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, that it is an attempt to appeal to foundations that have nothing to do with the gospel, have cast a shadow over the discipline in recent years. This paper seeks to take those critiques seriously, yet argues that the discipline of apologetics is vital for the ongoing witness of the Church. It offers a new vision of apologetics based on the theological Apocalyptic genre. Rather than attempt to prove the existence of God or the truth of the Christian faith by rational means, Apologetics can be reconceived as an essentially narrative or descriptive discipline. The Apocalyptic genre thinks of the gospel as the result and announcement of the good news as a radical incursion of God into human life and history in the Incarnation and Resurrection. Apocalyptic Apologetics thus becomes an attempt to describe the world of history, politics, relationships and art (in fact, everything created) as lit up by the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It becomes a wide-ranging and imaginative venture to redescribe the world in the light of the gospel. This approach re-establishes Apologetics as a crucial part of the Church's witness while avoiding the critique that it smuggles in assumptions and foundations from outside the gospel itself.

Keywords: apologetics; apocalyptic; Auden; witness; rationalist; evangelism; descriptive

1. Introduction

The Centre for Cultural Witness is a new venture from within the Church of England seeking a renewal of the public understanding of the Christian faith. From its inception, it has coined the term 'Cultural Witness', which contains a number of potential meanings, including the task of witnessing in this particular cultural moment, engaging wider cultural norms and products and exploring the relationship between Christian faith and contemporary cultural life.

This essay begins to explore the particular approach to Cultural Witness that the Centre is adopting, seeking to move beyond more recent trends in apologetics towards a different form of cultural engagement of the Christian gospel with contemporary life and thought.

In Western Europe, the Church looks back on an age where it felt much more comfortable and secure in its place in culture. Christian leaders were honoured and distinguished members of society and were listened to with seriousness in public life, and the Church had an undoubted place at the centre of cultural life. Now, however, the Church feels much more marginal to social and political activity, and while traces of Christendom remain, and the deep roots of Western European culture are evident from time to time,[1] at least on the surface, the signs of Christian presence, especially in public discourse, are hard to find.

Responses to this in the Church in the West have been various. Sometimes, it is simply nostalgia for a lost past. More positively, a number of missiologically driven initiatives, such as Fresh Expressions; the Church Planting movement; and renewed attempts at evangelism in the UK and beyond through process courses such as Alpha, Pilgrim and Christianity Explored, have made significant but still modest gains in planting new churches and

attracting people to the Christian faith. However much of this seems to still be swimming against an increasing cultural tide flowing in the opposite direction to the Christian faith, towards the growing secularisation of life and culture.

On another level, there has been renewed engagement with the practice of Christian apologetics. This gained particular resonance with the rise of New Atheism, with well-publicised atheist voices producing polemical works attacking religion in general and Christian faith in particular, which have occasioned several rejoinders from within the Christian academic community. These new attempts at contemporary apologetics, however, have not been without their critics.[2]

Such a critique is not new. The theological discipline of apologetics has always been somewhat controversial. Even in the early years of the Church, the Greek-speaking thinkers that we know of as the early Christian Apologists, people such as Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria and others, did not find universal delight among their contemporaries for their attempts to make the Gospel understandable to the Greek-speaking world. Figures such as Tatian and Tertullian poured scorn upon any attempt to translate the gospel into Greek terms and adopted a much more hostile stance towards pagan culture than these apologists who sought to adapt Greek terms and notions for the communication of Christian ideas.[3] For Tertullian and others, this attempt at synthesis was a step too far in betraying the radically different metaphysics that the gospel revealed. It felt like pressing the good news into the procrustean bed of Greek thought and, therefore, losing something essential, diminishing the distinctness of Christian faith and practice in the process.

During the years of Christendom, apologetics understandably took a backseat. Occasionally, Anselm's ontological argument, the synthesis of faith and reason in Aquinas and his 'Five Ways', have been gathered under the category of apologetics, although this always seems a little tendentious, as these are theological enterprises aimed at exploring the internal coherence of Christian faith rather than seeking to make an argument for faith outside the Christian Church.[4]

In the early stages of the rise of the Enlightenment, the desire to develop defences of orthodox Christian faith begin to re-emerge in the seventeenth century and beyond, in England with Joseph Butler's arguments with the Deists and William Paley's 'Natural Theology'. In France, a tradition of French apologetics developed, involving people such as Marin Mersenne, Yves de Paris and Jean de Silhon, engaging with sceptical leanings that can be traced back to Montaigne, as well as Protestant apologists such as Hugo Grotius and Philippe de Mornay (d'Angers 1954). Blaise Pascal, of course, is a prominent figure in this tradition, although his apologetic method differs from these others in significant ways.

In more recent centuries, apologetics has had its severe critics, in particular, Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. For Kierkegaard, apologetics was equivalent to Judas' kiss, the 'treason of stupidity' (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 87). For him, the Christian message had a compelling force not because it was rationally more coherent than other messages but simply because it was a word from God, breaking into the superficiality of ordinary life. What prevents people from accessing it is not a lack of intelligence but nothing more than sin. Reason is always historically and culturally situated, and so an appeal to reason always ends up as an appeal to the crowd, judged at the bar of public opinion. Kierkegaard opposes any apologetic attempt to make a case for Christian faith because it grounds faith in secular reason and makes faith into something it was never intended to be, the kind of rational acknowledgement of the truth of Christian faith that does not make any particular demands on the existential life of the person, the kind of faith he subjected to withering critique in his analysis of Christendom.

In a similar fashion, the early Karl Barth in particular, with his classic and memorable refusal of Emil Brunner's dabbling in natural theology, rejected any natural point of contact between God and humanity that could be the basis upon which any apologetic attempt could be made: 'Anxiety concerning the victory of the Gospel—that is, Christian Apologetics—is meaningless, because the Gospel is the victory by which the world is

overcome. . . . It [the Gospel] does not require representatives with a sense of responsibility, for it is as responsible for those who proclaim it as it is for those to whom it is proclaimed' (Barth 1933, p. 35).

Apologetics for Barth, therefore, can never be a distinct discipline, and for him, the best apologetics is good and proper dogmatics, in other words, the Church's public confession of faith. Any attempt to demonstrate the existence of God through human reason will always end up as idolatry. The later Barth softens this critique a little, yet it remains true that Barth's critique of apologetics has been hugely influential and has cast a shadow over the discipline in Protestant circles at least over the past century or so.

In more recent decades, certainly in Western Europe and North America, as noted above, apologetics has been dominated by the rise of New Atheism. The emergence of, among others, the 'four horsemen' of New Atheism, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens (Dawkins 2007; Dawkins et al. 2019) led apologetics into a defence of Christian faith against such attacks led by theologians and apologists such as Alister McGrath, Ravi Zacharias, John Lennox, David Bentley Hart and William Lane Craig (McGrath 2004; Lennox 2009; Hart 2009; Craig 2008).

Given the scale and popularity of this very public attack on Christian faith, such responses were perhaps necessary for a time; however, arguably, this response is in danger of allowing the apologetics enterprise to become narrowed into engaging with this debate on the terms of New Atheism, presenting arguments for the existence of God, the historical veracity of the Resurrection and so on, in a way that renders them vulnerable to the critique of Kierkegaard and Barth, that they are effectively an attempt to commend the gospel in terms that have little to do with the gospel itself.[5] This has led to a number of critiques of the apologetic enterprise that continue the Barthian suspicion into more recent times.[6]

Catholic theologians have never felt quite the nervousness found in these Protestant circles to the task of apologetics. With their background in Thomist ideas of nature and grace and belief in the ongoing validity of divinely implanted reason in the human mind, they have always felt there was value in appealing to the natural capacity of rationality in the minds of those without faith.[7]

Yet, for many, the suspicion of rationalist apologetics remains. The enterprise of seeking to prove the truth of the Christian faith according to pure reason is, according to John Hughes, 'not so ancient as we might think, but actually belongs to this particular philosophical project, which we call modernity and the European Enlightenment, and more specifically to rationalist foundationalism' (Davison 2011, p. 5). And foundationalism is a problem if it proposes foundations for knowledge outside of the gospel itself.[8] The danger is that of proving a God who turns out to be the God of the Deists, or the God of the philosophers, as Pascal argued, rather than the God of Jesus Christ.

Can the discipline of apologetics survive the Kierkegaardian/Barthian critique? Is it essentially an attempt to ground the truth of Christianity in a logical framework that somehow exists above and beyond it? Does it fail to grasp the radical nature of the new metaphysics that the Christian faith brings into the world?

Perhaps a way forward can be charted through a look at a particular period of twentieth-century European life where a concerted attempt to give an account of Christian faith in public seems to have had a significant, if short-term, impact on public perceptions of Christian faith and even perhaps led to growth in church attendance and involvement.

2. A Christian Vision of the World: 1940s Britain

Alan Jacobs has told the story of how, as the dark days of the Second World War progressed in early 1940s Britain, a debate began as to how Europe could be rebuilt after the cataclysm that had swept across the continent through the 1930s, leading to the tragedy of the war itself. If the great tradition of European social and political life had been led into the horrific cul-de-sac of Nazism, leading to the widespread destruction of cities and populations, as well as an erosion of trust in political institutions and intellectual life, what

vision would have the power to rebuild life and society in Europe after the war was over (Jacobs 2018)?

A typical episode related to the poet W. H. Auden. He recounted a visit to the cinema in New York in November 1939, while living in a part of Manhattan largely populated by people of German descent. As the newsreel preceding the film depicted Poles being taken prisoner by the Wehrmacht, his fellow moviegoers started shouting 'kill them, kill them!'. The experience shook Auden to the core and made him begin to ask on what grounds such a despicable perspective could be deemed morally wrong. To cut a long story short, he came to believe that 'only an appeal to something eternal, absolute, and good—like the God of St Thomas . . . would permit one to answer the Nazis to justify one's choice of social democracy over fascism.' As quoted in (Jacobs 2018, p. 7).

Over these war years, a number of other Christian writers and intellectuals began to engage in this debate, not so much by writing lengthy theological tomes but through other means. While an English Professor at Oxford University, C.S. Lewis gave a series of radio broadcast talks between 1941 and 1944, which were eventually published as *Mere Christianity* in 1954. T.S. Eliot, after his bleak depiction of cultural fragmentation in *The Wasteland* of 1922, offered his newly Christian vision of reality in *The Four Quartets*, published between 1936 and 1942. Dorothy Sayers wrote and produced her play about the life of Jesus, *The Man Born to be King*, in 1941–2.[9] The Roman Catholic Evelyn Waugh published *Brideshead Revisited*, the theme of which he described as 'the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters' (Waugh 2000, p. ix), in 1945. JRR Tolkien was working on his epic stories of Middle Earth with the publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937 and *The Lord of the Rings* between 1954 and 1955. At the same time, figures such as Jacques Maritain in France and William Temple in England, as Archbishop of Canterbury,[10] were helping articulate new political visions for the future of Europe, resulting in the welfare state in the UK and the Christian Democratic movement that gave birth to the European Union.

Jacobs goes on to point out how part of this broad Christian engagement with the culture of the time took place in a gathering of Christian intellectuals known as the Moot, brought together by J.H. Oldham and that met between 1938 and 1947 (Jacobs 2018, pp. 24–32). This was an attempt to articulate a Christian response to the war and to advocate the need for moral and spiritual renewal in the British education system, in part because Oldham felt that the Christian voice in England was either indistinct or silent. The group included T.S. Eliot; the theologians Paul Tillich and Alec Vidler; and the German sociologist Karl Mannheim. Reinhold Niebuhr attended on occasion, and C.S. Lewis was asked to write papers for the group to discuss.

This coalition was not always harmonious. C.S. Lewis, for example, always disliked T.S. Eliot's poetry (McGrath 2013, pp. 106–7) (the feeling was mutual)[11], and Auden was a fierce critic of Niebuhr's political vision for lacking a spiritual heart. Yet, despite personal animosities, what can be seen here was a concerted and, to a certain degree, coordinated attempt to find a Christian voice in public. These were, by and large, not theologians but novelists, poets, literary critics and politicians. Their output was largely narrative in form, ranging from Sayers' plays to Lewis's Narnia stories, all painting an imaginatively rich, intellectually rigorous and spiritually informed picture of the world, seen through Christian eyes.

An interesting coda to this story, a connection not made in Jacobs' telling, is that this renewed Christian engagement with the imagination, this many-faceted depiction of a broad Christian view of the world, arguably led to the growth of the church in subsequent years. Callum Brown describes how 'the late 1940s and 50s witnessed the greatest church growth that Britain had experienced since the mid nineteenth century' (Brown 2009, p. 170). This period saw growth in church membership, attendance at Sunday school, Anglican confirmations and baptisms in other denominations as well (Brown 2009, pp. 172–73).

While the figures are undoubted, accounting for this growth is a little harder. Of course, the British Billy Graham crusades took place in the early 1950s, yet growth had

begun long before then. These events arguably reaped the fruit of a more general cultural Christian movement rather than being the cause of it. The post-war years were marked with austerity and a social conservatism that may have helped foster a return to traditional faith, and yet a major part of this growth in church engagement may be traced back to this rich, imaginative portrayal of a Christian view of the world during the war years. These books, novels, plays and poetry made Christianity attractive, intriguing and believable again for generations who had become tired of hackneyed phrases and repetitive sermons.

What was at the heart of this intellectual and imaginative renewal of the Christian imagination? An answer to this vital question might be found by looking at one particular artistic and poetic product of this movement.

From 1941 to 1942, soon after his conversion, W.H. Auden wrote '*For the Time Being: a Christmas Oratorio*' which took the form of a verse drama, tracing the Christmas story in the Christian Year from Advent through to the flight to Egypt. Towards the beginning of the work, the Chorus sings:

> We who must die demand a miracle,
> how could the eternal do a temporal act,
> The infinite become a finite fact?
> Nothing can save us that is possible:
> We who must die demand a miracle

The plea is for a dramatic intervention from outside, a miracle that undoes death, the death that was so commonly reported in news from the continent during these war years. As the play progresses, with the birth of Jesus, the old man, Simeon, declares:

> By the event of this birth the true significance of all other events is defined . . .

> And by the existence of this Child, the proper value of all other existences is given, For of every other creature it can be said that it has extrinsic importance but of this Child it is the case that he is in no sense a symbol. Shortly after this declaration, the three wise men speak to Herod: God has been born, we have seen him ourselves. The world is saved. Nothing else matters. (Auden 1994, p. 393)

These statements, which summarise the narrative flow of the play, can perhaps be taken as emblematic of this general movement and its approach to what we might call (though they did not generally use the term) apologetics. In light of the desperate situation of humanity during these war years, nothing else but the dramatic intervention of God can suffice. Social and political progress, using the resources of human endeavour, will never be enough. Only the miracle of eternity becoming temporal will do. Humanity is so corrupt and entangled in destructiveness and deceit that it can only be saved by a radical intervention from God, the incursion of the divine into human affairs. And that miracle occurs not in a new political movement or the technocratic society but in the Incarnation. This event both sheds light on and gives significance to every other event because it is the key inbreaking of God into human history. It is, in fact, the central event of history, as it is the only one that is not a symbol of something else, but the one event towards which everything else points—the 'myth become fact', as C.S. Lewis put it.[12]

Rather than mounting arguments for the existence of God or evidence of the Resurrection or the historicity of the Bible, the various strands of this imaginative and literary movement were an attempt to re-imagine reality in the light of the decisive intervention of God in the Incarnation. If the Second World War had seemed a cataclysm, interrupting the normal state of affairs, the Incarnation was seen as something even more decisive, casting a new light on the world. This insight gave rise, in a literary sense, to new worlds that overlapped with ours and yet bristled with imaginative colour, such as Lewis's Narnia or Tolkien's Middle Earth. As Lewis once said in a talk about the novels of Charles Williams, one of the 'Inklings', the group of Christian academics who met to read, edit and critique each other's books in Oxford,

'He is writing that sort of book in which we begin by saying, let us suppose that this everyday world were at some one point invaded by the marvellous.'

In other words, this might be described as an apocalyptic approach to apologetics.

3. The Return of Apocalyptic

It is undoubtedly true that there has been a widespread resurgence of interest in the notion of the 'apocalyptic' as a tool for unlocking the meaning and context of the New Testament. Yet, in theological terms, the word is a potential minefield of confusing definitions. 'Apocalyptic' is, of course, a literary genre common in the Second Temple period out of which the NT emerged. At first glance, it refers to Biblical texts such as the book of Daniel or Revelation, or other extra-biblical texts such as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch. Yet 'apocalyptic' also stands for a type of theology that could be found in other literary works beyond the more obvious texts belonging to that genre.

Numerous authors have explored the significance of the apocalyptic as a category of theological exploration; Albert Schweitzer was perhaps the grandfather of this movement, with his dramatic and racial re-reading of early Christianity as an essentially apocalyptic movement, expecting the imminent end of the world (Schweitzer 2000). Much of the modern interest in apocalyptic stems from the influence of the early Karl Barth, especially his epoch-making commentary on Romans (Barth 1933). Ernst Käsemann was a further key figure in this development, with his often-quoted statement that apocalyptic was 'the mother of all Christian theology' (Käsemann 1969, p. 102).

Perhaps the main scholar in more recent years who has built on these foundations is J. Louis Martyn, with his ground-breaking commentary on Galatians published in 1997 (Martyn 1997). Further contributions have been made more recently by Pauline scholars such as Leander Keck (Keck 1984), Alexandra Brown (Brown 1995), Beverley Gaventa (Gaventa 2013) and Douglas Campbell (Campbell 2009). The interest in apocalyptic is not confined to NT scholars, however, and a number of systematic theologians have explored the significance of the genre, including Douglas Harink and Philip Ziegler (Ziegler 2018).

Some have emphasised the element of revelation (after all, that is, of course, essentially what the word Ἀποκάλυψις means). Some (such as Martyn) stress military metaphors of God's invasion of the world, while others have emphasised the radical liberation that apocalyptic brings, and yet others (such as Philip Ziegler) emphasise the battle with the powers of darkness—the three-agent drama involving not just God and humanity but also the reality of evil personified in the figure of Satan.

There is a debate within the field of apocalyptic studies as to the relationship between apocalyptic and eschatology. Are they effectively coterminous? Or is eschatology intrinsic to apocalyptic? As Jamie Davies points out in his summary of apocalyptic thinking in Pauline studies, earlier understandings of apocalyptic, such as in Schweitzer and Käsemann, saw an imminent Parousia as essential to the genre, whereas, more recently, the work of Christopher Rowland has stimulated a shift away from the eschatological to the epistemological as essential to the category. Apocalyptic, in his understanding, is about revealed mysteries that were not accessible to the natural mind, rather than necessarily expecting an imminent end of the age (Davies 2022, pp. 79–81). While the apocalyptic genre once implied a fascination with the imminent end of the world as we know it, this approach focuses attention more on the apocalyptic as enabling a new way of seeing the world as it really is—a world into which God has become incarnate, in which Christ has died for the sins of the world, a world that has been radically changed by the Resurrection of Christ.

Another related debate concerns the relationship between wisdom and the apocalyptic in Paul's teaching. At times, they have been seen as opposing strands of interpretations of Pauline theology, the former seeing Paul as offering a new form of wisdom teaching, a better way of navigating the world as it is, and the latter a much more radical break with the wisdom of this age, suggesting that, in Christ, something much more significant has

shifted in the hinge of the ages. Scholars such as Grant Macaskill have found a way to integrate these in a kind of 'revealed wisdom' (Macaskill 2007).

Significant for our purposes here is this dimension of the epistemological crisis brought about by the interruption of the historical process due to the coming of Christ.

For example, Martyn points out that, in Paul's conversion, he was not gradually argued into faith by a careful process of reasoning, but that God literally revealed, or *apocalypse*, Christ to him. In Paul's theology, therefore, before Christ, humanity was trapped under the power of an evil age. In Christ, God has invaded that *aeon* to bring liberation, ensuring final victory one day. In the meantime, the battle against the forces of evil has to be fought and won. The old world literally died in Christ, and a new world has been born. A dramatic new age has come into being where the time of cosmic enslavement is now past. Human liberation does not grow out of the present evil age, nor is it something towards which we struggle through political action, but is an invasive movement into that age that took place in Christ. The decisive victory has been won at the cross, which has brought about this new age, and the sending of the Spirit enlists Christians as soldiers in a battle while living in hotly contested territory. The Pauline epistles, therefore, tell the story of 'God's invasive act into a space that has temporarily fallen out of God's hands' (Martyn 1997, p. 105).

Moreover, this invasion of the world in the coming of Christ has not only brought about a new world it has also brought about what Martyn calls an 'epistemological crisis', or

'a new way of knowing . . . Paul sees the crucifixion as apocalypse, as the divine, revealing invasion that changes not only the cosmos, but also one's way of perceiving it . . . The glad tiding of this Christ became for them not an object, but rather an occurrence, happening in their midst as though it were a powerful explosion that rearranged the whole of reality'. (Martyn 1997, p. 132)

Besides Martyn, other scholars in this field have explored the epistemological aspect of this apocalyptic turn in a number of ways. Alexandra Brown, for example, in her reading of 1 Corinthians, argues that, in the light of the cross of Christ, Paul now posits a new kind of wisdom—an 'apocalyptic wisdom' (Brown 1995, p. 51)—which is both revealed and concealed (1 Cor 2.7) in the cross of Christ, the sign of the power and the weakness of God (1 Cor 1.24). This 'word of the Cross' has the ability to transform the Christian's view of the world, offering a new way of knowing the world and a new way of living in that world. The cross marks the end of the old age and the beginning of the new, and the Corinthian Christians are taken to task for not having realised the radical break that has come about, still viewing the world in the old way (Ψυχικὸς) as opposed to the new way (πνευματικῶς). In a similar way, even N.T. Wright, not normally considered an advocate of the apocalyptic Paul, has written of an 'apocalyptic epistemology' (Wright 2013, p. 1310).

In this strand of apocalyptic scholarship, we find the idea emerging of revealed wisdom—a new way of looking at the world, brought about by the event of divine intervention in Christ. Alexandra Brown focuses on the cross as the nexus of this new wisdom, yet we might also extend this to the significance of the Resurrection. As Davies puts it, drawing on Barth's understanding of the importance of the Resurrection for epistemology, 'In Paul's apocalyptic thought, the Resurrection is . . . the reality from which one reasons; it effects the transformation of the knowing subject . . . and is the ground of a new way of knowing.' (p. 148).

Thus, in the work of J. Louis Martyn, Alexandra Brown, Grant Macaskill and Jamie Davies, we see emerging a strand of understanding of the apocalyptic that stresses a new way of understanding, knowing and interpreting the world. It leads to seeing the world with new eyes.

Now, none of these scholars extends this idea explicitly into the field of apologetics, but if we begin to think along these lines, we begin to find some creative possibilities and the opportunity for a renewed vision of the discipline. If the Incarnation, the cross and the Resurrection of Christ have marked the end of the old world and the beginning of the new, how, then, is that world to be described?

4. Apocalyptic Apologetics

Myron Penner offers a significant critique of contemporary rationalist apologetics, arguing that they no longer work in the post-Enlightenment world. He conceives of apologetics as exemplified by figures such as William Lane Craig as 'the Enlightenment project of attempting to establish rational foundations for Christian belief' (Penner 2013, p. 7). For him, such modern apologetics discounts intuition, tradition and other ways of knowing that were common in the premodern world and assumes that being a Christian means giving rational assent to specific propositions that can be grounded in an external logic. This might be the liberal attempt to adapt Christian doctrine to the modern world or the conservative attempt to show Christian belief as compatible with modern science. Both approaches, he feels, are conditioned by modernity.

He goes on to argue that in place of the rational justification of belief, a more personal and committed living of the faith is needed—truth as verified by life. We need not just apologists carrying arguments, but prophets who have encountered God and speak the word for the moment. This is a valuable perspective but perhaps does not go far enough. The New Testament does seem to assume that the Christian will be called to account and needs to give an *apologia* for his or her faith when asked (1 Peter 3.15). That seems to assume a verbal response, which, of course, is grounded in the living of Christian life, but is still verbal nonetheless. The question is about what form that verbal response takes.

Our venture into apocalyptic theology perhaps gives us an answer to this question. We saw the fruit of an apocalyptic form of Christian theology in the imaginative and intellectual renewal of the Christian imagination in the 1940s. At the heart of that movement was not the kind of hopeful liberal anticipation of slow human progress towards the Kingdom of God as was fashionable in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century theology but a new vision of the world seen in the light of the Incarnation and Resurrection.

We also saw glimmers of this in the interest in epistemology in a movement that understands St Paul in particular as an apocalyptic theologian.

This perhaps gives us a way to reconceive the task of apologetics, reimagining it not so much as rational discourse, with the goal of arguing opponents of the Christian faith into submission through appeal to logical reasoning, but as a predominantly descriptive discipline. It presents the Church with the task of describing a world into which God has intervened decisively in the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Christ.

Apologetics then becomes the discipline of seeking to describe the world as lit up by the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4.4). What then do politics, law, architecture, music, housing—in other words, everything—look like in the light of his coming?

5. Apologetics as Witness

Walter Brueggemann, in a stimulating reappraisal of the ministry of evangelism, invites the Church to rethink the telling of the gospel as a work of reimagining (Brueggemann 1993). He argues that the Old Testament story revolves around three themes: the promise to the ancestors, the deliverance from slavery and the gift of the land. This story, especially as retold in the light of Christ, is one into which all peoples are invited so that it can become the defining story of our lives rather than the other stories that might try to define us. Evangelism is, therefore, the invitation to reimagine a life around promise, freedom and gift, and to re-frame our lives by this story. This means a conscious replacement and rejection of other stories that might tell us we are simply consumers, playing our part in the advance of the economy; victims of harm or damage by others; or perpetrators of sinful oppression. The task of the apologist, 'the teller of the evangel, has as his work the complete and radical redescription of all of reality' (Brueggemann 1993, p. 62).

In another work, Brueggemann suggests that the task of the preacher, as well as, we might add, the apologist, is to 'invite and empower and equip the community to re-imagine the world as though Yahweh were a key and decisive player' (Brueggemann 2000, p. 2). He reminds us that this is hard, courageous work, a theologically demanding task, and yet,

it must be done. He goes on to insist that the proper stance of a church in exile must be the same as the stance Israel took in its own exile, which is that of witness. In a world that no longer assumes the reality of God and construes the world without reference to God, he writes, 'my suggestion . . . is that the genre of testimony (as bid for assent) rather than proclamation (on an assumption of universal consensus) is how ancient Israel proceeded to claim truth in a like situation' (Brueggemann 2000, p. 39).

In other words, the task of the Church is not to win arguments but to bear witness. The success of the apologetic enterprise is to be measured not so much in the winning of debates, or the defeat of enemies in argument, but by the extent and imaginative power of faithful witness that the Church is able to bear to the remarkable dawning reality it has seen in the coming of Christ. That witness, of course, is born both verbally and in lives that are humanised into compassion and grace. A measure of effective and successful apologetics, then, is not so much the number of converts convinced but the imaginative richness of the portrait of the world that is painted as lit up by the glory of Christ. The heart of apocalyptic apologetics is the task of describing this new world, which has been dramatically brought about by the interruption of human history in the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Christ. It is looking at this world with new eyes, brought about by the epistemological crisis that the divine action in Christ has brought about.

Of course, the richer the range of imaginative colour, the extent to which the church can describe an intellectually and spiritually satisfying vision of life, the more likely it is that jaded, tired secular people, hungry for spiritual reality, will be drawn to that picture, as happened to many in Britain in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As Alister McGrath puts it, 'Apologetics is not primarily about persuading people that a certain set of ideas is right, although the demonstration of the truth and trustworthiness of the Christian faith is clearly important. It is more about depicting its world of beauty, goodness and truth faithfully and vividly, so that people will be drawn by the richness and depth of its vision of things.'(McGrath 2019, p. 18).

This suggests that the task of apologetics, viewed in this apocalyptic fashion, is as much a work of the imagination as it is of reason. The best apologetics have always engaged with this imaginative work. Augustine's 'City of God', for example, can be seen as an extended work of Christian apologetics, showing the incapacity of paganism to offer a satisfying way of living and dying and showing the ability of the Christian faith to provide just that. It does so by looking at the world through a new set of lenses, the perspective of the unseen City of God that lives alongside the seen City of this World and yet is directed towards a different destination. Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' does something similar, retelling the story of a person's life with imaginative colour as a journey to the heavenly city rather than a random series of events.

6. Conclusions

The task of *Apologia* in the modern world is primarily a descriptive one. How can Christians reimagine, re-describe and enact a renewed vision of economics, relationships and politics or money, sex and power in the light of the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Christ? This form of apologetics promises a more relationally positive form of persuasion. Rather than antagonistically facing the non-Christian, arguing them into submission, or being argued into submission themselves, it places the Christian alongside their non-Christian companion, with a gesture of pointing away to something new and remarkable, the light that we see in the face of Christ, and then to the world as lit up by that light around us.

This approach also escapes the Barthian and Kierkegaardian critique of being founded on a rationality that may or may not have anything to do with the gospel itself. It does not try to prove Christian faith within the metaphysics of a secular notion of reality but offers to re-describe the world based on the different metaphysics, a world, as it were, baptised into Christ.

This takes apologetics beyond a narrow set of questions focused on the existence of God and evidence for faith in which it perennially seems to be on the backfoot, responding to critiques made from outside. Instead, it is nothing less than reimagining and re-describing the whole of reality in the light of the gospel.

Notes

1   See (Holland 2019) for a recent influential popular exposition of the deep Christian roots of Western culture,

2   See (Penner 2013) for a well-argued recent critique of the modern apologetics enterprise.

3   See (Grant 1988), chapters 13 and 14, for an account of Tatian's critique of Greek culture and thought.

4   (Dulles 1971) is the classic historical account of the discipline. See also (Forrest et al. 2020) for a useful recent survey of apologetics.

5   Having said that, a number of these more recent apologists have developed more nuanced and creative approaches to the discipline that can be said to escape the Barthian and Kierkegaardian critique, such as in (McGrath 2019; Hart 2013).

6   See, for example, Penner, End of Apologetics.

7   Dulles, Apologetics, is the classic Catholic account of the discipline, and the approach is exemplified in John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html (accessed on 9 February 2023).

8   See (Thiel 1994) for an extended discussion of foundationalism, in conversation with figures such as the post-liberal theology of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.

9   An intriguing footnote to this is that Karl Barth conducted a correspondence with Dorothy Sayers in 1939, and even if he felt she leaned a little too far in the direction of semi-Pelagianism, he was still appreciative enough of her work to translate two of her essays on the Creed into German in 1959 after her death.

10   See (Spencer 2015) for an account of Temple's contribution to these developments.

11   It is said of Eliot that he 'did not like the Christianity of C.S. Lewis': (Gordon 1989, p. 217).

12   'Myth Became Fact' in (Lewis 1971, pp. 39–43).

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Article

Participating in Cultural Witness

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Abstract: The creation of a Centre for Cultural Witness at Lambeth Palace, to serve the Church of England within an ecumenical partnership that already stretches across Europe, offers an opportune time to reflect upon the place—even the meaning—of "culture" in witness of the church. The analysis presented here identifies three senses in which that term might be applied to witness: as that from which the witness comes, that through which it comes, and that to which it comes. At least in theory, a strong cultural emphasis might (or might not) be placed on each of these dimensions independently. However, while this may prove to be a useful distinction, it risks perpetuating an assumption that churches, and Christians, stand outside the culture of those they address, speaking as if from beyond it. In the second half of this paper, I work, instead, from the recognition that the Christian speaks from a position of a shared creaturehood, shared humanity, and—in myriad ways—a shared culture. Approached that way, the mission of the church can fruitfully be seen as witness to a theologically specific understanding of that which is shared. I conclude with the suggestion that this can be ably resourced from the broad tradition of a Platonic "Christian humanism".

Keywords: witness; culture; cultural witness; theology; participation; Christian humanism; Christian Platonism

1. Introduction

The occasion for this collection of papers is a significant development in the life of the Church of England—working in partnership with other churches—with the creation of the Centre for Cultural Witness at Lambeth Palace, the London seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The role of the Centre is to promote apologetics and public theology, seeking both to bring them to new prominence and to explore and commend a change in approach. Three aspects might serve to set the scene. The first is an emphasis on "showing one's working" and one's inspiration, so that the contribution of the church to matters of public concern would come with a stronger articulation of the theological vision that undergirds it. The Centre would certainly wish for such contributions to be accessible, but not for them to be so accommodated to more widely shared patterns of thought as to obscure what is distinctively Christian about perspectives and motivations. A second aspect, more in the area of apologetics, is a shift away from the language of "proofs" towards that of "witness" or "testimony", with an allied reticence towards supposing that everyone begins from the same—supposedly neutral—categories or convictions. There is also a shift here away from expressing the faith, or making one's appeal, using the drier forms of reasoning reminiscent of analytic philosophy, towards an embrace of narrative, testimony, and artistic means.[1] Third, there is an emphasis, both for public theology and apologetics, on *doing* rather than *talking about doing*. The flagship initiative, for instance, is an outward-facing magazine website, with articles, podcasts, photo stories, and films, where everything is presented with the non-churchgoer in mind. The project is relatively not so much an exercise in thinking together about the venture of apologetics or public theology among those involved in that sort of exercise, and more one of going about it.

2. "Culture" and "Cultural"

2.1. Some History of Usage

In this paper, I wish to focus on the description of this mission or witness as "cultural", that being a far from straightforward idea for the framers of this project to have invoked, as the late 20th century literary critic theorist Raymond Williams (2014) made clear.

> Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought (pp. 76–77).

What it might mean for the church (or, for that matter, any other community) to engage in "cultural witness" calls for further examination.

Etymology offers some valuable insights, as long as we avoid the "etymological fallacy" of confusing meaning *then* with meaning *now*. The oldest associations come from the Latin *cultura*, with its senses of inhabitation, farming, and protection. Something of even these deep roots remains today, with talk of the "cultivation" of soil and crops, and in thinking of culture as the particular style in which we inhabit a place and time. With "protection" in view, newspaper commentaries may have more to say about the need to protect culture than about the capacity of culture to protect us. Nonetheless, recent political turmoil in the United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), and beyond, has illustrated ways in which certain received practices—which is to say, aspects of a culture—act as a safeguard. Thus, it has often not necessarily been ideas in the abstract that have provided the bulwark against an anti-democratic nationalism, but cultures and practices: for instance, of impartiality in the civil service, or fairness in handling ballots in elections. Similarly, as the mirror image of this, we see how national and political life degrades once those aspects of a culture slip, having to do with civic norms and virtues. A wish to speak about culture, or cultures, and how we guard and nurture them, as they guard and nurture us in turn, has a timely air to it, as do links between culture and inhabitation and tending the earth.

Additionally, allied to notions of culture, is a sense of honouring with worship (Williams 2014, p. 77). For many readers, the idea of "cult" will have only negative associations, to do with secretive and repressive religious movements. Those familiar with Romance languages, however, might think of some common words or phrases for worship, not least as a Christian activity: *rendre un culte* in French, *rendir culto* in Spanish, and *cultuar* in Portuguese. Indeed, in Roman Catholic theology, "cult" refers to the practices and responsibilities associated with worship, as with the idea that the reception of certain sacraments (baptism, confirmation, marriage, and ordination) bestows an identity that is inextricably linked to worship: "the imposition of character is a delegation to cult", as the saying goes. In these ways, notions of worship are not far from the word "culture", either etymologically or in contemporary usage, at least in some languages and settings. Moreover, some of the most significant recent theological explorations of culture have addressed it in terms of what we "worship", applying that category broadly, to mean that to which we ascribe particular worth, or to which we sacrifice our resources and attention (Smith 2009; Cavanaugh 2008).

The most recent roots of the word "culture" lie with cultivation and care, as still seen in expressions such as "horticulture" or "viniculture." The most prominent sense of "culture" today, in Williams' (2014) estimation, arose by extrapolation from tending crops or animals to tending and developing (to "culturing") minds and understanding (p. 77). He offers, for instance, Francis Bacon's striking description (in 1605) of the "culture and manurance of minds" (ibid.) The word "culture" here is still a verb. From the mid-nineteenth century, it came also to be used as a noun, to refer to what this verb seeks or produces, while the adjective "cultural" is later still, appearing in the 1870s.

Alongside the biological references (e.g., microbial culture), Williams (2014, p. 80) homes in on three meanings of first importance today:

(i) a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development... (ii) ... a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general... (iii)... the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.

Although, in his view, the third use is now the dominant one—"culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film" (p. 80)—all three bear upon the "cultural witness" project. That third sense invites us to look at "artistic", "high", and "popular" culture as part of the church's witness, and as a barometer for other senses of what constitutes a culture. Sense (ii) addresses what, if anything, embodies a shared way of life, at larger and smaller scales of community. This seems to be particularly close to the interests of public and political theology. Sense (i) may spring less readily to mind, but it also offers a vista on what we might mean by "cultural witness." The suggestion would be that the Christian can invite others into conversation about what most deeply constitutes our humanity, and about how that can be developed, with the church sharing some of its "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic" resources from its traditions. Of course, what "intellectual" or "spiritual" role might be played by culture in the third sense—as "music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film"—has been a point of dispute for some time. Part of what may be witnessed to in "cultural witness" is the capacity of culture in that sense to have a vocation that bears upon "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" at all.

Additionally, contested will be *whose* culture or cultures are meant. Williams diagnoses that "virtually all the hostility [toward the category of culture]... has been connected with uses involving claims to superior knowledge, refinement (*culchah*) and distinctions between 'high' art (culture) and popular art and entertainment" (ibid., p. 82). The Lambeth-based Centre is poised to respond to that concern by a certain deliberate pluralism in its vision, as to what culture is in view, with a range of contributors speaking from the perspectives they best understand and inhabit.

2.2. Witness as "Cultural"

Williams' discussion offers any number of leads for thinking about "cultural witness", but my inquiry in the rest of the first half of this paper will not so much be around what "culture" means as around how it is applied. The "cultural" in "cultural witness" is an adjective: what, however, do we take that adjective to qualify? Having adopted a broad definition of what we might mean by "cultural", based on discussions in the founding documents of the Centre, any complexity that might then emerge in analysis will come from charting ways in which the word "cultural" might be applied: what noun it qualifies. My working definition is that in talking about "cultural witness" we are highlighting ways in which the history, beliefs, commitments, and communities of Christianity are shaped and offered in ways that are deeply woven into patterns of human speech, practice, and creativity.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1986), the father of structural linguistics, suggested that to understand what is meant by a given word, we do well to also ask what is not meant by it: to ask what contrast is being made, and what stands on the other side of that contrast. What we mean by the word "meat", for instance, is quite different when we are contrasting it with inedible things ("thou givest them their meat in due season") from when we use it to contrast with food of non-animal provenance ("meat and vegetables"). Following a line that runs through the project of the Centre for Cultural Witness (and, indeed, though my own previous writing on this topic), I will take Christianity and its witness to be cultural in the sense that it is inextricably bound up with stories, figures of speech, ways of life, habits of body, forms of community and of artistic expression, practices, and exemplary figures (to begin a list that could easily be expanded). To return to de Saussure's point, that understanding of witness as "cultural" might contrast, for instance, with an understanding of Christianity and its witness that puts the emphasis on isolated individuals making acts of ascent to propositional statements expressed in univocal terms. Any such contrast, I should say, is offered to clarify what I have in mind when I call something "cultural", not

to suggest that either extreme is commonly encountered in its starkest form, or that either pole is without its insights.

2.3. Witness by, to, and through: What Are We Qualifying with the Adjective "Cultural"?

Taking that as our definition of witness as "cultural", we can begin to analyse a diversity of approaches to "cultural witness" by turning to a simple account of the structure of action. The simplest description might distinguish only between the agent and the patient: between the one who acts, and that which is acted upon. We can then expand that slightly, to a tripartite analysis, according to which we have an agent, a patient, and something in-between: a medium, means, or instrument. An action—here the act of witness—could be approached according to that by which, that through which, and that to which it comes. My suggestion is that we might make progress in asking what it means for witness to be "cultural" by considering that this adjective can apply in at least three ways: to that which is witnessing, that by which it witnesses, and that to which it witnesses, and—indeed—to a combination of those three aspects. The first angle would lay the emphasis on the witness coming from Christianity as a culture (or not), or from the Christianness of a culture. The second angle would lay the emphasis on witness by means of something cultural (again, or not). It would not necessarily hold that what is witnessing should primarily be understood as cultural in form (although it may), nor need it suppose that whatever this witness comes to is emphasised as something cultural, or that any effect this witness has will be manifest in a cultural way. Finally, as our third angle, we can think about witness as cultural in the sense of characterising that to which the witness comes, or that where the effect of the witness is shown.

That offers three angles to pursue. In doing so, we need not suppose that any dimension applies in only a strict yes-or-no fashion: all-or-nothing, purely cultural, or absolutely not. We may, for instance, find it difficult to imagine any of these angles as entirely lacking any cultural dimension (as I would). The question, instead, in each case, would be one of exploring what it means for the "cultural" dimension of any of these angles on witness to be emphasised or not, to be seen as more or less important. In theory, one could stress or downplay the cultural angle to each of these three dimensions independently. If one's position on any of them does not foreclose what positions might be taken on the other two, that presents us with eight options to consider.[2] In practice, however, some combinations will seem more plausible than others, and I will not discuss all eight combinations individually.

To affirm that the church's witness is cultural in the first sense (with respect to the agent) would be to affirm that quality, not only of that witness, but also of the church itself, and of its faith: the one witnessing, and its understanding of that to which it wants to witness, will be understood to be inextricably bound up with history, practices, and so on. Asked "what is Christianity?", "What is the Christian faith?", or "What is the Church?", one would point not only to texts and propositions but also to communities, practices, disciplines, ways of life, alongside not only systematic or dogmatic texts but also narratives, including biographies, poems, sermons, law codes, and so on. While it is possible to hold to this "cultural" emphasis but then deny a significant cultural dimension to either of the other angles (medium or recipient), those are not likely to be commonly encountered combinations. A stress on the cultural nature of the first of the three angles is likely to propagate "downstream" to the other two. On the other hand, it would be possible to conceive of this first dimension (the faith and the agents of witness) in rather non-cultural terms—to downplay the communal and analogical, and stress the individual and univocal, for instance—and still see a role for culture later on: in one or both of the other two dimensions. One might, for instance, see the faith as somehow standing above culture but still suppose that cultural forms play a pragmatic role, simply as means in bearing witness. Similarly, one might wish for witness to be cultural in the third sense, even if it were not particularly thought to be in the first sense: one might see the faith as somehow above culture and yet still wish it to come to bear upon a prevailing culture so as to change it.

The second dimension is that of the means or medium. Again, at least in theory, a cultural emphasis here may or may not be taken to line up with one elsewhere. As we have just considered, cultural means might be seen as important, but still as purely instrumental or pragmatic, as not really how the agent understands Christianity or its message, but valuable in evangelism nonetheless. Christianity in itself might be seen primarily as a matter of abstract beliefs and individual assent, but one might choose to go about witness using cultural forms—on this view—for the sake of efficacy.

Finally, our third avenue for analysis places its emphasis on that to which witness comes, and on what it is that might respond, or be changed by it. Without necessarily saying that the faith is cultural in itself, or even that the means of witness is a cultural one, this angle would be asking about the object or recipient.

This three-fold analysis has the capacity to tease apart some of the senses in which one might suppose that the witness of the church is (or is not) cultural, with the caveat that this is not necessarily an all-in or all-out matter, but about whether one places an emphasis on culture at one or more of these points. The value of this three-fold distinction would be in aiding those involved in conversations about witness—in the work of the Lambeth Centre, and beyond, for example—to give a more nuanced account of what they have in mind in speaking of witness as cultural, and in provoking those listening to ask more nuanced questions. What had, perhaps, been obscured by a more general invocation of the idea of "cultural witness" can rise to greater clarity, and varied articulation.

3. Witness Within

3.1. "He Came to His Own"

The analysis so far has presented the church as the communicator of the gospel, and has approached that communication from three angles that might be said to be "cultural". The direction of travel has been from the "church" to the "world": from the church as agent to a recipient or recipients outside the church, with questions of means also in view. This suggests a picture of the church, and of the Christian, as casting a light into an otherwise dark world, providing medicine to the sick, and teaching the ignorant. It may also tend to see the church and the Christian as addressing, from the outside, a culture that is fundamentally alien to it. In now wishing to expand upon that, and criticise such an interpretation, I am not suggesting that the church should be ashamed of understanding itself as the body of Christ, entrusted with a deposit of faith and the means of grace, nor that it should abandon its sense that the human world has estranged itself from God in various significant ways, and stands in need of remedies. Nonetheless, it is also true that Christians and the churches find themselves within a world that they confess to be God's creation. They address others who are created in the image of God: others for whom and to whom the Word came in Christ, in such a way that the fourth evangelist writes "he came to his own" (Jn 1:11). While the reference there is perhaps first of all to Christ in his Jewishness, it would be legitimate to expand that interpretation in light of the comment, only a few verses earlier, that "all things came into being through him" (Jn 1:3). Moreover, there would be a serious theological failing in supposing that God, or the divine work, is absent beyond the bounds of the church.

Self-awareness is also at stake here. Speaking now simply more empirically or ethnographically, Christians and the churches stand alongside non-Christians—alongside those outside the church—in a variety of ways, sharing the same culture, or cultures. I have written elsewhere that if a Christian claims that her theology stands above any need of attention to philosophy, because the faith comes directly from a divine source, it is precisely then that her thinking most likely to be shaped by philosophical assumptions, of a sort that she is now ill-equipped to examine, or even to notice (Davison 2013, pp. ix–x; Kerr 1997, p. 1). As a parallel to that, the Christian who does not recognise herself as standing culturally alongside the non-Christian, indeed in innumerable ways, is most likely also to fail to recognise the ways in which her "Christian culture" is shaped by forces and

suppositions that lie rather far from what the Christian tradition may often have wished to teach.

3.2. Witness and Doctrine

My suggestion for exploring modes of "cultural witness" from an awareness of one's place within a culture or cultures, dwelling there alongside those to whom the church speaks, is part doctrinal and part philosophical. Doctrinally, it is the proposal that witness and apologetics, can and should draw on the full range of themes in systematic theology, beyond the typical concentration on sin and redemption, and on the "existence of God", not least in also drawing on the doctrines of creation and theological anthropology. Part of a Christian "cultural witness" is the articulation of a positive Christian account of culture and humanity as cultural. The philosophical angle is to commend traditions of Christian theology that have been most explicitly worked out with an eye to Platonic themes— "Christian Platonism"—as in a particularly strong position to provide inspiration.[3] These are particularly capable of accounting for to all that we share as coming from God (indeed, as a form of sharing from God).

Turning first to doctrine, the Christian understands his/her faith as unified and whole, yet worked out in many parts, and under various theological headings (creation, Christology, redemption, eschatology, the doctrine of God, and so on). In thinking about what it means to be engaged in "cultural witness", the church may do well to draw upon the full breadth of that theological tradition, not least the doctrine of creation and, alongside it, theological anthropology. That is because the church's witness can be, in part, a matter of showing what the faith says about our shared humanity and creaturehood, and about humanity as intrinsically cultural and creative. It can address that which is shared—our humanity, creaturehood, moral aspirations and failings, and aspects of our cultural location—and yet do that in a way that witnesses to what Christianity brings in particular through its theological interpretation and elucidation of all of that.

That same inextricable connection between doctrinal topics means that, even in respect to that which theology most celebrates about our common humanity, that is combined with elements of judgment, even of lament. The doctrine of sin is never far away, but neither is the notion of promise, since redemption lies at the heart of the faith, and is bound up with everything else. Doctrines are related, co-implicated, even co-constituting.[4]

If the first part of this paper concentrated on what it might mean for "cultural witness" to be "cultural", we have here an angle on what it means for it to be "witness." Part, though not the whole, of the churches' witness is to what it means to be a creature, to be a human being, to be a cultural animal, and—of course—to be those things in a way that falls short of that to which we are called, and as those addressed by a message of forgiveness and reconciliation. This witness is to what we share, but it does not betray the revealedness of the gospel, since the interpretation that is offered of what we share is shaped, even determined, by special revelation.

The world, humanity, and culture into which, and within which, we speak, is not alien to God. A comment by the Methodist theologian Christopher Morse is helpful here.

> [T]he world into which the apostles are sent is confessed to be one where Jesus Christ has already gone and is expecting them. Christian faith in God's sending of Jesus Christ into the world refuses to believe that there is any 'world' of time and space and social circumstances into which the church is commissioned to go that Jesus Christ has not already gone. In this sense there are no 'foreign missions'. 'The true light, which enlightens everyone... was in the world' is one way the Gospel of John testifies to this faith; through this Word 'the world came into being' so that the Word's coming in flesh in Jesus is a coming 'to what was his own' (John 1.9–11). Resurrection testimonies in Matthew and Mark speak, from another angle of vision, of Jesus Christ as 'ahead of' the apostles and already at the very place to which the witnesses are sent. The message to the women at the tomb is, 'Go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the

dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him: . . . "'
(Morse 2009, p. 310, quoting Matt 28:7, with further reference to Mk 16:7).

The Centre for Cultural Witness has a web magazine (*Seen and Unseen*) with the strap line "Christian perspectives on just about everything". In that "just about everything" we can see a confidence, but also an openheartedness, and an enthusiasm for all that is good, beautiful or true (we might think of Phil. 4.8 here), alongside a willingness to look the sorrows of the world in the face. This represents an attempt at embodying the principle that 'He came to his own' in a literary form. As Jacques Maritain put it, a Christian humanism is not disposed to write anything off, and seeks for value even in that with which it disagrees. It 'is able to accept all, since it knows that God has no opposite' (Maritain 1946, p. 84). Ben Quash's comment is also relevant, that tradition and revelation (that which is 'given') need not be threatened by subsequent encounters or the dynamism of history (that which is 'found'), but rather find that in this encounter it 'comes alive':

> the perfection of God's revelation in Christ is not compromised—indeed, precisely implies—an ongoing historical dynamic whereby, in God, human beings are constantly invited to *related to given to the found* [and, I would add, the *found* to the *given*]. . . The God who has 'stocked our backpack for the journey', so to speak, also 'places things in our path', up ahead of us (Quash 2013, p. xiv; and see Leith 2023).

3.3. The Humanism of a Christian Platonism

At this point, I turn to draw upon, and make explicit, the ecclesial setting in which I work, and which I currently know best, namely that of a college or university chapel. In my case, that chapel is part of an institution with deep Christian roots (as the name 'College of Corpus Christi and the Blessed Virgin Mary' indicates). Today, that Christian history and dedication rarely impinges, to any great extent, on the majority of its members, and yet neither is there any great hostility to that heritage, and the chapel plays a prominent part, although optional, in the college yearly calendar and weekly cycle. Nonetheless, any hearing that the Chapel (or Chaplain, or Dean of Chapel) receives has to be earned respectfully. That is a rather particular and distinctive setting, but one that I think provides a concrete example of something that would be more generally applicable.

Rather than write about myself, I will jump off from the observation that among those who embody the approach I want to discuss, few have illustrated it better than the late Dean of Chapel at Jesus College, Cambridge, John Hughes, theologian and priest of the Church of England, so wrenchingly taken from us by a car accident in 2014. The approach he lived by, and that I will commend as a way of both living within a culture and speaking to it, was a form of Christian Platonism. I also choose Hughes as my example because we have the benefit of an analysis of what this approach looked like in his case, practically and theologically, from one of the foremost voices in philosophical theology today, Janet Soskice, also a fellow of Jesus College, in the address she delivered at his memorial service (Great Saint Mary's, Cambridge, 11 October 2014). His was a "cultural witness" and a highly successful one. The location of his funeral Mass had to be moved to Ely Cathedral once it became clear that no church in Cambridge would be large enough. A thousand people attended, including hundreds of students, past and present, whose lives bore the imprint of his witness and ministry.

While there was ample attention on evil and human sin in Hughes' work and preaching too, his approach was more characteristically to hold out the allure of the good and excellent, than to use the stick of threat or condemnation. Soskice (2014) remarked that

> In John's Anglo-Catholicism, this recovery of work [a theme central to his aca-demic writing] had to go hand in hand with love of beauty and life ordered to the Good, that is, to God... Human beings, as Aquinas marvelously said, are naturally oriented to the Good, and because of this, even in our work, naturally at home in the world. And, this is why they are also attuned to Beauty, since the human mind is not 'going against the grain of the Universe but in harmony with

it'. And, this is because, in John's Christian understanding, this world is creation, rather than chaos—a loving gift.

Such celebration of creation, of gift, and of human capacities, need not be rose-tinted. Much is wrong with the world, recognised by Hughes' witness as one "profoundly interested in social justice, [and] embedded in [the] tradition of Anglican social thought". As Soskice recounts, in writing, preaching, and his wider ministry in the college, he urged everyone to "consider, deeply and with urgency in our time" the question "what are our lives ordered to?" The ultimate answer to that question (our orientation to God) and the proximate answer (our orientation to one another, and to the common good) are both vital parts of any "cultural witness".

In a context where human lives are reduced to units of production, or dismissed by reductive neuroscience as epiphenomena, a Christian humanism is on view here, which offers a potent witness of its own. Its motto might be *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* ("I am a human being, and nothing human is alien to me"): a line from one of the plays of Terence (2001, my translation, act 1, scene 1, line 77, p. 186). Commenting on something close to this outlook, Soskice (2014) jumped off from a seemingly innocuous remark from the college nurse, that "Nothing was too much trouble [for Hughes] and he always seemed really interested".

> I think John seemed really interested because he was really interested, and this went right to the heart of his guiding theology and of how he understood the office of a priest in the College community. He would never have conceived this as a matter of 'bringing the Gospel' to dark corners, as though the Gospel were a large lardy cake to be deposited on the desks of unwitting and unwilling recipients. John did not need to bring God to people because according to his Anglican Thomism God was already there. His job was to make us glad and help us rejoice as we worked, whether as students, Fellows, or in one of the Colleges many other departments for, as he wrote in The End of Work, 'labour whose only end is efficiency and functionality, labour free of responsibility, intellect and delight', is not worthy of human beings (ibid.).

Thinking of the point about deploying a wide doctrinal range, there is a doctrine of God, creation, and providence here, and a broad sense of sin and redemption. This is cultural in the sense of enjoying an organic relationship to its place, and to its institution, with its history and aspirations. It is also cultural in its infusion with music, in attention to architecture, in preaching with attention to rhetoric and style, and in awareness that the Scriptures and the liturgy (especially as conducted according to the Book of Common Prayer) are themselves part of a cultural inheritance that belong to those beyond the bounds of active church going. (The recent witness of the funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, again largely drawn from the Book of Common Prayer, serves as a further example of this point.) Hughes' interest in political theology and philosophy ran to Hegel and Marx, to Weber, Adorno, and Arendt, but his favoured resources for thinking about human lives, work, and community—as ultimately lying in God—were to be found chiefly among those whose social criticism was as deeply "cultural" in all of William's senses, not least in the production of works of art and architecture: in John Ruskin, William Morris, Eric Gill, and David Jones, most of all.

Among Hughes' writings, a frustratingly short paper on 'The Possibility of Christian Culture' is of value, in which he offers a 'defence of the notion of the possibility of a Christian culture or cultural Christianity' (Hughes 2016c, p. 163) in a way that seeks to avoid Christian nationalism, or the capture of the church by power. He makes the Foucauldian point that we are always already too immersed in culture and power to be able to eschew them: 'it is impossible for Christian to renounce the question of power altogether... because... even the most local, small-scale Christian practices, such as communicating the gospel or caring for others or bringing up children, are forms of power' (Hughes 2016c, p. 163). Moreover, to imagine that we can simply be, or ought to be, isolated individuals 'completely free and rational, a blank slate forming [our] own destiny...

downplays the important ways in which *who* we are, including our very capacities for reason and freedom, are not simply inert, self-possessed givens, but are *developed* through *time* and through *relations* with others' (Hughes 2016b, pp. 164–65, emphasis in original).

His other principal exporation on this theme looks at the Christian humanism of two significant French Roman Catholic writers of the twentieth century, Jacques Maritain and Henri de Lubac, as a way of understanding an Anglican perspective of the place of culture in the church, and of the church in culture. The "integral" humanism found here (which we might also call an integrating or expansive humanism) contrasts with a secular naturalistic humanism, which, according to Maritain's perspective "is truncated or distorted by excluding the spiritual element of human nature and its transcendent goals" (Hughes 2016c, pp. 125–26). In this humanism, nature is no stranger to grace, nor grace to nature (Hughes 2016c, p. 126). It is once both celebratory of the human and yet, as "theocentric", it displaces of humanity from the centre: "it is all the more huamn because it does not worship man" (Hughes 2016c, p. 126; Maritain 1946, p. xvi).

3.4. Metaphysics of Participation

The philosophical foundation for such as vision was a Christian Platonism, as is evident in almost all of Hughes' writings, as for instance in the collection The Graced Life (Hughes 2016a). It was also a Christian humanism, and those facets went together. While today that idea of "humanism" has become associated with atheism, its roots are in a Christian movement of the 15th century, associated with a revival of interest in classical art, literature, and philosophy, and particularly of Plato. That association may seem ironic, if we think of Plato as teaching that all that belongs to the worldly, perishable aspects of human life—the things of nature and culture—are mere shadows of what is fully real (the Forms). Such a vision of Platonism, however, is a partial picture at best. If there have been Platonisms of escape from contingency (some of them Christian), others have painted a much more positive account, by drawing on a Platonic sense of the world as an image of that which grounds it, augmented in some cases by the descent of the divine into the human world (seen particularly in the Neo-Platonists Proclus and Iamblichus). That can, in turn, ground an account of the supreme worth of the human being, and therefore of all things human. In this we have a form of Christian Platonism that I would commend as a foundation for cultural witness. This approach recognises that we are the recipients of being, life, humanity, and culture, alongside everyone else, and has a distinctive message concerning those gifts, with a particularly strong emphasis on pointing to the origin of all things in God, and which will therefore urge us to view the created world as the arena for the encounter with God and things divine.

To ground that intellectually, and to put it to work, it may be helpful to turn to the theologically potent category (as Christian as it is Platonist) of "participation", which is to say, to dynamics of donation, reception, and partaking. This has been seen as more and more central to a wide variety of theological traditions in recent decades. A rediscovery of the historical place of participation is a vital part of the Thomism of the past half century, for instance (Geiger 1942; Fabro 1961; Clarke 1994; Dunn 1957; te Velde 1995), with parallel stories in patristic historical theology (Boersma 2011; Davis 2008; Portaru 2012; Powers 2002; Balás 1966; Clavier 2014; Normann 1978; Ge 2021; Törönen 2007), and of the Magisterial Reformation and Anglican traditions (Allchin 1988; Billings 2007; Dominiak 2019; Kimbrough 2016; Vainio 2008; Canlis 2010). This history bears witness to such scholarship as an endeavour not only with ecumenical breadth, but even as an exercise itself in ecumenical bridge building, since a shared interest in participation as a theological and metaphysical category represents one of the liveliest areas of theological rapprochement today.

Augustine serves as a helpful point of reference, not least because he enjoys ecumenical currency with Protestants as well as Catholics (although Aquinas is gaining ground).[5] Augustine's participatory outlook was expressed, time and again, in terms of a question taken from St Paul: "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor 4:7). In its context

in the Epistle, the emphasis is on grace. In the hands of Augustine, the frame of reference is expanded, to trace all that is good and real, of every form, back to God, most fundamentally through the idea of creation, and indeed of creation ex nihilo. Alternatively, however, we may do better not to say that we are expanding the register of Paul's question beyond a home register in grace, and suggest instead that grace lies at the root of any answer to questions about where anything comes from, since the creation itself is the first undeserved gift. Such ideas have considerable potency in "cultural witness."

With its lively doctrine of creation, and its conviction that every aspect of everything comes from God—with the exception of evil (which is a failure of reception from God)—the participatory trajectory within theology offers an outlook for the witness of the church that need not neglect either our commonality with those to whom we speak, or the reality of all that is good beyond that bounds of the church, in nature, in culture, wherever. Themes of participation also offer an illuminating way to approach the interwoven nature of doctrine, such that each part casts light on each other (Davison 2019), after the manner commended earlier. Recognition of the breadth of doctrine, so fruitful for a cultural view of witness, is not—of course—the sole preserve of a theology set out with an emphasis on notions of participation. However, with its rich account of the doctrine of creation, with its desire to trace all things back to God, and with the motif of participation treading its way through all the doctrinal topics, a desire to sing the song of Christian belief in a particularly polyphonic way is certainly one of its prominent characteristics.

4. Conclusions

I began this paper with an exploration of what we might understand by the adjective "cultural" in any undertaking of "cultural witness". I suggested that the witness of the church is cultural (although that might be played up or played down) as to agent, means, and recipient. Some Christian traditions will approach questions of culture with a sense of the Christian as occupying a separate culture from that of "the world", and there is much to commend in a critical attitude towards that which is harmful, which seeks patterns of discipleship to engrain better habits.[6] Nonetheless, we are all inevitably embedded in wider cultures, and I have approached that here more as something to embrace, and work with, than to lament. One of the principal set of examples of this in Christian history has been that found in Christian humanism, of one sort or another. In following that model, Christian mission can also be "cultural" in bearing witness to a theological interpretation of that which we share: both as to culture, humanity, and creaturehood, and also as to sin and the offer of redemption. For that, we will need to draw upon a wide range of doctrinal resources, including a doctrine of creation and theological anthropology while, philosophically speaking, there is much to commend the broad tradition of Christian Platonism, with its long history of reflecting upon creation in relation to God, with the confession that "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom 11:36).

Notes

1   I have advocated such an approach along these lines (Davison 2011), as have Elaine Graham (2017) and Holly Ordway (2017). I mention the method of analytic theology here, in as much as it tends towards what can be strictly proved, and it values univocal use of language, and is often at least somewhat disconnected from historical genealogies of thought. We can contrast that to a way of thinking, writing, and speaking that argues (or indeed simply witnesses) in a way that is more sympathetic to analogical uses of language, and is typically approached within a sense of an historical inheritance of textual traditions.

[2] If we represent what I have called the agent as *A*, the medium as *M*, and the patient as *P*, and if a capital letter represents a position on Christian witness that stresses what I have been calling the cultural dimension of this aspect, and a lower case letter represents one that plays it down, the eight options would be *AMP*, *AMp*, *AmP*, *aMP*, *Amp*, *aMp*, amP, and *amp*.

[3] For an excellent recent study and survey, see Hampton and Kenney (2020).

[4] For a sense of the centrality of doctrine to witness, and of the place it occupied in the works of one of the principal examples of 'cultural witness' in England in the 20th century, Dorothy L. Sayers (1947) offers a good place to begin.

[5] Among figures central to Eastern Orthodoxy, we could consider Gregory of Nyssa or Maximus the Confessor. (Cf. Balás 1966; Törönen 2007; Portaru 2012).

[6] Here, we might, for instance, think of Philippians 2:15–16, or James 1:27.

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The *Munus Propheticum* of the Church: On a Controversial Reformed Heritage

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Abstract: To what extent can the Reformed heritage of the prophetic office sharpen the perception of the cultural witness of the church in secular Europe? The so-called *munus propheticum* as a heritage of the Swiss Reformation is the focus of this paper. In a first attempt, the Reformation origin of guardianship will be traced. A look at the debate on Swiss refugee policy during the war years shows how controversial church involvement was at that time. Using the example of the prophetic office, the sensitivity and fragility of the church's witness in secular society can be better understood and used for the theological discussion on the function of the public church. In a concluding reflection, arguments for and against its use are examined.

Keywords: prophetic office; reformed tradition; guardianship of church

1. Introduction

The question that has inspired this article is whether the Reformed heritage of the prophetic office can sharpen the perception of the cultural witness of the church in secular Europe. In order not to lose one's bearings in the broad field to which this question leads, restrictions are necessary. Attention is focused on the so-called *munus propheticum* as a legacy of the Swiss Reformation. What started in Switzerland subsequently had an impressive impact in Protestant Europe. In a first attempt, the Reformation origin of the guardianship will be traced. In a bold leap across the centuries, the second step will be a concrete case study from recent Swiss history. The spotlight on the debate about refugee policy in the war years illustrates how the church and large sections of society understood the *munus propheticum* at the time, but also revealed tensions that were to intensify in the years to come. Church involvement was and is a cause for debate when it goes against the mainstream in ethical terms or when economic interests are affected. Especially bourgeois parties disapprove the instrumentalization of religion for politics. Using the example of the prophetic office, the sensitivity and fragility of the church's witness in secular society can be better understood and used for the theological discussion of the function of the public church. In a concluding reflection, arguments for and against its use are examined.

2. Preconditions

2.1. All We Need Is Hope

In secular Switzerland, issues of faith are considered a private, rather delicate and discreet matter. The crucial question of how to hold one's religion is also a delicate and discreet matter (Fechtner 2015). Those who publicly stand by their convictions and call themselves "devout Christians" belong to a minority (Stolz and Senn 2021). So it is rather unusual for a retired member of government to speak explicitly on matters of life and faith. All the more remarkable was an interview with former Federal Councilor Pascal Couchepin that appeared in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung at the end of August 2022. In the interview, the 80-year-old also expresses himself about religion:

> I am a devout, liberal Catholic. I don't go to church every week, but I go regularly. The other day I was debating with a former vicar general of a diocese about the

great theological virtues: Faith, Mercy, Hope. Faith is less and less widespread in society. Bon, you have to accept that. Mercy is often commercialized and publicized today. The only Christian virtue that is still the same and that we also urgently need is hope. That in the worst of circumstances there is still a chance for improvement, for progress. Especially when we see what is going on in the world today (Couchepin, in Tribelhorn and Neuhaus 2022).

Two things are remarkable about this testimony: it is open-hearted, and it is reflective. Couchepin asks a crucial question: what can religion give a secular society that it cannot give itself? It is hope. For hope is something that is in principle unavailable. It makes a condition that no state can guarantee.

The formulation sheds light on a thesis on the relationship between state and church that is very often quoted in the German-speaking world. It is a dictum of the legal philosopher and constitutional and administrative lawyer Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (1991, p. 75):

The liberal, secular state lives on preconditions that it cannot guarantee itself. That is the great gamble it has taken, for the sake of freedom.

Böckenförde argues that the secularity of the state is a necessary postulate of a democratic society and thus also of religious freedom—a postulate that should also be obvious to devout Christians. For the state has emancipated itself from religion and, with the Universal Declaration of Human and Civic Rights in 1789 (Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen de 1789 set by French National Constituent Assembly), religion was relegated to an area of society that has since been reserved for private affairs.

The guaranteed positive or negative freedom of religion for the individual does not mean that the state could take over the function of religion, nor does the dictum declare the institutionalized form of religion superfluous. The institution of the church, even if not exclusively, can still be assigned the task of providing moral substance for the community qua its teachings. The contribution of religion is to strengthen the cohesive power of society. But it can only do this if its teachings are not enforced in conflict, which necessarily requires a neutral state. It is certainly not wrong to say that in the German-speaking world, despite all the differences and diverse accents, there is in principle a consensus on religious law. What is disputed, however, is how the churches contribute their testimony in a democratically constituted state, or more precisely, how they, as public-law corporations, can fulfill the role of guardians of Christian values in the sense of a cultural witness and thus contribute to the building and cultivation of the community of values.

2.2. Hope and Prophecy

Couchepin's illuminating reference to the three Christian cardinal virtues and the focus on hope (Couchepin, in Tribelhorn and Neuhaus 2022) highlights an aspect of cultural witness that will be further developed in this article as prophetic witness. Whereas faith and love can be more or less directly related to universal values, aiming at a more stable society, hope is particularly directed towards change. In the biblical context, change is linked to prophetic witness and hope is an uncomfortable virtue because it carries the sting of power criticism.

The American Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann deserves credit for drawing attention to the connection between hope and prophecy. In his challenging and enlightening treatments, Brueggemann traces the lines from the radical vision of Moses to the solidification of royal power in Solomon to the prophetic critique of that power with a new vision of freedom in the prophets. He highlights that the prophetic vision not only embraces the pain of the people but creates an energy and amazement based on the new thing that God is doing (cf. Brueggemann 2001). To what extent is this connection present in the current discourse on public theology?

When the elder statesman Pascal Couchepin freely admits in an interview that "we urgently need hope", he speaks significantly in the first-person plural. He is not only expressing his private opinion but is claiming a collective. Who is this "we"? How does the

"we" expressed in the cultural witness of the church relate to the "we" of secular society? How do individual believers, and consequently the community of faith, understand the biblical instruction to "give an account of their hope at all times" (1 Pet 3:15)?

3. The Prophetical Office in the Swiss Reformation

3.1. The Prophetic Dimension of the Gospel

It would certainly be presumptuous to reduce the historical roots for this awareness to a movement at the beginning of the modern era known as the Reformation of the Church. What can be shown, however, is a massive strengthening and vehement emphasis on the prophetic dimension of the gospel in the Swiss Reformation and especially in Huldrych Zwingli, who, along with Jean Calvin and Martin Luther, was one of the great instigators of the Reformation. His emphasis will be highlighted by means of two of his writings, which speak about secular authority, the responsibility of the church, and the public witness of its ministers. On the one hand, we are talking about the treatise published in 1523 under the title "Divine and Human Justice" and, on the other hand, the morning sermon at the end of the second disputation in 1523, which Zwingli had printed at the insistence of the St. Gallen Reformer, Vadian, and which was published in 1524 under the title "The Shepherd". From both texts it becomes clear why the critique of power belongs to the signature of prophecy.

3.2. Divine Justice as a Yardstick

Already in the first years of the Reformation, Zwingli found himself caught between two fronts. On the one hand, the bishop accused him and the Zurich authorities of sedition; on the other hand, Zwingli's reforms were not radical enough for some of his friends, who shortly afterwards went their own way as "Anabaptists". Zwingli therefore saw it as his task to remind both groups that Christ is Lord of all areas of life. His goal was to lead both the traditionalists and the radicals with the guiding principle of divine justice on the path of reform as it is seen in the commandments, and especially in the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. In agreement with Luther, Zwingli ([1523] 1995) also recognizes the use of the law, which leads to the knowledge of sin, but emphasizes "the desire of the believing soul to practise according to God's demand" (p. 169).

It is important to him that the basis of every social renewal is essentially the commandment of love, which is a matter of the heart, in contrast to the law, which is addressed to the outer person. Divine justice calls for love and expresses itself as a call that the inner being hears, but that he/she cannot fulfil. To recognize one's inability is the first step towards repentance. On the other hand, a person who, "in spite of all his powerlessness, meanness and corruption, pretends to be good on the outside" (ibid., p. 174) is a hypocrite. According to Zwingli, to experience grace means to admit one's inability, but not to despair of it. Rather, the Christian may hope, on the basis of divine forgiveness and in anticipation of divine providence, to receive the strength to align his/her life with the measure of divine justice.

One consequence of Zwingli's theology of sanctification can be seen in the fact that he considers it a right and duty of preachers to resist the misguided worldly authorities. This "right to resist", for which Zwingli refers to Acts 4:19 and 5:29, lays the foundation for Reformed social ethics (ibid., p. 192). An authority that prevents or forbids the proclamation of the gospel is an authority that no longer allows itself to be told anything in God's name and is therefore not legitimized to call itself a Christian authority. However, the judgment also applies to the church. The Word of God, in which divine justice appears, is a Word in the light of which even religiously dressed up hypocrisy is revealed. Therefore, a church that no longer takes its measure from God's Word may no longer call itself a Christian church. Zwingli draws the following conclusion from this: "Divine righteousness should be revealed and preached to all men without ceasing, and one should rather lose one's life than be dissuaded from preaching and proclaiming it, as Christ has often commanded" (ibid., pp. 182, 186).

His strong plea for the Christian witness makes it clear how important Zwingli considers the public proclamation of the gospel for a Christian community. It is in the interest of the state to be able to refer to an authority that legitimizes it to enforce external laws as an authority. The proclamation reminds both—church and state—of the divine power to which all those in power are responsible and of the limits of their own power vis-à-vis individual human beings. Neither ecclesiastical nor secular government is to dominate the human soul. "The human soul is known by none but God alone. So also no one can govern it but God alone" (ibid., p. 192).

Even the prophet, the organ that sees to the propagation of doctrine, has no such power, but is under a duty to remind others of the divine government under which all people are.

> Therefore no doctrine of government or authority serves better than the doctrine of Christ, for it teaches what is good, what is evil; and does not teach to be righteous outwardly alone, but leads the superior together with the subject to inward righteousness and greater perfection than human righteousness requires (ibid., p. 193).

The comparative leaves room for prudent consideration. There are ethical questions that are not answered unequivocally with a 'yes' and 'no,' because it is a matter of finding a healthy measure; for example, the question of how much credit should be allowed and when an interest economy becomes usury and thus harmful. Although the secular authorities should decide on this, they should also consult with the spiritual authorities. Zwingli uses this example to show that a word of power is needed, that it must be enforced and therefore the state is given the sword (ibid., p. 212f). But no state is above the law, and a state that permits usury abuses its secular guardianship. Zwingli's definition of the relationship between human and divine justice makes it imperative that, alongside the royal and priestly offices, the *munus propheticum*, as a spiritual guardian office, watches over the secular guardians. That is why God's Word is given to it and not to the state.

3.3. The Shepherds as Watchmen of the Watchmen

But how does a person come to speak God's Word? What or who gives him/her the right to act with such authority? The claim to divine authority necessitates a distinction that is ecclesiologically explosive. In fact, a legitimation problem of the prophetic critique of power manifests itself when it turns against the institution that calls to the office of preaching. Zwingli wrestles with this question in a passionate sermon. In his sermon, he first takes the idea of the good shepherd as his starting point, and then speaks out against the ecclesiastical and secular abuse of power by the bad shepherds.

The profile of the right shepherd consciously ties in with older pastoral theological writings (Shepherd of Hermas), but takes up motifs of the ethics of discipleship from the Devotio Moderna (Zwingli [1524] 1995, p. 259). In analogy to the argumentation in the treatise on divine justice, Zwingli takes Christ as the perfect model. In his speech, he demonstrates what a right man/woman of God should do: "Thus the shepherd must not lead his sheep into any pasture but that in which he himself has already been pastured before. That is, to the pasture of the knowledge of God and of trust in Him" (ibid., p. 260). The Reformer sees the greatest danger in the authenticity of the testimony. "Therefore the shepherd must be scrupulously careful not to break in deed what he teaches in word [. . .] In this, one must be very careful that the shepherd does not throw on a cloak instead of his true garment. He should not drape himself with caps and cowls, but be full of covetousness within, as is the custom with most monks and theologians today" (ibid., p. 262).

Sanctimony and hypocrisy are therefore disastrous because they undermine the credibility of the preacher when he/she unflinchingly attacks the outrages of others. For this is his task; for this he puts his life on the line when he stands against those who arrogate power to themselves but are avaricious and high-handed. For Zwingli, it is clear that

[W]e are not to keep silent about the word, but to come out into the open without fear of those who can harm us [. . .] So we see quite clearly that the shepherd is obliged to stand up against all enemies in order to protect the sheep and also to lift them out of the mire of sin. If this were not necessary, there would be no need for a shepherd. As long as the sheep suffer no lack, they need no guardian. He becomes indispensable to them only in danger (ibid., p. 268).

However, it also becomes dangerous for the shepherd. "The great ones of the world are happy to tolerate the preaching of the truth as long as their arbitrary rule is not pilloried and they lose nothing in the process. But the shepherd teaches another thing here, namely, not to spare the king, the ruler, saying, 'You must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29)" (ibid., p. 271). That is why he needs armor—his truthful testimony! (ibid., p. 279). Zwingli calls the incorruptible witness of truth and champion of divine justice a shepherd. Interestingly, he does not speak of the prophetic office, but makes it clear which biblical sources he is referring to: "What need is there of further prophetic passages to prove that the shepherd should oppose all evil? Read the prophets himself, and he will find nothing but the eternal struggle with the mighty and the iniquities of this world" (ibid., p. 278).

3.4. Success of the Successor

In the dramatic escalation of the conflict with the radical friends and the bishop, Zwingli did not have the time to meticulously systematize his impulsive speech and to distinguish more precisely between the pastoral office and prophetic role. It was left to his successor Heinrich Bullinger, both to preserve and to transform Zwingli's inheritance through the crises and upheaval from the 1530s to 1570.

The important role Bullinger played in the further dissemination of Zwingli's impulses is discussed by Peter Opitz, editor of the critical edition of Bullinger's Decades (Opitz 2008). Opitz contributed a major paper entitled "Das 'munus propheticum' bei Bullinger" (Opitz 2007). According to Opitz, the Reformer is particularly remembered for having "consolidated" and "institutionalized" the Reformation in Zurich, a process closely connected to his exercise of the prophetic office. In the "Karlstagsrede" of 1532, a speech delivered at the annual festival on 28 January commemorating Charlemagne's original endowment of the Grossmunster, Bullinger compared his function to the prophetical office as originally formulated by his predecessor Zwingli, namely as a "servant of the divine word" after the example of the Old Testament prophets. As such, it was his duty to announce first and foremost the great reconciliation (ibid., p. 501). For Bullinger, prophecy was at the same time a pedagogical task. In preparation for this, all candidates for ministry in Zurich were required to take a theological examination that included the rigorous testing of linguistic and other higher academic attainments. In addition, through exercise of the prophetical office the Reformed clergy became associates with the political authorities in governance of the populace.

In this context, it is not uninteresting to note how great Bullinger's influence was on the English Reformation. Torrance Kirby addressed a specific application of Bullinger's theology of the Magistracy in a monarchical setting in his treatment of "The Civil Magistrate and the 'cura religionis': Heinrich Bullinger's prophetical office and the English Reformation". Kirby concludes that Bullinger's distinctive role with respect to the Reformation of the Church of England is perhaps best described as "prophetical". There are several factors for this influence: the extensive correspondence and the presence of teachers of the Schola Tigurina in England. Kirby (2005, p. 115 f.) says:

Indeed it is arguable that no other divine exercised a comparable degree of continuous influence over all of the principal stages of the English Reformation—from the Henrician and Edwardine reforms, through the crucible of the Marian exile, to the eventual implementation and consolidation of the Elizabethan religious settlement. At every stage Bullinger was engaged as a significant player, and in later years was frequently appealed to as an arbiter of internal disputes and even as a public apologist of the Church of England on the international stage.

Bullinger lays a fair claim to being a theologian par excellence of the reformed Church of England. Throughout the forty-odd years of his support of the cause of religious reform in England, one recurrent theme of his discourse stands out among the rest, and that concerns the very pre-eminence of the civil magistrate's authority in what Bullinger refers to as 'cura religionis'. In short, the proposal put forward is that Heinrich Bullinger's distinctive contribution to the English Reformation was to be a prophet of the Royal Supremacy.

3.5. Ambivalent Legacy

We can speak of a real export hit of the Zurich Reformation! However, the strong emphasis on prophecy also had an ambivalent effect that should not be ignored. The problem of legitimation has already been pointed out. Concentration and identification of the prophetic role with the office of preaching solved the problem that arose on the left wing of the Reformation but exacerbated the contradiction that was bound to arise through a magisterial Reformation. This can be seen well in Zwingli's ideal type of the shepherd. For the "shepherd" is called upon to fight against the corrupt system to which he himself belongs and on which he is financially dependent. It is the church that has granted the *venia predicandi* to priests and guarantees his livelihood. What does this mean for reform? There is a natural disparity between the prophet and the secular authorities, because only a magisterial reform can support the office and protect it from arbitrariness. The tension that follows from this can be seen in the paradox that the pastor in Zurich became the first civil servant. How credible are paid prophets? Are they free to criticize their employers?

A second problem arose from the fact that the conflict between the emerging confessions led to massive political discord. The potential for escalation of religious disputes was particularly explosive in the small-scale Confederation. As early as 1531, there were armed conflicts. Defeat on the battlefield in Kappel led to the early death of the Reformer, but above all to the fact that the reform-minded places had to make compromises at an early stage. In order to keep the peace in the confessional patchwork that resulted, the localities of the Confederation decided to prevent feuds by means of contractual arrangements, the so-called "land peace" (cf. Bächtold 2014). In the role of arbitrators, the secular authorities committed themselves to confessional neutrality. In a certain sense, Switzerland in the early modern period became a model for Europe and allowed the prophet's claim to oversee the guardianship of the state to appear in tension with the demand for religious neutrality. Would secular institutions and freelance "prophets"—intellectuals, journalists, and media workers—be better suited for this task than church employees?

Another problem arose from church discipline, which cast long shadows in both Zurich and Geneva and gave the church a reputation as a morally strict, old-fashioned, even anti-life and anti-pleasure institution. As guardians of morals, pastors were also responsible for ensuring that "their little sheep do not fall back into the mire [. . .] and lead a righteous life, so that they no longer live in death" (Zwingli [1524] 1995, p. 261).

Finally, the fact that one has the profession of a pastor is no guarantee of one's credibility and no substitute for personal witness. The ideal of the incorruptible contender for truth and justice inevitably shifted under the auspices of increasing deinstitutionalization from an office charisma back to a person charisma. The effect was reinforced by the fact that, parallel to the emergence of religiously neutral state power, the church developed into a formal organization. The reasons for this decoupling of confession and membership are the conflict over direction among the theological camps in the 19th century and the pluralization of orientations in the 20th century. The pluralization within the denomination made an organizational form necessary that could take into account the religious convictions of the members and respect them as mature subjects. All this led to the fact that the authority of a person to appear as an "official prophet" in the name of the church was increasingly questioned. One could also see it this way: The church does not have too few prophets who stand up for truth and justice. It has too many who contradict each other and accuse each other of false prophecy.

4. The Boat Is Full—Guardianship in the Time of World War II

4.1. Guardianship on Probation

We will return to these difficulties of how to deal with the high demand of the *munus propheticum* in a secular society and a plural church later. Let us first speak of the test case in which the office of the guardian has once again proven itself and demonstrated its suitability. It is certainly no coincidence that with the break after the First World War a situation arose in which the prophetic responsibility of pastors and church proclamation again became the subject of theological debate. The movements of religious–social and dialectical theology played a central role in this.

In the 1940s, Switzerland found itself in a highly precarious political situation. Threatened by Hitler's Germany, the government of the time sought a course between resistance and adaptation to escape the threat of German occupation. Thus, there was a lot at stake. To illustrate the explosive nature and relevance of cultural witness in this crisis situation, we will focus on a speech by Walter Lüthi—a personality who was not afraid to address uncomfortable truths.

The sermon in question can justifiably be described as one of the most memorable political sermons in recent Swiss history. Lüthi delivered it at the Landsgemeinde of the Young Church in Zurich on 30 August 1942 (Lüthi [1942] 2018). The open criticism of the Federal Council's refugee policy expressed in it was the public climax of a controversy that increasingly intensified in the course of the war years. The political dispute over direction, which was later to shape the debate over the legitimacy of public theology, had receded into the background during the war years. The issue at that time was the attitude of official Switzerland towards the refugees seeking protection. Lüthi found clear words for this. The fact that they were refused entry was described as "uncharitable", "hypocritical" and "ungrateful".

The harsh judgment could give the impression that the preacher found the prophetic role easy. The opposite was the case. Lüthi found it difficult. In a personal retrospective he recounts:

> On 30 August 1942, the Young Church held a country congregation in the Hallenstadion in Oerlikon, with six thousand participants. The intention was for young people to protest against the authorities closing the border. Federal Councillor von Steiger was to represent the authorities' point of view in the afternoon. And I was asked to give a biblical explanation of the opponents' point of view in the morning sermon. To publicly declare war on the supreme state government? And in this time of war? Impossible! Twice I had to say no. Then a delegation of the Young Church came and explained to me that this was a very serious confessional situation. To say no would be denial, betrayal of the Christian faith. I could not resist this argument and finally agreed. It was then probably the steepest pulpit staircase I climbed on 30 August 1942 in the Hallenstadion. Without a doubt, it was God who prevented my escape attempt in this case as well. The most important thing in my life (Lüthi 1983, pp. 168–73).

Of course, it was no coincidence that the young people asked Walter Lüthi, of all people, to preach a sermon. Lüthi, along with Paul Vogt, Gertrud Kurz, Eduard Thurneysen and Karl Barth, belonged to the circle of theologians who came together in the Swiss Protestant Aid Organization for the Confessing Church in Germany. With the growing need of the refugees, the focus changed. A network of helpers abroad tried to save the lives of persecuted Jewish people. Lüthi, who was the pastor of a parish in Basel in the early 1940s, experienced the consequences of the immigration ban against the Jewish refugees first-hand.

> There were some border guards living in the parish. One of them told how terrible it had been when he had had to turn back a Jewish grandmother with her grandchild at bayonet point at the border; how he heard her scream when she was caught over there by the German border guards (ibid., p. 172).

Indeed, the fear of being overrun by the Axis powers was very real. Nevertheless, more humanity would have been possible. The real scandal was the racist and anti-Semitic core of the measure. The closure of the borders, enacted on 13 August 1942, was directed against illegal refugees seeking asylum "solely on racial grounds". This decision was not made in ignorance of the persecution of the Jews! In mid-1942, people knew about mass executions in Eastern Europe.

A letter from a class of girls at the Kreuzlingen secondary school in the same year caused a sensation. Shaken up by reports in the regional press, they wrote a letter to Federal Councilor von Steiger and appealed to his compassion and Christian spirit. They were outraged that the refugees were being sent back into misery. Their call went unheard. In a personal letter, the magistrate sternly admonished the girls to remember their task as future mothers. In the household, they also had to divide up the supplies. Later, when they understood how precautionary the Federal Council was, they would blush with shame at their letter.

4.2. Two Speeches

The first sentence in Lüthi's ([1942] 2018, p. 157) sermon is remarkable in the light of these contexts: "There is now indeed something that separates us from the love of God, and that is our bad conscience". Lüthi cites the government's callous decision to send refugees to certain death as the reason. He knew the Justice Minister's speech defending the closure of the border that afternoon. He also knew the metaphor of the "lifeboat" that played a central role in the afternoon justification speech of the Federal Council. It was meant to justify the harsh decision with the dilemma in which those responsible found themselves. The crucial passage in the Federal Council's speech read:

> Anyone who has to command an already crowded small lifeboat with limited capacity and equally limited supplies, while thousands of victims of a shipping disaster are crying out to be rescued, must seem tough if he cannot take them all. And yet he is still human when he warns in good time against false hopes and at least tries to save those already taken in (quoted by Kocher 1996, p. 220).

The Minister of Justice had come with the aim of defending his policy. In his speech, he advised the young Christians present not to let themselves be worn down in the conflict between "mind and spirit" and warned against "stirring up sentiment against any state in any way in advance." (ibid.) The magistrate appealed to patriotic unity; the preacher warned against sacrificing everything for security: "We must not be surprised if lightning descends upon this ungrateful people [. . .] That is why we have a guilty conscience" (ibid.).

If one compares the "spirit" of the two speeches, it is obvious: two different "prophecies" clashed here (ibid.). The statesman said, "We have to protect ourselves—we won't make it otherwise". The preacher replied: "We have the duty to save persecuted people—we can do it!" (ibid.)

I wonder what prompted Lüthi to choose, of all things, one of the most powerful comfort texts in the New Testament to explain his point. He sensed the distress of his young listeners!

> All of you [. . .] who have travelled to this meeting with a weighted conscience, as the weary and the beaten, you may now see in the word we have read together the outstretched arm of the apostle. That arm points to Christ's cross. There is no other refuge and no other place of forgiveness. The love of Christ is strong enough to forgive the sin of unkindness, hypocrisy, and ingratitude (ibid., p. 158).

Lüthi made the radical nature of forgiveness strong—and thus the admonition to the authorities even more forceful when he unmasked the latter's speech as an "apology". He addressed the Federal Councilor directly: "Dear Federal Councillor, don't bother to soothe our conscience either! You would be doing our country a disservice." (ibid., p. 159)

The rhetorical highlight of the speech is the refutation of the lifeboat metaphor. Is the Federal Councilor right? Is the boat full? The comparison is cleverly chosen. It reminds an

audience with an affinity for the Bible of Noah's Ark. The message is clear: Switzerland cannot afford mercy (Häsler [1967] 2008). Lüthi counters with a comparison that resonates with biblical tones (cf. Mk 7:24–30).

> In the city of Basel alone, according to official statistics, more than 3000 still well-fed dogs are fed. I may well begrudge them their food. But as long as we in Switzerland are still prepared to share our bread and soup and meat ration with perhaps 100,000 dogs, and at the same time worry that a few tens of thousands, but also hundreds of thousands of refugees would no longer be sustainable for us, that is an attitude of high-grade unkindness (p. 158).

It is this brazen and drastic comparison that must make one feel guilty. A nation that can afford to feed 100,000 dogs and let people starve is being taught a biblical lesson. The message is clear: the boat is far from full . . .

4.3. Reactions and Reflections

The reactions to both speeches were very different. In the bourgeois Neue Zürcher Zeitung, the journalist praised von Steigers' "gripping words" and distanced himself from the "polemical tones" of individual speakers. (cf. Kocher 1996, p. 224) Lüthi was meant. The left-leaning National-Zeitung was different, praising Lüthi's sermon as "open and courageous." (ibid.) The image of the lifeboat would not do justice to the situation, as the authorities did not even treat the rescued well. Von Steiger had missed the "unique opportunity" to "place himself as a commander at the head of the offensive of mercy" emanating from the Young Church and the people (ibid.). The liberal press was particularly harsh and spiteful in its rebuke of Lüthi:

> Should such a functionary of the divine court really have appeared in Pastor Lüthi, it would have been more expedient to have him appear in greater proximity to Basel itself, for instance in Allschwil, instead of in Oerlikon. If, however, he is simply an ordinary, mortal man like others, then a fanciful religious rhetoric should not do him the injustice of dissolving him alive into the theatrical haze of a mythological figure of terror for propaganda purposes (ibid., p. 226).

Lüthi's sermon had made a deep impression on the actual addressees, the young people. However, the reaction of the official church remained ambivalent. Some colleagues found the public attack on politics and the naming of the responsible Minister of Justice unseemly, even outrageous, while others defended the courageous speech. The praise and criticism reflected the theological currents. While the religious–social and dialectical theologians—notably Eduard Thurneysen—came to the defense of their comrade, the liberal-minded reacted indignantly.

Lüthi's speech was undoubtedly a political sermon, although not a classic pulpit speech. The stage was more polis than church, a public place and not a sacred space, a stadium where competitions were held. It made the speech situation outrageously tense for the speaker as well as for the audience. The preacher, as a theologian, turned against the government's policy and became political precisely because of that. The speech wanted to achieve something, not only to present things, but to change them. The juxtaposition of the two communities, the mixture of spheres and the resulting tension, brings the preacher into conflict. But he overcomes his resistance.

The decisive factor was the call that urged the preacher to take a stand, to obey his conscience and to exercise the office of watchman. Lüthi himself linked his willingness to take on this role with the Reformed heritage of the *munus propheticum*. Years later, in a small paper written in 1960, Lüthi justified his position with the primacy of the kingdom of God over all politics. One hears from his reflections a deep aversion to the Lutheran two-kingdom doctrine. In a church that stands wall to wall with the state,

> . . . there are resolutions, consultations, even pulpit speeches that resemble well-balanced communiqués, sermons that give everyone a little, no one everything, that hurt no one, but also do no one any good. In this way, the Word of God, this

dangerousness, this ferment, this salt and dynamite power, can finally also be defused in the Protestant Church, in the Church of the Word, and secured by the church office (Lüthi 1960, p. 37).

Lüthi was known (and feared) by many as a preacher who did not mince his words. He was criticized for his statements after the war. Peter Vogelsanger, the pastor at Zurich's Fraumünster, showed little understanding for his colleague's testimony and remarked in a review:

The way Lüthi chapters the 'Christian Occident' non-stop in the style of the zealous perfectionist [...], the assiduous canonisation of everything left-wing and the harsh condemnation about everything that is traditional and conformist in his eyes, the recurring secret and openly anti-militarist slashes—this and more than once takes away the taste for his sermons (1962, p. 645).

The harsh condemnation reveals something about the critic's mindset. Vogelsanger (1962) was close to the upper-middle-class milieu of Zurich. In his eyes, Lüthi was a "political theologian". The label "political" sheds light on the discourse situation in the 1960s and the contemporary historical location of the so-called "new political theology" after the Second World War, which set itself apart from the "old political theology" and, following the Frankfurt School among others, saw itself as an opposition to the bourgeois establishment that was critical of domination and society or "left-wing". The '68s addition- ally strengthened this political spin and twist. On the Catholic side, Johann Baptist Metz was a well-known representative of the political program (cf. Metz 1997). In the Protestant camp, Barth's students such as Helmut Gollwitzer, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothee Sölle, among others, advocated this line. Whether and how church representatives are allowed to express themselves in the pulpit on political or ethically controversial issues is a topic that is still controversial today, both within and outside the church (cf. Kunz 2018).

Of course, the question is whether a speech in *statu confessionis* is suitable as a lesson in public witness. Can rules be derived from an exceptional situation? Perhaps a negative one: the term "prophetic" would become meaningless if everything that someone in the pulpit knows to say against those in power were meant by it. "Prophetic" in the qualified sense is rather the testimony that recognizes the right kairos for contradiction. But this also means that this word in due time builds on a foundation of the "indissoluble relationship of cathedar, pulpit and town hall" (Bethge 1956) and sees its goal in reorienting the action of the congregation in the polis towards the kingdom of God. Political preaching is prophetic when it is heard as a call to conversion. Lüthi's speech is a textbook example of this.

5. Criticism of the Guardianship

5.1. *"A Prophetic Guardianship of the Church Lacks Theological Legitimacy"*

It is one thing to classify the prophetic watchman's office historically and another to judge whether and how such a role can still be claimed by the church in the present. Is it legitimate to make this claim? Friedrich Wilhelm Graf is considered a vehement critic of this claim (cf. Graf 1988, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). He is one of the few university theologians who regularly publish their theological diagnoses of the present in the feature pages of national German-language newspapers (Pfleiderer 2016, p. 151). His critique of the guardianship is of interest because, on the one hand, it takes up the Reformed heritage and, on the other, strikes a nerve in the debate on the role of the public church. In his Munich habilitation lecture, Graf notes that prophecy has made a remarkable comeback in 20th century theology. It is evident, he says, from the fact that an ethical claim to authority and avant-garde is being made for the church vis-à-vis society. Graf (1988) counters this:

The claim to prophetic competence, however, does not at all correspond to a clearly determinable theological content. At least for Lutheran ecclesiology, the following is true: a prophetic guardianship of the church lacks theological legiti- macy (p. 89).

In the historical unfolding of the thesis, Graf shows how the idea of an ethical guardianship of the church developed from the dogmatic teaching of the prophetic office of Jesus Christ. If Christ is not only King and Priest, but also Prophet, one must speak of a threefold office of Christ. This insight, as Jean Calvin was the first to systematically formulate it in the Geneva Catechism, and later in the Institutio, and make it a principle of Christology, was to become fundamental for the Reformed doctrine of offices. Calvin, as well as Zwingli before him and Bullinger after him, affirmed the continuity of Christ's prophetic task in the church and referred to the Pauline doctrine of charisms (cf. Kraus 1968). God always raises up prophets and uses them where and as the needs of the time require.

The kairos moment, however, reveals a problem. The prophetic gift of the Spirit cannot be clearly assigned to an office. The problem of proving legitimacy that this creates is solved in Reformed Orthodoxy by outsourcing it, by propagating a kind of "total prophecy of the church towards the world". Prophetic witness thus becomes a "matter for the congregation" (cf. Herlyn 1997). Every Christian, insofar as he/she participates in Christ's anointing, has a share in Christ's prophetic ministry, and this to the extent that he/she makes it his/her own through an active life—practical correspondence to Christ's ministry.

Graf traces this identification in the Reformed dogmatists and sees in it evidence of the pious practical pressure that is typical of sanctification theology (Graf 1988, p. 90). The shaping of the world according to the model of Christ is founded in this specifically Reformed version of Christology.

The *munus propheticum* Christi is therefore by no means just a special topic of theological dogmatics. The elective affinity between Reformed Protestantism and political democracy is shown here—a relationship that has been sustainably promoted by the specifically Reformed version of Christology.

> Every individual Christian is a representative of Christ's ministerial activity—this is the Christological place of origin of that egalitarian-democratic and political-activist basic attitude which has been characteristic of Reformed Protestantism up to the immediate present and which has become so momentous for the modern political culture of Western Europe (ibid., p. 91).

5.2. The Problem of Legitimacy

The extension of the prophetic role to the general priesthood of all believers has, in one particular respect, exacerbated the problem of legitimacy. By relating Christ's indirect prophecy neither to a particular office within the church nor to the church as a whole alone, but by obliging every individual Christian to prophetic witness for the sake of the exaltation of his/her Lord, a pluralism of individual prophetic figures is potentially generated. And this becomes problematic at the least when the church does not speak with one voice and the many prophets contradict each other.

Unlike the Reformed, Old Lutheran Orthodoxy does not know a Christologically based ethical mandate of the church. Luther speaks only of two offices, namely, the kingship and the priesthood of Christ. However, the triplex *munus Christi*, as Graf demonstrates on the basis of the development of dogma history, proved to be more effective. The idea that the exalted Christ also functions as a prophet through his church was increasingly taken up by Lutheran and Catholic theologians in the 19th century. Interestingly, according to Graf, it was precisely politically radical conservative theologians who paved the way for the ethicisation of Christ's *munus propheticum* into the prophetic guardianship of the church. They hoped that by acting as a moral authority, the church could strengthen its role in society and compensate for the increasing loss of power—that is Graf (1988, p. 93)'s suspicion. He believes that the development of the history of theology from the Old Reformed *munus propheticum* Christi to the modern prophetic guardianship of the church can be read as an expression of a specifically modern functionalization of Christological ideas. This is where Graf's critique comes in.

5.3. The Perversion of Christology

An argumentation that doubles Christology once again in ecclesiology, so that dogmatic predicates of Christ become ethical qualities of the church, threatens to pervert the inner meaning of Christology. For Graf (1988, p. 109), it is clear that "any direct correspondence of Christology and ecclesiology" produces a sovereignty that can no longer be limited theologically. If the sovereign titles of Christ are played over directly into church doctrine, the possibility of critical self-discernment disappears.

The critique is thus directed against the pathos and the presumption that goes hand in hand with the status of the prophetic, of having a monopoly on the interpretation of meaning as a church. Genuine prophetic criticism, according to Graf, would be exactly the opposite of this, namely, to show that sensitivity to the inner diversity of the world which is a prerequisite for ethical compromise and insofar also a condition for the church's capacity for democracy.

> Prophetic criticism, however, which equates itself with its theological presup-position, lacks this thorn of negativity and is uncritical in its centre; it makes itself immune to criticism through self-absolutisation. If the exalted Christ and the Church are identical as the subject of prophetic criticism, the beyond of prophetic criticism and this criticism itself coincide directly, [. . .], thus also not distinguishing between true and false prophecy. If the prophet alone is directly communicating to God, who should then be able to criticise him? (ibid., p. 98).

In the final analysis, Graf demands a renunciation of the claim to power that can be derived from the claim to the prophetic role. The character of the Christian faith can only be met through pious self-limitation because faith is only able to realize its high critical potential when it submits to its own conditions and learns to distinguish between the ultimate and the penultimate with regard to itself.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Limitation of the Self-Limitation

Graf's critical reflections point out the weaknesses of a theological figure of reasoning that were already evident in Huldrych Zwingli. However, his proposal to replace the prophetic guardianship with pious self-limitation and to declare the permanent difference between the church and Christ as the basis of a prophetic critique that is also able to remain critical of itself amounts to abandoning the idea of an ecclesial continuation of Christ's prophetic ministry altogether, or not limiting Christ's indirect prophecy to a prophetic activity of the church alone. The first option would be a radical interpretation of the pious self-limitation demanded by Graf, which would, however, be tantamount to an ecclesiological self-dissolution. The second option can be seen as a theological consequence of the demand for difference. It has the advantage that the secularization of society and the development towards a liberal rule of law are taken seriously. However, Graf's polemic lacks any approach to positively describe and theologically justify a guardianship that distances itself from the claim to represent divine government.

Günter Thomas' approach sheds further light here.

6.2. Kingship of Jesus Christ

Thomas (2011) makes a strong case for a "transformative hope", which he finds in the doctrine of the "kingship of Jesus Christ" (pp. 326–28). The tension characteristic of Western modernity between the universality of the kingdom of God and the particularity of the church, which as a religious community is no longer congruent with the political community and no longer shapes all areas of life in society, does not release the church from its responsibility to remind all people of the search for the kingdom of God. This is a search for determination that is oriented towards God's command and justice and, at the same time, is situation-specific, open to the future, ready to learn and, in principle, unfinished. If this remembrance is to produce a public resonance, it must shine forth in the

church in a parable-like fashion. What Zwingli expected of pastors must today be expected of communities that find themselves in a diaspora situation.

That is why the memory of the contestation and proving of the *munus propheticum* in the crisis period of the war years has relevance. What we may have taken for granted out of a certain inertia is in reality the constantly endangered foundation of democracy that has to be regained again and again. It would therefore be fatal if the church were to indulge in the pose of a permanent moral criticism of the state and see itself in a quasi-judicial position above every human order.

In contrast to Graf, who recognizes a root of this evil in the *munus propheticum*, Thomas sees the related model of the "kingship of Christ", which underlies the Barmen Declaration, as an opportunity to work through this tension in a productive and constructive way. If one considers the contemporary historical context of the pointed formula of the "kingship of Jesus Christ", the experience of the self-destruction of "reasonable" extra-religious humanity and political formation is contained in it.

6.3. Political Productive Delimitation of Divine Power

When Graf rightly insists on the self-limitation of ecclesiastical power, this also includes the insight into the necessity of a delimitation of divine power. Who, if not the church, should remind us of this? And where, if not in Christ, can a theology of hope be located? The decisive point of the dissolution of boundaries, however, is precisely not the problem of whether the church presumes to play Christ. The challenge of the church is to formulate its cultural witness in such a way as to strengthen the forces that give rise to a community of solidarity in contemporary society.

It is the same point that is found in Zwingli's social ethics, and it is the reason why the prophetic preacher Lüthi formulated reservations against the so-called "two kingdoms doctrine". I think it is the heart of the Reformed doctrine of the "kingship of Jesus Christ". The Christological designation sets an accent that can be more precisely defined as a shift. It consists, according to Thomas, "in the fact that the two modes of God's action are not treated by the distinctions God/Jesus Christ and sinful creation/reconciliation in Christ, but by the distinction reconciliation/redemption. Not God in general, but Christ is the bridge symbol that spans the distinction" (Thomas 2011, p. 329).

The consequence of this reconstruction is that both world and church are located in the not-yet-redeemed but already-reconciled world. In this reconciliation-theological view, state action can be expected and trusted to have a positive social form even in a secular society, without having to give up the epistemic lead of the church, that Christ reigns as the Risen Lord and that both state and church are qualified and moved by the coming kingdom of God.

This head start is rather the incentive to look for development possibilities in the direction of participation, social justice and reconciliation. What Günter Thomas says about the "kingship of Jesus Christ" applies to the doctrine of the guardianship of the church:

> [It] is not without weaknesses and undoubtedly contains its own dangers. However, due to the clear and extremely multi-faceted accentuation of a direction of development, it itself appears to be more capable of development for modern democracies and functionally differentiated societies—and thus to be the more convincing alternative compared to the 'two kingdoms doctrine' (ibid., p. 328).

7. Epilogue

There is still an awareness of this in the Western democracies: if the liberal, secularized state lives on preconditions that it cannot guarantee itself, it takes a great risk for the sake of freedom (Böckenförde 1991, p. 112). The fact that, in order to dare freedom, a reference to transcendence is needed in the constitution, to watch over it as a guardian, as it were, is an indication of this. Significantly, this last religious remnant of political self-determination is found as an invocation in the preamble and not in the articles of the constitution. But it is not written in stone. It is written in books that can be rewritten. In the canton of Lucerne,

some politicians are bothered by the word "God" in the cantonal constitution. In a motion, parliamentarians are demanding that the passage be replaced by a formulation in which a reference to God is to be dispensed with. What do they hope for? What are they hoping for?

If hope is the virtue that "we urgently need" (Couchepin, in Tribelhorn and Neuhaus 2022), the church must not remain silent but contradict the false prophets who think they can do without invoking God. It probably takes quite a lot of educational effort to make the Christian content of preambles comprehensible—a task that is worthwhile. In the words of a retired statesman: "Especially when we see what is going on in the world today" (ibid., 2022).

I must leave open here what it means for the doctrine of the three offices that the prophetic office of Christ is absorbed, as it were, by the royal office of Christ through its incorporation into the doctrine of the kingship of Christ. It would be necessary to examine more closely how the prophetic and the royal offices negotiate each other in the horizon of the kingship. Let me indicate at least one track on which I suspect an answer. I found it in the booklet Being Christian by Rowan Williams (2014). Williams sees it as a task of every Christian to model following Jesus in light of the three offices. By placing the prophetic office in the context of the priesthood of all believers, he also brings into focus the relationship to the kingly and prophetic office of Christ. What Williams has to say about this is not a conclusion to the discussion of cultural witness, but is illuminating enough to serve as a conclusion to this paper.

> So the baptized life is a life that gives us the resource and strength to ask awkward but necessary questions of one another and of our world. It is a life that looks towards reconciliation, building bridges, repairing shattered relationships. It is a life that looks towards justice and liberty, the liberty to work together to make human life in society some kind of reflection of the wisdom and order and justice of God. All these aspects of the baptized life need one another. If we were only called to be prophets, we would be in danger of being constantly shrill nay-sayers to one another and to the world. There is plenty of that in Christian history, and plenty of that in the Christian mentality today. And if we were only priestly, there would be a danger of never asking the difficult questions but moving on as rapidly as we could to reconciliation. [. . .]. And if we were only talking about royal freedom and justice, we would be in danger of constantly thinking in terms of control and problem-solving. But just as in Jesus these three things are inseparably bound up in his work and his words and his death, as in his life, so for us these are three facets of one life, not three isolated bits of a vocation (ibid., p. 16f.).

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Public Theology as Cultural Witness: Christological Contours for "Times That Are A'Changin'"

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Abstract: Churches in Europe are being faced with a transformation that can be described as a seismic shift. In order to face the challenge of cultural witness in this context, this contribution proposes a Christologically contoured public theology. This will be spelt out in four consecutive steps. After a brief introduction on the paradigm of public theology, the second part tackles the question of addressees. Is the witness of public theology directed at the church or at the world? Making use of the insights of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this contribution argues for going beyond the binary and understanding the one Christ-reality as the frame of reference for public theology and cultural witness. The third part seeks to uncover the transformative power of Christology for public witness by making use of the traditional dogmatic figure of the *munus triplex* for the task of witnessing to the "public Christ" (Michael Welker). In the final part, three theses sketch out the implications of public witness in "times that are a-changin'." (1) Public witness needs religious literacy and bilinguality. (2) For public witness, diaspora existence and missional existence are sisters. (3) Public witness is ecumenical, practical, and spiritual.

Keywords: public theology; cultural witness; religion; church; secularization; religious literacy; bilinguality; ecumenism; spirituality; mission

1. Introduction: The Times They Are A-Changin'

"I think the change we're seeing around us might one day be viewed on the same level as what happened to the church after Constantine's conversion or after the invention of the printing press. Whatever the change looks like when it's done, it will register as a seismic shift from what we've known", says Carey Nieuwhof in view of the immense transformation on nearly all levels of church life (Nieuwhof n.d.). We all know the trends and numbers in terms of membership of the institutionalized churches in Western Europe and North America, and these figures seem to know only one direction: downwards. Fifty percent of so-called millennials, i.e., the generation born between 1984 and 2002, are post-Christian. At the same time, however, there is another trend visible. This trend takes place on a global level. In 2022, 85% of the people living on this planet professed adherence to a faith tradition, making faith communities the largest transnational civil society actors (World Population Review 2022), and here, the numbers are pointing upwards. "The 21st century will be religious", concludes an extensive empirical study by Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center 2015). All major faith traditions, with the exception of Buddhism, will grow significantly in the course of this century.

At first glance, the findings of the Pew Research Center seem to fly in the face of those busy preparing the burial service for the churches in Europe. Yet, there is some indication that both trends actually interact, even in Western Europe and North America. Although here the past century was strongly influenced by a secular stew consisting of Max Weber's postulation of a "disenchantment of the world," the post-Enlightenment relegation of religion to the private sphere and the so-called secularization thesis predicting

that the functions of religion would be more and more taken over by other societal actors, recent years have seen a "renewed interest in the role of religion in the making of modern societies" (Freeman 2012, p. 1).[1] This trend is accompanied by a growing awareness on the side of academics, policy makers, and practitioners alike of the importance of religious literacy, i.e., the competence to adequately understand, analyze, and interpret the religious factor in a given context.[2] Although religion is ever ambivalent (Appleby 2000), negative sides associated with religion more often than not dominate media portrayal and public perception, for example, in view of the instrumentalization of religion in the name of hatred and violence. Yet, this is only one side of religion. (Any) religion also contains potent resources for peace, reconciliation, justice, and equality, in short, for a better world. Our world today, breathless still from the COVID-19 pandemic, shocked by the outbreak of a war at Europe's very borders, and threatened by the apocalypse of an impending "climate hell" (Guterres 2022), needs this hope. Rather than a theology of crisis, we need a new theology of hope. We need witnesses of the Good News into our cultures, setting "trust against fear" (CPCE 2021, p. 10).

Coming from a Christian perspective herself, the author will seek to sketch out what this task means for Christian theology. Here, a Christologically contoured public theology can be very helpful for the task of cultural witness, i.e., witnessing of the Christ-hope in cultures of continuing crisis. Yet, not only is the existing paradigm of public theology helpful for the task of the new paradigm of cultural witness, but the same holds true the other way around. Public theology is only public theology if it is cultural witness at the same time. As such, public theology is not only a specific mode of doing theology, but it comes with a clear, Christological profile directed at bearing witness in the midst of our individual cultures. The emerging paradigm of cultural witness is therefore also helpful in giving profile to public theology. It does so through its three major aims, namely a renewal of the public understanding of Christian faith, for instance, by providing both fresh and intellectually sound "Christian perspectives on just about everything" through a major news website (www.seenandunseen.com, accessed on 2 April 2023), by strengthening and deepening the church's voice in public, such as through developing a new apologetics, and by harnessing the wisdom of the Christian academy for the public witness of the church. Although the concept of public witness is still in the process of being developed—among others, evidenced by the contributions of this Special Issue—it seems that there is significant overlap with a Christologically contoured public theology, even to the degree that it seems warranted to speak of public witness as a way of integrating both.

This will be spelt out in four consecutive steps. After a brief introduction of the paradigm of public theology, a second part tackles the question of addressees. Is the witness of public theology directed at the church or at the world? Making use of the insights of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this contribution argues for going beyond the binary and for understanding the one Christ-reality as the frame of reference for public theology and cultural witness. A third parts seeks to uncover the transformative power of Christology for public witness by making use of the traditional dogmatic figure of the *munus triplex*—the threefold office of Christ as king, prophet, and priest—for the task of witnessing the "public Christ" (Welker 2013, p. 286). In the final part, three theses sketch out implications for public witness in "times that are a-changin'" (Dylan 1964).

2. What Exactly Is Public Theology?

The short answer to this question is that "there is no short answer that would define once and for all what public theology is" (Höhne 2015, p. 11).[3] Rather, there is a certain "elasticity of meaning" (Benne 1995, p. 3) connected to this term. Nevertheless, there are certain guard rails and characteristics that help to explicate the concept of public theology that is employed here. First of all, public theology holds on to the relevance of theology for public issues, while also holding on to the relevance of public issues for theology. Public theology, according to Wolfgang Huber, the doyen of public theology in the German-speaking world, seeks "to interpret the questions of life together and its

institutional formations in their theological relevance and to identify the contribution of the Christian faith to the responsible shaping of our lifeworld" (Huber 1996, p. 14). Rather than merely describing the effects of Christianity on our cultures, public theology wants to be an active part of these effects. Based on a wide understanding of "public," public theology goes beyond the duo of church and state, but rather encompasses the areas of state, economics, civil society, and cultural communication (Huber 1994). In this sense then, public theology goes beyond political theology. Though public theology takes up the concerns of political theology, it transcends political theology's focus on church–state relationships by also addressing other public spheres beyond the political.

To further describe public theology, the following five criteria are helpful (Bedford-Strohm 2009, p. 53). Firstly, public theology is engaged in questions of public relevance. These are often of an ethical nature. Secondly, public theology is bilingual, i.e., it speaks both in its own theological language and in a language accessible to the non-religious or differently religious others. This will be discussed in more detail below. Thirdly, it is interdisciplinary. In its specific combination of being rooted in a particular context, yet of embracing a global perspective, public theology is, fourthly, "glocal." Finally, it takes up public concerns into its own theological reflection.

These characteristics of public theology, however, can also easily pertain to other faith traditions besides Christianity, and in fact, they do. Public theology is not a monopoly of the Christian religion, but there are numerous representatives of other religions acting as public theologians and exploring the resources of their faith traditions in current public challenges (see also the interreligious book series "Religion Matters," Schliesser et al. 2021ff). I would therefore like to add a sixth criterion to the above, namely Christocentrism. Public theology, in its Christian variation, is firmly rooted in Christology. This will also be discussed in more detail below. Yet, who are the actors of Christian public theology? Who are the public theologians? Actors of public theology are each and every individual Christian, the church as well as academic theology. In this way, public theology seems somewhat broader in its approach compared to the focus of cultural witness on the church, and public theology is a multifaceted phenomenon. This holds true for both the German-speaking and the international context. The term "public theology" therefore always includes the plurality of "public theologies" taking on different shapes and tackling different challenges according to each particular context (De Gruchy 2004, pp. 45–62).

3. Witness to the Church or the World? Going beyond the Binary

We have not yet discussed the question of who actually the addressees of public theology and cultural witness are. For this discussion, I will draw on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), a German pastor and theologian killed by the Nazis for his involvement in a conspiracy against the Nazi regime. In the German-speaking context, Bonhoeffer has become almost the godfather of public theology (Schliesser 2018). His theological heritage is immensely fruitful even today as we wrestle with the challenges mentioned above. This heritage is not uncontested, however. For, as Johannes Fischer (2016) argued, "His [Bonhoeffer's] theology is not directed at the world or at society in the public sphere, but rather towards the church as the community of believers" (p. 44). So is the theology of Bonhoeffer meant for the church then and not for the world? Fischer is right in that every theology is connected first of all with the church, the *communio sanctorum*. Yet, Fischer's alternative between church and world as possible addressees of theology points to a deeper problem, a problem that Bonhoeffer himself dealt with intensely. For in not only differentiating between church and world, but actually separating both spheres into a harsh "either–or," we see what Bonhoeffer, himself Lutheran, had named "pseudo-Lutheranism" and passionately fought against it. By setting the "worldly kingdom" against the "spiritual kingdom," Martin Luther's so-called "Two-Realms Doctrine" had become perverted—with disastrous consequences, as Bonhoeffer observed.[4] For eventually, this misunderstanding led to the irrelevance of the Christian faith in the marketplace and the invisibility of Christian existence in the public sphere. Privately, Bonhoeffer observed, quite

a number of his fellow Christians would disagree with Hitler's regime, also on Christian grounds. Yet this private, Christian conviction would not find its way into the public. Against the attempt to save one's private virtuousness by trying to evade public issues, Bonhoeffer (2010) finds clear words:

> In flight from public discussion and examination, this or that person may well attain the sanctuary of private virtuousness. But he must close his eyes and mouth to the injustice around him. He can remain undefiled by the consequences of responsible action only by deceiving himself. In everything he does, that which he fails to do will leave him no peace. He will either perish from that restlessness or turn into a hypocritical, self-righteous, small-minded human being. (p. 40)

Against this separation of private impeccability and public engagement that results from a misperceived understanding of two realms, Bonhoeffer set the image of the one Christ-reality, emphasizing the unity of reality. "Hence, there are not two realms, but only the one realm of the Christ-reality [Christuswirklichkeit], in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united" (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 58). The foundation for this understanding of reality is found in Bonhoeffer's theology of reconciliation. "In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ" (ibid., p. 55).

Bonhoeffer's understanding of reality corresponds to the wide understanding of "the public" in public theology. This understanding of reality and the public also has ecclesiological consequences. "When one therefore wants to speak of the space of the church, one must be aware that this space has already been broken through, abolished, and overcome in every moment by the witness of the church to Jesus Christ. Thus all false thinking in terms of realms is ruled out as endangering the understanding of the church" (ibid., p. 64). We therefore need to scrutinize our perceptions of the nature, self-understanding, and tasks of the church in terms of a problematic "realms framework." Just as there is no such thing as a purely personal and private Christian faith, there is no such thing as a private church, either. With Bonhoeffer, we emphasize instead: theology and the church are in their nature always public. This holds true for Christian witness as well. "By its very nature, Christian witness is public not private" (De Gruchy 2007, p. 40).

Against this background, the alternative "church vs. world" as possible addressees of public witness is misleading. Because, "Just as the reality of God has entered the reality of the world in Christ, what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is worldly" (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 59). Beware, this quote has radical consequences! It also guards Bonhoeffer's theology towards different sides from misunderstandings, such as a pietistic or evangelical misreading that aims solely at personal piety, a cultural Protestantism whose Christian profile becomes invisible in the public sphere or a Christian-motivated actionism that seems to be able to act without being rooted in spirituality. The Christian without the worldly would be devoid of its aim, the worldly without the Christian devoid of its content. Public witness, in word or deed, transcends the binary "church" vs. "world," because the whole of reality has been reconciled in Christ.[5]

4. Transformative Christology: Witnessing to the "Public Christ"

Christology is the heartbeat of public theology.[6] In the midst of public theology's multiple shapes and contexts, it is Christology that gives to public theology contour towards the outside and cohesion towards the inside. To unfold this, I will make use of the traditional dogmatic figure of the *munus triplex*, the three-fold office of Christ, which constitutes a unique ecumenical phenomenon in that it is accepted in the different confessional traditions (Schlink 1983, p. 414). Though the differentiation between Christ's kingly, prophetic, and priestly office can already be found in the works of the Church

Fathers, it was Calvin who developed it systematically in his *Institutes*, book 2, chapter 15 (Calvin 1960, pp. 494–503). "To know the purpose for which Christ was sent by the Father, and what he conferred upon us, we must look above all at three things in Him, the prophetic office, kingship and priesthood." Using the lens of the *munus triplex* can help us to discover "the public Christ in different domains of life, and it allows us to differentiate and to relate Christ's presence in ecclesial, political and moral-diaconical contexts," in short: in public contexts (Welker 2013, p. 286).

When asked about the task of art, the Swiss artist Paul Klee is said to have responded that art does not depict the visible, but art renders visible. In a similar way, public theology does not seek to depict Christ, but to render Christ visible in public contexts. In other words: the task of public theology is witnessing to the public Christ. In order to be able to do so, one crucial aspect needs to be kept in mind, though. As Calvin (1960) pointed out, "We see that he [Christ] was anointed by the spirit . . . not only for himself that he might carry on the office of teaching, but for the whole body that the power of the spirit might be present in the continuing preaching of the Gospel" (p. 496). The Spirit of God rests on Jesus Christ not only for his own sake, but Jesus Christ pours out the Spirit to his body, the church, "to live in his witnesses and to allow his witnesses to live in him" (Welker 2013, p. 286).

Yet how exactly is the *munus triplex* helpful to public witness? As we look at each of the offices of Christ in more detail, we will connect the three offices to his pre-Easterly life, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. Through linking the kingly office of Christ with his earthly life, light is shed on dimensions of the historical Jesus that have remained underexplored for most of church history. Even our creeds quickly proceed from Jesus' birth to his death, as if everything that lies in between had no further relevance.[7] Yet, the contrary is the case; Jesus' earthly life reveals a radical transformation of the concept of kingship. This king did not come to be served, to rule and to oppress, but rather to serve, to heal, and to help. Jesus' kingship is characterized by his love and forgiveness, by his inclusion of the outcasts, and by his attention to those marginalized and forgotten by society. "This king, who is also a brother and friend, even a poor person and an outcast, shapes the constant movement towards radical democracy characterized by love and care, mutual acceptance, recognition and respect. . . . What a great orientation for any public theology!" (ibid., p. 287).

The prophetic office of Christ can be connected to the cross. The cross first of all points to the powerlessness of God. It is thus the death also of all false images of God. God's power proves itself in powerlessness. The son of God, tortured to death, shows God's compassion with all victims of power and abuse. The biblical preferential option for the poor and the weak reveals itself precisely here, at the cross. In the countless victims of human rights violations today, we encounter the Man of Sorrow. At the same time, the cry of agony in solidarity with the suffering merges with the cry of the prophets against injustice and oppression. The judicial murder of 2000 years ago not only directs our attention towards the limits of any legal system, but also towards the functioning of power. "The paradox of the law" (Auga 2008, p. 365), including liberal law, is revealed by the fact that the marginalized, i.e., the ones whose rights are being violated, usually have no access to the rights discourse. Furthermore, the cross points towards human failure and sin. Failure and vulnerabilities are being taken seriously here, yet at the same time constructive ways of overcoming them are being revealed. Grace, forgiveness, and a new beginning emerge as powerful resources for perpetrators and victims alike as social reconciliation processes after historical trauma in contexts as Rwanda and South Africa show. "Again, what a great challenge and task for a global public theology!" (Welker 2013, p. 289).

Here, the ray of the resurrection already shines through, which can be connected with the priestly office of Christ. Though this office has often been viewed primarily through the lens of atonement and sacrifice, it is set into a wider horizon when seen in the light of the resurrection. The early church witnessed to the resurrection in particular by means of symbolic actions. For example, the breaking of the bread and the celebration of Holy Communion reveals God's continuing loving mercy and acceptance. As such, the table of

fellowship becomes a powerful demonstration of mutual acceptance, care, and equality. The priestly office speaks in particular to the witness of the church as the social body of Christ. "The main task of the priestly office and the priestly shape of the reign is to witness in proclamation, liturgy, teaching and mission to the sustaining, saving and ennobling God" (ibid., p. 290). Again, what a great task for public theology!

In the interplay of all three offices of Christ as king, prophet, and priest, the distinct yet connected tasks of public witness come into view as the public Christ is rendered visible in the different domains of public life. Rooted in the particular reality of a specific context, public witness is nonetheless beyond confinement. Its global and ecumenical dimensions need to be accounted for also in its theology, therefore. "Global public theology has to rise to the challenge to understand itself as an ecumenical and eschatological public theology–without losing its moral, political and global responsibilities and virtues" (ibid., p. 290). This calls for a number of concrete implications for the task of cultural witness and public theology. In the following, three of these implications will be presented in the hope of stirring up further discussion.

5. Now What? Three Implications for Public Witness in Contemporary Europe

5.1. Thesis 1: Public Witness Needs Religious Literacy and Bilinguality

On 16 September 2022, Mahsa Amini died in police custody in Iran. The young Iranian woman had been arrested by the morality police, who accused her of wearing her head covering improperly. Two weeks later, German Minister of Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock stated the following in the German Parliament in view of the ensuing protests in Iran against the Mullah regime: The terror of the Iranian moral guardians "has nothing, but nothing at all, to do with religion or culture" (Baerbock 2022). This is not only a dangerous factual error, but it also shows an alarming lack of religious literacy.

Western thinking has for so long been dominated by the assumption of a post-religious world thar religious literacy has continued to decline. Religion in the public sphere—be it politics, education, or media—often evokes uneasiness coupled with helplessness. Religion is deemed too complex on the one hand and too problematic on the other hand, both resulting in ignorance and neglect. This has disastrous consequences. If religion and its influences on individual and social processes are not adequately understood, prejudices and misunderstandings abound, leading ultimately to hostility, discrimination, and violence. Diane L. Moore (2016, p. 27) from Harvard's Religious Literacy Project argued, "Understanding these complex religious influences is a critical dimension of understanding modern human affairs across the full spectrum of endeavours in local, national and global arenas. An important dimension of diminishing religious illiteracy is to provide resources for how to recognise, understand, and analyse religious influences in contemporary life". This is exactly where public theology comes in. Addressing this void in many Western cultures, public witness shows how religion—in our particular case, the Christian faith tradition—contributes to human flourishing, thereby also helping to reduce stereotypes and prejudices and building mutual understanding, tolerance, and trust.

Religious literacy from the perspective of public witness has two dimensions, one directed inwards and one directed outwards. Although both are intrinsically connected, they follow a consecutive order. I want to argue that we first need to acquire religious literacy in terms of understanding our own faith tradition. In her discussion of translating religious convictions in political discourses, Christiane Tietz pointed to the importance of first understanding immanent plausibilities within one's faith tradition. She argued for the necessity of transforming mere thetic statements such as "This happens to be the will of God" into convictions like "The meaning of this commandment of God is that . . . " (Tietz 2012, p. 95). Although Tietz focused primarily on ethical discourses in terms of certain norms and commandments, we need to also include dogmatic figures. We need fresh thinking on what we actually mean when we speak, for instance, of the Trinity, of the Almighty God, of faith or of sin.[8] The first requirement of religious literacy is therefore learning to speak our own mother tongue again. Not in the sense of repeating formulas,

but in the sense of creatively and critically engaging with our theological traditions and to feel at home within them. "The greatest challenge of the present times is: To access the language of faith again, to learn again to speak it and to use it" (Thomas 2021, p. 351).

In a second step then it is necessary to help people who do not play the same or any religious language game to still be able to understand it. As South African public theologian John De Gruchy (2007) put it, "[G]ood public theological praxis requires the development of a language that is accessible to people outside the Christian tradition" (p. 39). Nota bene: the aim is not convincing the communication partner of the truth of the Christian faith (as if this even were in anyone's power), but to create the prerequisites for the possibility of understanding. Here, public witness needs to develop the competency of bilinguality or—more precisely—multilinguality (Tietz 2012, p. 98f). Ever since Jürgen Habermas prominently called for a translation of religious content into secular accessible language in public discourse in 2001, this discussion has gained traction. Yet though translation is the prerequisite of bilinguality, it is not identical with it. Mere translation will only lead us halfway, so to speak. For the danger of translation is that the translated product results in another monolinguality. In this case, the theological origins and religious identity of certain concepts become invisible in public discourse. Instead, public witness needs to be present in public discourse by speaking in both languages simultaneously, i.e., in its own theological language and in its publicly accessible version. This ensures that neither language retreats behind the other, resulting in either the invisibility of Christian identity or the incomprehensibility of Christian content. Bilinguality, i.e., the permanent and visible presence of both languages together, is thus the communicative consequence of the one Christ-reality. To spell this out in terms of a new apologetics will be the task of public witness.

The metaphor of bilinguality also provokes criticism, however. As Thomas (2021) rightly pointed out, not everything is translatable lest it becomes simplistic (p. 351). The existence of God, for example, cannot be translated nor can potent religious imagery. And: As translation scientists point out, every translation process is one of transformation and re-presentation (Pirner 2015, p. 452). Content is inevitably transformed in this process rather than simply mirrored. This means that there is likely to remain a surplus of meaning in any translation process. Not least in view of these challenges connected with the concept of bilinguality, Thomas rejected this notion altogether, arguing in favor of explication (Erläutern) instead. "Explication is like monolingual foreign language teaching" (Thomas 2021, p. 355). Yet just as in foreign language teaching, I propose a pragmatic approach. Although monolingual teaching can be quite efficient, there are likely to be occasions where its limits become apparent and where it would be helpful to resort to other means as well. Public witness therefore makes creative use of any means of communication available. One particular strong resource, for example, is storytelling. Literary scholars such as Jonathan Gottschall (2013) point us to the identity and community constituting dimensions of storytelling. According to Gottschall, it is stories that shape us, our self-understanding, our meaning making of the world. It is what makes us human. The Jesus story makes for an amazing story, indeed! Yet, words are not all there is. Here, the Reformation denominations with their strong word orientation can benefit from other traditions, including the Catholic and the Orthodox with their attention to other dimensions such as the experiential, the haptic, the emotional. "The story of God's dramatic world adventure is also explicated in that people can observe the real use of this language. They understand the story when they see how people live with it" (Thomas 2021, p. 358). Bilingual or multilingual public witness therefore also takes the shape of experience, of rituals, of encounters—of life itself.

5.2. Thesis 2: For Public Witness, Diaspora Existence and Missional Existence Are Sisters

The year 2022 marks a change in the times in many respects. In Germany, 2022 is also the year in which the majority of people no longer belonged to one of the two major churches, i.e., either to the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant church. "It is a historical caesura, since, seen as a whole, it is the first time in centuries that it is no longer

'normal' in Germany to be a church member", said social scientist Carsten Frerk (quoted in Der Spiegel 2022). For the country of the Reformation, these are remarkable developments, indeed. Yet, the trend in itself is not so remarkable at all, but rather representative of a number of (Western) European countries. It seems that the future of many Christian churches in Europe will be characterized by a diaspora situation.[9] Although the term *diaspora* has been used (and misused) differently throughout the centuries, the New Testament employs this term for Christians or Christian churches who live in a minority situation. Public witness in such a context therefore requires a "theology of diaspora." In their study of the same title, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) argues for a wide understanding of diaspora, beyond its numerical dimension. Diaspora is understood "as shaping fullness of relations in a spirit of Christian discipleship. . . . While the concept of minority church or minority situation reduces this wealth of relations to a numerical ratio, and tends to imply a deficiency, the strength of a relationally focused concept of diaspora is that is highlights the polyphony of relations in diaspora congregations and understands this as an essential part of creative organisation" (CPCE 2018, p. 5). This relational concept of diaspora is characterized by its Christological roots. Pointing to John 17:16, the church of Jesus Christ is understood as being in this world, but not of this world. As the body of Christ—or, in Bonhoeffer's words, as "Christ existing as community"—the diasporic church partakes in God's own mission. "The Church interspersed in the world participates in the mission of God, the missio Dei, so that diaspora existence and mission orientation of Christian existence are two sides of the same coin" (Körtner 2020, p. 9). Rather than retreating from society, the contrary is the case for the diasporic church.

This in turn calls for a "theology for a missionary church," as the Church of England (2004, p. 84) pointed out. In the context of churches in Europe, the Church of England is an interesting case. In many respects, the Church of England seems about one generation ahead of the other churches, at least in the German-speaking context. Much of the experience of churches here, such as the shock about the loss of one's majority position in society, decrease in membership, scarcity of finances, sale of church buildings, etc., have already become a reality there. Over here, shock rigidity is followed by resignation and calls for orderly withdrawal on the one hand and frantic actionism on the other, which seeks its salvation above all in structural adjustments. The insight that "the question of the future perspective is a spiritual one" (EKD 2020, p. 1) is so far still rather the exception than the rule; yet, it points in the right direction. The question of the future of the church is a spiritual one, indeed, and—as one needs to add—a theological one. It is therefore only consistent when the Church of England developed already at the turn of the millennium a "theology for a missionary church." It identifies five marks of mission that are intended as a framework either for an existing local church or for developing, growing, or planting a church or a fresh expression of church (Church of England 2004, p. 81f). (1) A missionary church is focused on God the Trinity. It worships and serves a missionary God and understands itself as sharing in the *missio Dei.* (2) A missionary church is incarnational. This means that it shapes itself in relation to the culture in which it is located by being responsive to the activity of the Holy Spirit in its community. (3) A missionary church is transformational. Understanding itself as a servant and sign of God's kingdom, it serves the community it is located in. (4) A missionary church makes disciples. It is active in calling people to faith in Jesus Christ and in developing a consistent Christian lifestyle that engages with culture, yet is also countercultural. (5) A missionary church is relational in that it understands itself as a community of faith. It values hospitality and relationships with other Christian churches and communities. As the Church of England pointed out, "These five marks are not 'pass' or 'fail' criteria, but may be a helpful way of highlighting or identifying a church's missionary purpose and qualities" (ibid., p. 82). It is up to the churches in Europe to find out in what ways these marks can be helpful for them and the challenge of public witness, for a missional existence is the sister of the diaspora existence.

5.3. Thesis 3: Public Witness Is Ecumenical, Practical and Spiritual

European churches face the challenge of cultural witness together. This challenge presents new opportunities also for ecumenism. It is time to rethink the status of theological differences between different Christian denominations for ecumenical dialogue—and even more so, for ecumenical diapraxis. In this process, academic disputes about theological points of contention and an "ecumenism of profiles" (Wolfgang Huber)[10] are increasingly being supplemented by what could be called an "ecumenism of practice." What I see emerging as "public ecumenism" is committed to working together to solve concrete challenges, not least in a public global context. In the common struggle for answers to climate change or to an unjust economic order, for example, denominational differences are increasingly losing their significance. One example of this joint work for a more sustainable, just economic order is the "Economia di Francesco" initiative[11] launched in 2019, in reference to Francis of Assisi. This movement is aimed at young (U35) economists and entrepreneurs who want to rethink the economy and globalization. Inspired by the Catholic tradition, this initiative unites several thousand young people from different Christian and non-Christian faiths. In this spirit, the Roman Catholic economist and theologian Luigino Bruni is calling on Pope Francis to convene a Vatican III dedicated to the global challenges of a sustainable economy and ecology. "A new ecumenical Council could not remain just a matter of bishops but should also seriously involve the laity; it should not be only men's business but also that of women; not just a matter of adults but also young people; nor just a matter of Catholics but it should involve the other churches, other religions and atheists of good will" (Bruni 2021). Christian public witness thereby demonstrates its own specific resources for the common good, while working together not only with different Christian denominations but with other and non-religious actors as well.

At the same time, public witness in ecumenical and interreligious diapraxis depends on its spiritual roots. De Gruchy (2007) pointed to the importance of spirituality, not least in the context of a global, ecumenical public theology: "Good public theological praxis requires a spirituality which enables a lived experience of God, with people and with creation" (p. 40). The internationally renowned Taizé community is an example of how a young ecumenical community celebrates the resources of faith in a shared spirituality, both locally in Taizé and beyond.[12] Public ecumenical witness therefore connects head, hand, and heart. This means that alongside ecumenical dialogue and common theological struggle, and alongside ecumenical diapraxis in common commitment to a more just world, there is experienced spirituality as a common connection of hearts in God. This is accompanied by a spirit of humility, which is also prepared to acknowledge one's own failings with regard to the Christian community and to ask for forgiveness. Orthodox theologian Peter Bouteneff (2021) called this an "ecumenism of repentance." From this spiritual attitude then grows a wide heart for the neighbor. "This 'ecumenism of repentance' is at the same time always also an ecumenism of generosity, because the more I recognise my own share of guilt in the divisions, the more generous my heart must and will become. And this ecumenism must also be an ecumenism of curiosity–curiosity in the sense of being willing to really listen to each other and learn from each other" (ibid., p. 172).

6. Conclusions

For facing the challenge of culture witness in contemporary Europe, a Christologically contoured public theology has emerged from the discussion as a promising paradigm. Inspired by Bonhoeffer's one Christ-reality, cultural witness as public witness transcends the binary of "church" vs. "world." Witnessing to hope in cultures characterized by continuing crises means witnessing to the public Christ in the whole of reality. This was spelled out more concretely by using the dogmatic figure of the *munus triplex*. Churches in Europe witness to Christ the king, the prophet, and the priest by being actively engaged for peace, justice, and hope as servants and sign of the kingdom of God. The discussion yielded three implications. (1) In order for public witness to be effective, a two-dimensional religious literacy is needed. In a first step, we need to learn again our own faith language,

to understand it and to speak it. In a second step, public witness becomes bilingual, simultaneously speaking its own faith language and a language that is accessible for non-Christians, by making creative use of all means of verbal and non-verbal communication. (2) The future of churches in Europe is likely to be one of diaspora existence. A theology of a diaspora church is inseparably linked with a theology of a missionary church. Here, the experiences of the Church of England can give helpful impulses. (3) In the challenge of public witness, churches in Europe are bound together. This means that public witness will be characterized not only by ecumenical dialogue, but even more so by ecumenical diapraxis, united in manifold expressions of spirituality and lived experiences with God.

From the seismic shift currently taking place for the churches in Europe arises the challenge of cultural witness to the public Christ. This challenge requires fresh thinking. This contribution is meant to provoke exactly this.

> Your old road is rapidly agin'
>
> Please get out of the new one
>
> If you can't lend your hand
>
> For the times they are a-changin'. (Dylan 1964)

Notes

[1] The renewed interest in the role of religion on the side of academics, policy makers, and practitioners is clearly visible, for instance, in the field of international development. The exclusion and/or side-lining of the religious factor in achieving major global challenges such as the ones spelt out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 and the ensuing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2015 is slowly giving way to acknowledging and including faith actors in international development. Cf. Schliesser et al. (2021ff).

[2] One example is Harvard University's Religious Literary Initiative, which provides training to professionals in the public, private, and non-profit sectors to advance the public understanding of religion (Harvard Divinity School. Religion and Public Life 2023). The initiative can be viewed at: https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/programs/religious-literacy-professions (accessed on 2 April 2023).

[3] Translation by the author, if not indicated otherwise.

[4] Cf. Torbjörn Johansson's (2015) helpful critique of the "Two Kingdoms."

[5] At the same time, this does not mean that the concepts of "the church" and "the world" simply implode into each other and become identical. While the whole of reality is reconciled in Christ, it is still important to differentiate between reconciliation and redemption. Both, church and world, are located in the not yet redeemed but already reconciled world. This also calls for differentiated strategies for public witness, depending on whether it is directed towards the church or the world. Cf. the article by Ralph Kunz in this Special Issue and his use of Günter Thomas' critique of the "two-realms" concept.

[6] This statement, I hasten to add, is not to be read in a descriptive manner as if it was meant to provide a description of the current global landscape of public theology. This is certainly not the case as there are many public theologies that do not center on Christology but rather employ different approaches, such as the Catholic natural law tradition or more strongly Trinitarian or pneumatically oriented public theologies. While I would like to argue for the plausibility of a Christocentric approach also in a global context, for instance, by utilizing the ecumenically productive *munus triplex*, I readily concede that this Christocentric focus is more at home in particular Protestant traditions. I thank one of the reviewers for pointing me to the importance of this clarification.

[7] The creed of the Council of Nicaea (325) says about Jesus Christ " . . . and was incarnate and was made man, he suffered, and the third day he rose again . . . ". In a similar way, the creed of the Council of Constantinople (381) reads: " . . . and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again . . . ."

[8] Seeking to address the increasing need for religious literacy, Fribourg University developed the CAS course "Foundational questions in Christian existence," tackling precisely these questions. https://www.unifr.ch/glaubeundgesellschaft/de/weiterbildung/cas.html (accessed on 2 April 2023). Many more such courses are needed.

9   Cf. The contribution of Ulrich H.J. Körtner in this Special Issue.

10   According to Wolfgang Huber, an "ecumenism of profiles" does not deny or ignore the differences between Protestantism and Roman Catholics, yet still emphasizes the far greater commonalities. "We differ in some fundamental questions, but we do not lose sight of the much greater common ground that is given to us and opened up in faith. That is why an ecumenism of profiles is valid: Protestant for a good reason and Roman Catholic for a good reason and therefore Christian together for a good reason." Huber (2006).

11   The initiative can be viewed at: https://francescoeconomy.org/ (accessed on 2 April 2023).

12   The Taizé Community is an international ecumenical order of men in Taizé, France. The community is best known for its ecumenical youth meetings, which attract around 100,000 visitors of many nationalities and denominations each year. https://www.taize.fr/en (accessed on 2 April 2023).

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What Kind of Theology Does the Church of the Future Need? Reflections in a European Context [†]

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Abstract: While Christianity is growing worldwide, especially in various forms of charismatic and Pentecostal churches, membership in the Protestant churches and in the Catholic Church are declining throughout Europe. A theology for the church of the future, particularly a theology for pastoral ministry, needs an understanding of the church that is at once relevant to practical pastoral ministry and congregational work as well as awareness of the processes of change and upheaval. This paper argues that there is a need for a contemporary theology of diaspora. At the center of this paper is the question of how God can be spoken of in a theologically responsible way under present conditions without dissolving all theology into anthropology and ethics. The crisis of faith in modern Western secular societies is essentially a crisis of the language of faith. Theology *in* crisis and a theology *for* times of crisis—both have the task of waiting: waiting for God's new entry into the world, for his coming, and for him to speak to us in a new way by making the language of the biblical tradition speak and appeal to us anew. Such a theology for times of crisis is precisely not resigned, but highly expectant, as can be learned from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Keywords: theology of diaspora; Christian talk of God; God's acting and omnipotence; a theology of waiting

1. Introduction

This paper analyzes challenges of contemporary theology in the context of pluralization, individualization, and secularization. Pluralization not only affects general culture, but also characterizes developments in the field of religion as well as in the field of Christianity. The description of the current findings is based, among other things, on the analyses of Detlef Pollack (2003), Gerhard Wegner (2014), and Evangelische Kirche Deutschland EKD (2019). Against this background, this paper argues for a new form of theology of the diaspora. In doing so, it ties in with a recent study by the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) (Fischer and Rose 2019). The church crisis, the study found, is not only a crisis of credibility, but also a crisis of faith and a crisis of the language of faith. Following Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2010), this paper sketches out a theology of waiting and the concept of a waiting church in the sense that it guards the heritage of the biblical witness, carried by the hope that it will begin to speak anew.

2. The Church between Change and New Beginnings

In many countries of the world, Christians live in the minority. Even in regions where Christianity has traditionally been the largest religion, the number of Christians is declining—especially in Europe—while at the same time their number is growing in other parts of the world. This paper focuses on the development in Germany and the German-speaking world (Cf. Körtner 2019). For Germany, the *Freiburg Institute Forschungszentrum Generationenverträge* (FZG) predicts that the membership of the two large national churches—the Protestant and the Roman Catholic Church—will be cut in half by 2060 (EKD 2019).

Accordingly, the number of Protestant Christians would fall from the current 21.5 million to 10.5 million. In spring 2022, the total number of those still belonging to one of the two large national churches in Germany was less than 50%.

Protestantism in the broadest sense of the word covers a wide spectrum of denominations. Not only as a result of secularization, membership in the Protestant churches is declining across Europe but growing worldwide. The same applies to charismatic and Pentecostal churches in their various forms. In Europe, however, Protestantism is declining on a demographic level. This is especially true of the traditional churches that emerged out of the Reformation. Of course, there are also older free churches as well as those more recently formed in this part of the world—evangelical and charismatic congregations—which report growing membership figures (cf. WCE 2022). Overall, however, their growth by no means compensates for the decline in membership of the Protestant national churches.

The overall picture is, of course, much more complex, and the various denominations, denominational families, and individual churches all ought to be considered separately. From a sociological point of view, different groups and milieus have formed within the large churches. Broadly speaking, in regional Protestant churches (*Landeskirchen*) in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland, there may be "pluralistic, missionary-evangelistic and charismatic visions, as well as ecumenical-conciliar and political-emancipatory versions of church" to be found (Hempelmann 2016, p. 5, trans.). Outside and alongside the familiar church and free-church structures, "alternative forms of Christian piety are emerging at the same time, seeking expression in independent denominations and confessions, especially in the evangelical-charismatic sphere" (ibid.). In addition, as a result of migration, there is a numerically significant growth of Orthodox churches, which helps to shape the ecumenical conversation. Moreover, the number of migrant or immigrant churches from other European countries as well as those of Asian or African origin have grown steadily since the 1990s. "A part of worldwide Christianity is living among us. A new stylistic diversity of Christianity is developing" (ibid., p. 6, trans.)

In the eastern part of Germany, only a shrinking minority of the population belongs to one of the two main denominations, Protestant and Catholic. When evaluating population groups, the change in religious demographics due to the migration of non-Christians, i.e., primarily Muslims, must certainly be considered. Nevertheless, a full picture of the overall trend can only be obtained by looking at the absolute membership numbers and not just at the percentages. Likewise, is referring to the mortality rate, which exceeds the birth rate in the Christian part of the population, sufficient as an explanation? After all, one is not born a Christian, but baptized a Christian. The number of baptisms, however, is again lower than the number of births. A further and important factor is religious disaffiliation, especially for Protestant churches wherein the number of people leaving the church is higher in terms of percentage than in the Roman Catholic Church.

As a result of the continuous trend of religious disaffiliation, the religious demographics in the western part of Germany are becoming more and more similar to those in central and eastern Germany. However, the difference between the eastern and the western parts of Germany is that, while leaving the church in the west is a conscious decision, the eastern part has largely been "unchurched" for several generations. Here, people do not turn their backs on the church, but have never experienced a church or religious socialization (Fincke 2017). Therefore, it is not disappointments or negative experiences with the church that have led to religious disaffiliation, but being unaffiliated with any religious denomination is the norm.

Now, sociologists of religion rightly point out that being unaffiliated with any religious denomination is not the same as being unreligious. What is now called religious indifferentism can come in different shapes and forms. However, there is a widespread habitual atheism that has long since ceased to struggle with the question of God's character or the problem of theodicy, and has stopped asking after God altogether. As important as it is to distinguish between different forms of religious distance with regard to church work, preaching, pastoral care, and religious education, the proposition of a religious

a priori as an anthropological premise is questionable, because it claims to understand supposedly non-religious people better than they understand themselves, which means that their self-interpretation is not really taken seriously.

Like Gerhard Wegner, I think it is wrong to assume that the change, which becomes palpable in declining church membership, affects only the ecclesiastical form of Christianity, that is, only a certain social form of Christianity, and not Christianity as such or religion in general. Wegner (2014) counters: "The times when it was possible to claim unchallenged that all people basically had religious interests but nowadays cultivate them in a highly individualized way, and that the church's loss of validity is because its dogmatic and authoritarian style fail to meet people's needs, are over. Of course, a distinction must still be made between religion and church—however, religious communication is rarely found outside church contexts" (p. 7) (Cf. Pollack 2003).

Critics fear that Wegner's proposition favors a narrow understanding of church and the warding off of any kind of inner-church and inner-theological criticism (Raatz 2014). However, such a reading is by no means compelling. On the other hand, a theory of religion that declares Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, to be the administrator of modernity shields itself from all empirical evidence and criticism, because its construct of an omnipresent individualistic religiosity, which equates modern subjectivity and religion, is sociologically intangible. It is, ultimately, to use Thomas Luckmann's (1991) term, an "invisible religion."

Pluralization, individualization, and secularization are not contradictory. The church and the Christian faith are not only in a time of change, and there are likewise not only new beginnings to report, which awaken faith and the church to new life, but also departures. As justified as the criticism of an impetuous and undifferentiated talk of a break with tradition may be, the magic words "change" or "transformation" cannot hide the fact that there is indeed such a break with tradition, not only outside but also within the churches. In some cases, it is even encouraged within the churches themselves. Wolfgang Huber has coined the term "self-secularization" for this phenomenon (Huber 1998, p. 10). Such "self-secularization" happens not least by moralizing the gospel, that is, when its message is reduced to one of morality or an ensemble of ethical norms and values.

In this situation, it is not enough to—in the tradition of liberal theology—invoke the spirit of the Reformation or to speak of the spirit of Protestantism and, at the same time, to think that one can leave behind the source of Reformation faith and make the perpetual protest of any kind of religious commitment a principle. It was Paul Tillich (1962) who suggested that "perpetual protest" could "lead to the elimination of any concrete content. [. . .] Liberal Christianity has not just criticized religion, it has dissolved religion" (p. 136, trans.).

However, the question of what the church is (still) good for is not answered convincingly either if one quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's catchy phrase of *the church for others* and envisions the church of the future as one that' is focused entirely on diaconal work and social action, much like a secular non-governmental organization (NGO). Bonhoeffer's formula is too short-sighted in the sense that it is a truncated description of the nature and mission of the church. To be a church for others, the church must first continue to be a church, namely a community of believers in Christ. Only if it is a church *with* others can it also be a church *for* others, as Wolfgang Huber rightly notes in his Bonhoeffer biography published in 2019 (Huber 2019, p. 85f.). To be sure, the nature of a church is determined by its willingness to stand up for those whose lives are existentially threatened and endangered and whose dignity is disregarded and violated. However, the phrase "church for others" strikes an activist note that easily overlooks the fact that the community of believers, which is to be present for others, must first be formed and constantly strengthened anew.

A theology for the church of the future, specifically a theology for pastoral ministry, needs an understanding of the church that is at once relevant to practical pastoral ministry and congregational work as well as aware of the processes of change and upheaval described at the beginning of this paper. The theological competence of pastors cannot be

tailored solely to the empirical conditions that pastors are faced with in today's ministry. For the sake of its practical relevance, ministry is dependent on a possibly counterfactual or at least normative model of church leadership. For if normative and possibly counterfactual ecclesiological models are replaced by ones that are purely empirical in their outset—that is, a kind of market- or demand-oriented model, where the entire ministry and vision of the church is shaped by the current religious needs of society—the church will eventually become a religious doppelganger of society, which will sooner or later make itself superfluous.

The fundamental theological question arises as to what extent reform efforts are guided by circumstantial constraints or by decidedly theological principles and criteria that can be justified by systematic theology. Of course, it is not a matter of a top-down application of a normatively prescribed ecclesiology that dictates church practice, but rather of an interplay between theory and empiricism, through which dogmatic-normative statements about the shape, nature, and task of the church are repeatedly put to the test. In short, a systematic-theological theory of the church is in turn to be formulated in terms of church management ("Kybernetik"), so that it can fulfil its steering task in the everyday life of the church and church leadership, which must be recalled anew in the current reform debates. A guiding concept here can be the notion of diaspora, as I will show below.

3. A Theology of Diaspora

The biblical term used to designate Christians or a church in a minority position is that of the diaspora. Applied to Christian communities, the Greek word is found in James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1, that is, only in a few places and, moreover, in late New Testament writings. In John 7:35, it is used in the context of Jews outside of their homeland. Acts 8:1 and 4 use the verb *diaspeíresthai* ("to be scattered") in the context of Christians from Jerusalem who fled from persecution to the regions of Judea and Samaria.

Evidently, the Greek verb and its noun *diasporá* ("scattering") were adopted from the Septuagint, in which the verb occurs over 40 times and the noun, 12 times. The dispersion of Jews throughout the eastern Mediterranean, however, is terminologically distinguished from exile (Hebrew gôlā/galut) in the Septuagint and Judaism (Rajak 1999). The term diaspora also plays no role in medieval or early modern Jewish culture. In modern Hebrew, there is the term *tefuza* (Dan 1999). It denotes the diaspora, wherein one can live a prosperous and protected life, while *galut* stands for a life of suffering, persecution, and despair.

Apart from the few New Testament passages mentioned, it seems that the term diaspora was forgotten in Christianity for a long time. It is no longer used to describe a minority situation. It is only Luther's works wherein one finds the idea of a church that is "hidden and very scattered." (Luther 1930, p. 505, line 5)[1] Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf used the term diaspora to describe the situation of the members of the "Brüder-Unität" who lived in the territory of a national church (cf. Meyer 2009, p. 71).

In the middle of the 19th century, the term was used prominently in the context of the Gustav-Adolf-Foundation, the forerunner of the Gustav-Adolf-Werk (Fleischmann-Bisten 1999). The counterpart to Protestant diaspora work was the Catholic Bonifatiusverein, from which the Boniface Association emerged. Soon the term diaspora was used not only to signify a denominational, but also a cultural and origin-related minority situation. The different aspects of the term—the theological, cultural, and national or ethnic—became blended in a theologically and politically problematic way. During the Nazi period, the Protestant diaspora theology developed into an ethnic theology with an affinity for Nazi ideology, which only after 1945 was able to free and disentangle itself from the laborious process of self-purification (Röhrig 1991).

Because of its historic stigma, the concept of diaspora has been problematized increasingly in recent decades in theology and the church, and has thus been used less and less in theological discourse. Many minority churches do not (or no longer) use it to describe their situations as religious minorities. Amongst Protestants, however, Wilhelm

Dantine (1911–1981) and Ernst Lange (1927–1974) as well as—amongst Catholics—Karl Rahner (1904–1984) in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s presented groundbreaking outlines of a theology of the diaspora that were based on biblical foundations and critical of any "völkisch"-nationalist echoes. What the above-mentioned authors have in common is an understanding of diaspora existence as an essential characteristic of the church, even in those social contexts in which Christians or a specific church make up the religious majority of the population. The reason for this is that, according to the New Testament understanding, the church exists in the world, but not of the world, and is not supposed to be equal to the world (see below).

For Wilhelm Dantine (2001), who has described the existence of the Protestant minority in Austria as a "Protestant adventure in a non-Protestant world" (trans.), diaspora means the church interspersed in the community of nations. Alluding to John 12:24, Dantine's theology of diaspora was shaped by his theology of the cross: "'Diaspora' means to be a scattered grain of wheat of God in the furrowed field of the world. The grain of wheat bears much fruit when it dies. The Future-minded church becomes a 'dying church'. [. . .] A dying church essentially means to be a church that is willing to die for the sake of its testimony: it rather dies because it does not want to live for its own sake. A church following her Lord is not only a church in the world, but a church 'for the world'" (Dantine 1966, p. 447, trans.).

Karl Rahner (1988) also deemed the existence of the church in the modern, secular world to be a diaspora existence: "The Christian situation in the present is [. . .] characterizable as diaspora" (p. 24, trans.). "For us today the diaspora situation is a [. . .] must in salvation history, i.e., we have not only to regretfully acknowledge this diaspora situation as existing, but can accept it as a must wanted by God [. . .] and, as a result, uninhibitedly take the appropriate action" (ibid., p. 26, trans.). "We therefore have the right, indeed almost the duty, to reckon with the fact—and not merely take note of it bewilderedly—that the way the church exists in public is changing. That the church is becoming a diaspora church everywhere—a church among many non-Christians" (ibid., p. 32; cf. Rahner 1967). Ernst Lange, on the other hand, described the existence and life of the church as an interplay between gathering and dispersion with the formula "ecclesia and diaspora" (Lange 1965, p. 142f., trans.).

The three authors mentioned above oppose the misunderstanding that diaspora means the withdrawal of Christians or the church from the world into itself—into a kind of inner-church milieu. What they have in common is the view that the church, which by its nature is always a diaspora church, knows that it is sent by Christ into the world. It participates in the mission of God, the missio Dei. Therefore, the diaspora existence and the missionary orientation of the Christian existence are two sides of the same coin. Dantine, Lange, and Rahner are also convinced that the diaspora existence of the church must not be understood confessionalistically, but ecumenically. Like Hermann-Josef Röhrig (1993, 1995), one can almost speak of an "ecumenical diaspora."

Interestingly, in more recent times, a concept of diaspora that has been completely detached from theological and ecclesiastical usage has been developed in the field of cultural studies (Mayer 2005; Knott and McLoughlin 2010). For example, one speaks of a Pakistani diaspora in Great Britain, a Ghanaian diaspora in Austria, or an African diaspora in the United States. Within cultural studies, the concept of diaspora may include the religious dimension, which is by no means limited to Christian denominations; however, religion is not the decisive factor there. It is, nevertheless, a worthwhile task to relate the discourse on a renewed theology of diaspora to the diaspora discourse of cultural studies.

This task was taken up by a working group of the CPCE, which was commissioned in 2012 to initiate a study "defining the situation of Protestant churches in a pluralist Europe." The study document, entitled "Theology of Diaspora" (Fischer and Rose 2019), which is available by now, understands "diaspora as shaping fullness of relations in a spirit of Christian discipleship. [. . .] While the concept of minority church or minority situation reduces this wealth of relations to a numerical ratio, and tends to imply a deficiency, the

strength of a relationally focused concept of diaspora is that it highlights the polyphony of life relations in diaspora congregations and understands this as an essential part of creative organisation" (p. 142).

As stated in an initial set of theses from the study process, three concepts of diaspora must be distinguished in the discourse on a theology of diaspora: 1. "A descriptive-sociological concept, which refers to the numerically ascertainable situation of churches according to the number of their members within a society. In this respect the concept is used synonymously with a minority situation." 2. "A descriptive concept which describes the self-interpretation of a church. 'Diaspora' then means a particular self-understanding of a church in relation to its minority situation." 3. "A theological interpretative concept which interprets the minority situation of a church/churches from a Christian biblical tradition. In the theological concept of Diaspora, there is always implied a particular theological view of history and a particular ecclesiology" (Diaspora and Identity 2013, p. 11).

The final document links the concept of diaspora with that of strangeness. However, the concept of "strangeness" is indeed central to the New Testament. The biblical foundations of a theology of diaspora therefore extend far beyond the few places where the word group diasporá/diaspeíresthai appears. The CPCE study document sums up the task of a theology of diaspora under the title "Church in a strange land—the strangeness of the church" (Fischer and Rose 2019, pp. 206–13). The diasporic existence of the church as the body of Christ is determined by and grounded in Christology. The Church of Jesus Christ exists in the world, but it is not of this world (Jn 17:16). The wandering people of God—as characterized by the Letter to the Hebrews—have no permanent city in this world, but seek the one to come. They follow Christ, who died on the cross "outside the gate" (Heb 13:12)—outside of Jerusalem. As the Apostle Paul writes, those who follow Jesus are not to conform to this world (Rom 12:2), but to live in it under the eschatological proviso: to have as if they did not, for this world in its present form is passing away (1 Cor 7:29–31), and the citizenship[2] of those who believe in Christ is in heaven (Phil 3:20).

Rudolf Bultmann coined the term *Entweltlichung* ("de-worldization") for the Pauline and Johannine view of Christian existence (Bultmann [1971] 2014, p. 565). Pope Benedict (2011) took up this term in his Freiburg speech in 2011, triggering a lively debate both within and outside the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, he could be understood in terms of constrictions within the church as well as a depoliticization of the gospel. Although the gospel of God's coming kingdom through Jesus Christ has a political dimension, it cannot be reduced to a political message, because humanity's relationship with God goes beyond the political. Bultmann's concept of *Entweltlichung* is therefore correct if it is understood theologically from John 17:16 and Romans 12:2. A theology of the diaspora has to bring a new consciousness for the eschatological hope to attention, which is essential to faith. At the same time, however, it has to keep in mind that the hope of the consummation of redemption, which extends beyond earthly life, does not release us from seeking the "welfare of the city" in the here and now (Jer 29:7). "A theology of diaspora," as the study document of the CPCE states, "also has to keep in mind the concept and phenomenon of 'strangeness'—the strangeness of faith and the strangeness of the God who became human. The tension between 'home' and 'a foreign country' informs diaspora experiences, literally and figuratively, and the way they have been interpreted theologically in history and in the present" (Fischer and Rose 2019, p. 155).

In contrast to a theology of diaspora that relies on the preservation of one's own identity in a foreign land by withdrawing from the world, the CPCE study pleads for a diaspora theology as a form of public theology and encourages the church as well as individual Christians to "engage critically and constructively with society and to be there for people in their present needs and experiences" (ibid.).

4. The Talk of God in Meager Times

According to journalist Matthias Kamann (2017), the social influence that churches continue to have is "based on a specific form of silence" (p. 59) about the decided reasons of

faith on which ethical or political options are based. If they actually focused on theological questions in the narrow sense, their social significance would have been lost long ago. How churches can talk of God and the Christian faith in a new way—that is, a life-changing way that meets people where they are and inspires them—is one of the pressing questions of the present.

The crisis of faith in modern Western secular societies is essentially a crisis of the language of faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's description of the incomprehensibility of the language of faith in his well-known *Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge* from 1944 still holds true: We are "being thrown back all the way to the beginnings of our understanding," because not only the dogmas and theological terms of the Christian tradition, but even the most elementary words of the biblical witness are no longer understood by many people (Bonhoeffer 2010, p. 389).

However, many efforts to proclaim the gospel in a contemporary way end up either moralizing or trivializing it. This is primarily due to the fact that the biblical concept of sin is no longer understood or equated with moral wrongdoing. Those who no longer know how to talk about sin also no longer understand why we humans are dependent on God's unconditional grace in the first place and what that means. On the one hand, this leads to the trivialization of God and on the other, to the trivialization of the problem of human existence. Since being a sinner is no longer taken seriously, then there is no longer a problem in humanity's relationship with God and he no longer demands anything of us humans. The message of Luther and Calvin was: "God loves you, although you are as you are." This sentence is often shortened today to: "God loves you as you are." This, however, is a fatal misunderstanding, because it leads to cheap grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it. According to biblical testimony, humankind and the world must be redeemed from evil and reconciled with God. This, however, cannot be done by humankind themselves but only by God, which is why any reducing of the gospel to moral appeals fails.

By its very name, the task of theology is to speak of God in a deliberate way. It can only do so in a thoughtful manner, by reflecting on the always-preceding talk of Christian faith about God. Modernity's relegation of religion to the private sphere has led to a religion without God in historically Christian countries. Thus, one could be inclined to understand the gradual lapse into silence in the speaking of God as a hint to finally dismiss the topic of God in theology altogether and replace it by discussing a religion that has become "Godless". In contrast, I would like to argue that the future of theology depends on its remaining theology in the literal sense, i.e., daring to speak of God and to reflect on the speaking of God.

Speaking about God is central and indispensable to the Christian faith because faith considers itself, human existence, and the world as a whole as gifts of the unconditional grace and goodness of God. All existence is existence received. The Apostle Paul writes: "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor 4:7, English Standard Version [ESV]). This fundamental insight was brought to bear anew in an almost revolutionary way by the Reformation as illustrated by Luther's interpretation of the first article of the Apostle's Creed in his *Small Catechism*. Sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus, and sola scriptura or solo verbo found their crystallization in Luther's solus Deus (cf. Ebeling 1981, p. 296). "God alone"—"God first" (Dalferth 2018)—is at the center of Reformation theology as an intrinsic consequence and condition of the doctrine of justification. Since the Christian faith is (among other things) a thinking faith, and since the worship of God is also enacted in thought, the Reformation experience and realization that God unconditionally justifies the sinful and godless person resulted in thinking of God anew.

In the present conditions, the possibility of speaking of God obviously does not depend on a generally presupposed questioning after God, but on the memory trace of the biblically attested revelation of God as certain, as there is no natural or evolutionary path from a general concept of religion to the claims to validity and truth of any real monotheism. The question of God does not precede revelation, but is provoked by it in the appropriate way. Otherwise, not even the question about God can be asked adequately. Only when the word

"God" fails, the question about God arises (Fuchs 1963, p. 70; Weder 1986, p. 145). To have recalled this remains the merit of dialectical theology within the history of theology. Only in light of the biblical revelation and the memory that keeps it alive does it make sense to speak of God's absence and loss in modernity.

The biblical tradition expects us to think of the God who has disappeared from modernity not as absent but as hidden, that is, present and effective despite all appearances, and above all: to believe. "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour" (Is 45:15, ESV). In view of modern experiences of God's hiddenness, this biblical statement of faith is taken at its word, that is, it is made comprehensible as a promise so that neither a modern skepticism nor a new-religious polytheism will have the last word.

The theological challenges of the present include the problem of a theology of history with the associated topics of God's actions and works, his election (praedestinatio) and providence (providentia), and his preservation and completion of creation (conservatio mundi, concursus divinus). Even in church statements, e.g., on environmental protection and climate change, faith in God's continuous creative work and the preservation of the world through him is increasingly lost sight of. Thus, in church appeals for the preservation of creation, the biblical God often only acts as a motivator for human commitment to the protection of nature, as a religious add-on, so to speak, that can be dispensed with if necessary. This is not an argument against the environmental commitment of the churches, but a plea for a theology of creation that is not limited to ethical demands. Such a theology distinguishes the churches witnessing to God and the gospel from an NGO working for environmental protection.

"The spirit of our time or that of the future," Ludwig Feuerbach noted in 1842/43, "is that of realism. The new religion, the religion of the future, is politics" (Feuerbach 1966, p. 231, fn. 1, trans.). According to Feuerbach, true faith in God no longer exists even in the remaining churches. Believers continue to speak of God's blessing, but they seek actual help only from people. Therefore, the blessing of God is "only a blue haze of religion in which the believing unbelief conceals its practical atheism" (ibid., p. 233, trans.). If such practical atheism is indeed to be found in the churches, it shows how much the churches, too, are afflicted by the "God crisis" (Metz 1994). Without self-critical examination of this internal crisis of God in the church, as well as the church's and theology's unsuccessful speech about God, all attempts to speak of God in a new way will be futile.

To speak of God without dissolving all theology into anthropology and ethics will only be possible if one retains speech about the omnipotence of God. It is here that Christian speech about God stands or falls, as a glance at the creeds of the ancient Church shows. Not only is it noteworthy that both the Apostolicum and the Nicäno Constantinopolitanum explicitly speak of God's omnipotence (Deus, pater omnipotens, Greek *Pantokrátor*), but that his omnipotence is in fact the only quality that is attributed to God in both creeds. "Therefore, it does not merely express *one* quality among others, but it emphasizes what God truly is, who he is *as* God" (Askani 2018, p. 1, trans.). In the words of Rudolf Bultmann (1969): "Whenever the idea, God, comes to mind, it connotes that God is the Almighty; in other words, God is the reality determining all else" (p. 53).

The "God crisis" and the unsuccessful Christian speech about God originate in a crisis of faith in the omnipotence of God, or rather, in the Almighty God. This crisis of faith results from the experience that God's omnipotence is not only extrinsically denied by the modern criticism of religion but also through experiences of suffering and evil which seem to call God's almightiness into question.

There is a fine line between Bonhoeffer's influential and paradoxical speech of God, which flows out of his theology of the cross and according to which God insinuates that we ought to live in the world as though he did not exist, and the practical atheism Ludwig Feuerbach spoke of. However, in order to reclaim Christian speech about God in our day and age, it is paramount to take this difference into consideration. The biblical tradition requires us to think of the God who was thought to have vanished by modernity as hidden, that is to say, to consider him, despite all appearances, as present—and above all: to believe.

It is no solution to refrain from speaking of the omnipotence of God and to replace it with speech about the powerlessness of God, as happened in many theological texts and methodologies after 1945, when confronted with the theodicy problem. The Christologically justified speech about God's powerlessness cannot be pitted against that of his omnipotence, except at the price of the dissolution of the idea of God. Rather, God's powerlessness is to be spelled out as a mode of his omnipotence. That means: God can only be spoken of in the biblical, New Testament sense if Jesus of Nazareth is spoken of at the same time, and in the way that Jesus is known as the Christ of God.

It is not a vague openness to God, but the confession of Christ that is the decisive "marker" by which the label "Christianity" is recognized on the market of religious possibilities and impossibilities. It is what determines the identity of faith and church. This, of course, also requires honesty when it comes to assessing one's own situation and refraining from whitewashing. When being thrown all the way back to the beginnings of our understanding, it is necessary to ask anew: What does Christ mean for this world, and what does it mean to be a Christian?

The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ establish a specific form of apophatic theology whose via negativa cannot consist in speaking abstractly of the world and thus indirectly of God by way of non-identity. Rather, the non-identity of God and the world must first be expressed in the mode of lamentation and repentance. Then it becomes feasible to also interpret this experience in the light of a paradoxical concept of revelation and to open it up for the possibility that God is present in the midst of his absence in a most definite way, judging and saving at the same time.

In contrast, there is widespread talk of a powerless God, who is seen merely as a compassionate companion of suffering people or even as an object of human care and concern. Johann Baptist Metz (1990) rightly wonders "whether speech about a God who suffers in solidarity with us is ultimately not just a more humane psychological projection, just as in former times, in feudalistic times, God was projected as the one who exercises sovereign power as the supreme warlord, as the Almighty" (p. 34).

If the idea of God's omnipotence is abandoned, the transformation of Christian beliefs into ethical appeals amounts to hypermorality (Gehlen 2004). Therefore, "because of the strong interest in change, a theology of the compassionate companion can become – like a reverse omen, so to speak—so overly moralistic that, in its permanent state of indignation, it cannot forgive God for his creation" (Thomas 2019, p. 41).

This has dramatic consequences for the political sphere as well. "In its allegedly structurally necessary and theologically legitimized lack of compromise," a "secularized and politicized kind of eschatological impatience," which manifests itself in the demands for the salvation and betterment of the world through humans, is "ready to de facto dissolve the by necessity antagonistically structured space of the genuinely political that is a vis-à-vis to the church" (ibid.). Ideally, a biblically and theologically responsible deliberation of speaking about God from a Reformation perspective becomes an essential contribution to a theology and ethics of the political.

Speech about omnipotence as an essential quality of God appears to have been gained by way of the via eminentiae. According to the via eminentiae, the experience of human and inner-worldly power is imagined as elevated infinitely. The via eminentiae, however, cannot be entered into without the Christologically determined via negationis—which, from a Reformation perspective, means a theology of the cross. The omnipotence of God at the epitome of his being, his love and goodness, his knowledge, and his power, are "precisely not only [predicated] on something more within a given schema of comparison, but the blowing up of every comparability between all temporal beings and the God not subjected to temporality" (Askani 2018, p. 2f., trans.). "God is not 'power in itself' […], we cannot understand from the standpoint of a supreme concept of power, who God is" (Barth 1949, p. 46f.).

When speech about the omnipotence of God or the Almighty God who determines all reality is not defined by a theology of the cross, the possibility for prayer also collapses.

The crisis of Christian speech about God is also a crisis of prayer, since all speech of God and about God, if it ought not fail, is rooted and culminates in speech to God.

Prayer means "turning towards God" (Barth 1951, p. 95). Prayer is the place of praise as well as of lamentation. Especially the prayer of supplication is to be explored, which, in the Christian tradition, has its origin in and is to be measured against the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer is to be understood as the sum of the proclamation of Jesus as well as the sum of Christian speech about God and thus to be unfolded as such. Tertullian already described the Lord's Prayer as "breviarium totius Evangelii" (cf. Körtner 2018, p. 144).

The right way to pray the Lord's Prayer, or any prayer really that is shaped in the way Jesus taught his disciples to pray, is to pray in a way where "one is certain that the prayer is heard" (Barth 1951, p. 117, trans.). With Barth, however, hearing is to be understood as "the reception and acceptance of human prayer in the plan and will of God" (ibid.).

And now we have come full circle: Without the paradoxical certainty of the omnipotence of God and his presence in the form of his absence, which is determined by a theology of the cross, prayer as an essential way of the speech about God becomes inconceivable. Therefore, also the idea—or rather the eschatological certainty—of the Providentia Dei is likewise the condition for prayer in the sense of genuine prayer and intercession, which includes praise and lament. Although, on the other hand, prayer is, of course, also the place where speech about God's election and providence—his plan and his will—first and foremost becomes apparent as an existential way to speak about God.

5. A Theology of Waiting

Theology *in* crisis and a theology *for* times of crisis—both have the task of waiting: waiting for God's new entry into the world, for his coming, and for him to speak to us in a new way by making the language of biblical tradition speak and appeal to us anew. Such a theology for times of crisis is precisely not resigned, but highly expectant.

The waiting for revelation or the return of Christ to the glory of God and a new heaven and a new earth to come are basic motifs throughout the New Testament. We speak of waiting not only in the sense of biding time, but also in the sense of nurturing and caring (maintenance), in the sense of preparing for what may come, and thus also in the sense of vigilances, which Christians are called to do in the New Testament. Paul writes: "For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness" (Gal 5:5, ESV).

In view of today's experiences of God's silence as a specific experience in contemporary Europe, the task of theology consists not only in keeping alive the memory of faith *that God spoke* to people in the past, but also in taking the biblically attested promise at its word that God will come and not remain silent forever. Where this possibility is no longer seriously reckoned with, theology mutates either into pure ethics or into a form of cultural studies.

Theology differs from religious studies or cultural studies in that it does not examine God's past speaking solely from a historic or literary perspective. Rather, its contemplation is guided by the hope expressed in Psalm 50:3 wherein even God's silence does not deny his earlier speaking and the promised future life-creating and salvific works decreed therein. Indeed, even God's silence should and can be understood as an expressive silence permeated by the language of the Gospel. Even in the mode of silence, God remains salutarily turned toward us humans.

What theology and the church can contribute to the renewal of Christian faith in a European context is active waiting. The practical theologian Birgit Weyel (2020) rightly criticizes a "kind of constant cultivation of agitation à la 'Something has to be done,' mostly because supposedly only a relatively short amount of time remains where something can still be changed," but just as rightly warns against "a simple 'carry on like this'"mentality (trans.). Active waiting is neither one nor the other. In a letter to his godchild on the occasion of the day of his baptism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2010) wrote: "It is not for us to predict the day—but the day will come—when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed" (p. 390). In 1518,

Luther wrote that the time when the Reformation would take place as the work of God was known "only to Him who created the time." (Luther 1883, p. 627)[3].

A waiting church in Bonhoeffer's (1996) sense "waits by working" (p. 397). A theology that is faced with a situation wherein the Christian faith is no longer a given is a waiting theology that does not feel the need to have an opinion on everything and everyone, but can sometimes only remain silent in a qualified way and does not conceal its lack for words even in matters of faith. It is also a waiting theology in the sense that it guards the heritage of the biblical witness, carried by the hope that it will begin to speak anew. A waiting theology also serves a certain kind of practicing of the Christian faith, which according to Bonhoeffer consists of three things, namely not only in praying and doing the work of justice among people, but also in waiting for God's time.

6. Results

The observations and arguments of this paper can be summarized as follows:

(1) Pluralization, individualization, and secularization are not contradictory;
(2) It is wrong to assume that the change in religious attitudes and convictions, which becomes palpable in declining church membership, affects only the ecclesiastical form of Christianity, that is, only a certain social form of Christianity, and not Christianity as such or religion in general;
(3) A theology for the church of the future, specifically a theology for pastoral ministry, needs an understanding of the church that is at once relevant to practical pastoral ministry and congregational work as well as aware of the processes of change and upheaval. In a European context, a guiding concept here can be the notion of diaspora;
(4) In contrast to a theology of diaspora that relies on the preservation of one's own identity in a foreign land by withdrawing from the world, this study pleads for a diaspora theology as a form of public theology that encourages the church as well as individual Christians to engage critically and constructively with society and to be there for people in their present needs and experiences;
(5) The crisis of the church in a European context is also a crisis of faith in modern Western secular societies. The crisis of faith is essentially a crisis of the language of faith;
(6) By its very name, the task of theology is to speak of God in a deliberate way. It can only do so in a thoughtful manner, by reflecting on the always-preceding talk of Christian faith about God;
(7) The theological challenges of the present include the problem of a theology of history with the associated topics of God's actions and works, his election (praedestinatio) and providence (providentia), and his preservation and completion of creation (conservatio mundi, concursus divinus);
(8) Theology *in* crisis and a theology *for* times of crisis—both have the task of waiting: waiting for God's new entry into the world, for his coming, and for him to speak to us in a new way by making the language of biblical tradition speak and appeal to us anew. Such a theology for times of crisis is precisely not resigned, but highly expectant;
(9) A waiting theology for the future is waiting by working. It is a waiting theology in the sense that it guards the heritage of the biblical witness, carried by the hope that it will begin to speak anew.

We can therefore conclude: A theology that is needed by the church of the future in a European context can learn from the Word-of-God Theology following the impacts of Dialectical Theology at the beginning of the 20th century. However, their concerns must be reinterpreted and reconstructed so that it becomes possible to represent with speech of the Word of God a claim to truth that does not turn into authoritarian assertions but takes into account the contentiousness of religious experience and its inevitable plurality.

Notes

1   Thus Luther on Psalm 90 in his *Lectures on Psalms*: "Abscondita est ecclesia et valde dispera" (Ennaratio Psalmi XC 1534/35, WA 40/3,505,5). Cf. also (Riess 1983).

2   Luther and the Zürich Bible translate the Greek *políteuma* as "home".

3   "*Tempus autem huius reformationis novit solus ille, qui condidit tempora*".

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On Changing the Subject: 'Secularity', 'Religion', and the Idea of the Human

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Abstract: The 'religion/secular' frame should be retired as a way of characterizing contemporary northern European cultures. The concepts of 'secularity' and 'religion' are both falsifying and question begging. They invisibly and unhelpfully predetermine the conversation about who and where we are now. Further, they are terms which increasingly lack salience in these cultures. If we seek to locate and articulate, in order to reflectively engage, the horizons within which contemporary northern Europeans generally live, the goods that orient people's lives, the ideas and values that move and motivate them, we need to talk not about 'religion' and the lack of it, but about the idea of the human. Within the concept of the human is nested today the sense of orientation, meaning, goodness and importance that notions of 'religion' used to express. This is the conceptual territory on which arguments about 'what really matters' are now conducted. If one wishes to have salience in contemporary culture, one needs to speak to this.

Keywords: religion; secularity; the human; witness; contemporary culture; humanism

> Since this [concrete, historical] man is the way for the Church, the way for her daily life and experience, for her mission and toil, the Church of today must be aware in an always new manner of man's 'situation'. (Vatican Council II 2012, p. 21)

1. Our "Situation"

David Foster Wallace begins his celebrated commencement address, 'This Is Water', with a story about the invisibility to us of our own milieu:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?' (Wallace 2009, p. 3)[1]

The "water" is our world-picture. It is our moral imaginary; a framing narrative so tacit, so proximate, that we can only bring it to conscious awareness with effort. It is an "'unthought', a field of ideal forces that carve out the space of the thinkable and shape it" (Costa 2022, pp. xvi–xvii). Only by becoming aware of this "water", Wallace argues, can we exercise some freedom in relation to it: only then can we interrogate it, and ask whether it serves and enables or limits and confines us.

The argument which follows pursues a negative and a positive response to Wallace's invitation. In the first instance, we propose that if we seek to engage contemporary culture, we should desist from tracking and plotting ourselves within a secularity-religion frame.[2] Instead of locating and relocating ourselves on that spectrum, we should ask instead how these concepts function; what work they are doing. We should change the focus from

the question of the fate of something called "religion" in a "secular" world, to how this "secularity-religion" frame has become an agent in its own right, and what that agency effects. Having asked this second question, we suggest that the notion of "secularity", and its correlative term "religion", should be retired as conceptual sites for characterizing and engaging our times and our identities.

The second part proposes a different conceptual site for such engagement: the idea of the human.

This is not a critique of (what is called) "the secular". It is simply an argument in favor of changing the subject. If we try to bring to conscious awareness the tacit world-picture of contemporary people, the horizon within which they locate themselves, the claim made here is that the secular-religion frame now obscures those horizons, but the idea of the human reveals them.[3]

There is an obvious demographic reason for retiring the secular-religion frame. In contemporary northern European societies—the demographic which is the object addressed in this argument and which usually is described as "secular"—"secularity" and "religion" are no longer the primary terms in which people express their sense of what is important to them.[4] Because secularity has been defined as *not-religion*, one would define oneself as "secular" only if that over-against which one speaks has some kind of social currency. People do not express their identities primarily in terms of being "secular" in the same way that I do not express my identity primarily in terms of *not-being-a-horse-owner*. For most people in these cultures, talking about why they do not go to church is similar to talking with them about why they do not own horses. It may or may not be interesting, but this question does not touch the deepest core of their care, their concern. Not enough people own horses for *not-being-a-horse-owner* to be a salient identity marker in this cultural frame. Arguments about something called "religion" are increasingly culturally defunct in these societies. To pursue a conversation in these terms only establishes the marginality of that conversation.

If we, however, seek to characterize the "water" in which we are swimming, this demographic situation is not the fundamental reason for abandoning the secular-religion frame. The fundamental reason is to do with what that frame allows us to see, or prevents us from seeing. The term "secular" in general usage identifies an absence of something, and therefore fails to capture the medium in which we are thinking, feeling, and living. To define the contemporary imaginary in terms of what it (supposedly) no longer believes in is to miss its characteristic intuitions, claims, and values. The secular-religion frame diverts our attention from the moral center, the constitutive goods, of our time and place.

If we want to locate and articulate, in order to reflectively engage, the horizons within which contemporary northern Europeans live—the goods that orient their lives, the "truths" that seem self-evident to them, the ideas and values that move and motivate them—we need to talk about the human. This is the site on which the temple is now built. To acknowledge this is not to accept "secular humanism", nor does it constitute an endorsement of Feuerbach. It is simply to observe that the temple is now constructed on anthropological ground. To recognize this shift is not to ratify it. What is offered here is an argument more in the mode of description: that within the concept of the human is now nested the sense of orientation, meaning, goodness and importance that notions of "God" or "religion" used to express.

We may or may not choose to celebrate this change, and we may have any number of views about how sustainable, coherent or compelling this new cultural "situation" may be. Some may see in this shift the (unacceptable) substitution of an immanent frame for a transcendent one. Certainly, as we argue below, the idea of the human cannot be sustained as a merely empirical object, and its sacralization cannot be sustained in a rationalistic or reductionistic mode. But we are not concerned here with evaluating this change, or with proposing what to do about it. To say that the human is the object of popular "faith" in the contemporary moment does not tell us by itself what frame would be needed to sustain that faith, nor even whether it *should* be sustained. What it does tell us, however, is that

if somebody wants to continue making sense of the notions of "God" or "religion" for contemporary people, she needs now to show what those words mean for, and in terms of the human being, her flourishing, her fulfillment, and her identity. We do briefly propose, however, in closing, that Christians could turn to the humanism of their own tradition(s) as a resource for cultural engagement with our contemporary situation. This is not meant to foreclose the question of whether the human of secular northern Europe is or can be the same as the Christian human, nor whether the migration of the sacred into the human should be defended.

Identifying the idea of the human as the site for cultural witness is also not to assume that that term has a settled meaning or content for the contemporary mind. On the contrary, noticing the centrality of that concept creates the possibility of identifying where our cultures are asking open questions about the shape, purpose, and meaning of this world and of our lives within it. It allows us to identify the live frontiers of those cultures, the (un)settlement at their heart.

2. Changing the Subject *from*: Deconstructing the "Secular-Religion" Frame

In contemporary usage, the term "secular" has its natural antonym in the term "religion". These antonyms are related in a narratival way. "Religion" and "secularity" are two ends of a "y" axis, plotted against the "x" axis of time. The notion of the secular per se contains and reproduces a particular story. This is a metanarrative: a usually tacit story which orients the other stories a culture or community wishes to tell.[5] One historian summarizes the popular version of this story as follows:

> There exists a global thing called 'religion', which has existed everywhere since the dawn of history. In Olden Days, consequently, there was a lot of 'religion' about. In Recent Times, however, 'religion' has declined. This is a New Thing: it is not a return to Even Older Days, before they had 'religion', because such an era does not exist. It is also, essentially, a Permanent Thing. On the macro level, there can be no going back to Olden Days. This decline of 'religion' (or, more accurately, 'the social significance of religion') in Recent Times is sensibly referred to as 'secularization'. (Brewitt-Taylor n.d.)[6]

Some metanarratives have causal properties, as historian Jeffrey Cox has pointed out. They are not just descriptive, but agential. While history trades in many master narratives, secularization, Cox (2001, pp. 24–35) argues, is unique in that it is "causal, invocatory, comprehensive and partly hidden; it is also uncontested".[7] As David Nash (2014, p. 531) observed, "Whatever we conclude about secularisation as historical reality, it is crucial to understand what the secularisation narrative *does*, and has done". Insofar as the secular is defined with reference to that story, the same goes for the concept of "religion". If the secular-religion frame is causal—if it *does something*, intellectually and socially—what is its effect?

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has proposed that this narrative functions as a "subtraction story". It pictures a process of historical change in which "the secular" is what persists now that something called "religion" has retreated. Just as the tide draws the sea back leaving the beach underneath exposed, to use the image of secularization employed by Matthew Arnold in his poem "Dover Beach", so "religion" retreats, revealing the substratum which was there all along, free of the superstructure of religious beliefs. When conceived in this way, the resulting substratum appears purely natural, obvious, uncontroversial. "The secular" is, in this account, the basic, factual and sober. In relation to it, "religion" appears as a question-begging overlay.[8]

The function of this metanarrative—what it *does*, to use Nash's term—is, at least, twofold. Firstly, it casts faith communities in the role of pushing back against a tide of all-but-inevitable historical change. In its story, they are on the losing side of history, an ever-diminishing remnant. Secondly, and more importantly, it presents the task and role of these communities as especially question begging, or odd, in contrast to the "obvious"

givens of the secular. We experience this effect whether or not we view the drawing-back of (something called) "religion" as a tragic loss—the melancholy, long withdrawing roar of "Dover Beach"—or as the long-awaited victory of reason and Enlightenment. As Taylor (2014) points out, the issue is not *whether* you "believe" but how "belief" itself is characterized: its obviousness, or lack thereof. (Of course, the word "belief" is already characterized, in its colloquial meaning, as something question begging.) "Religion" is thus defined precisely *as* an overlay, and the secular *as* the obvious and the given. We internalize this scheme not consciously but implicitly. It is in the air we breathe.

The attractiveness of this metanarrative for a society that considers itself "secular" is clear enough. It expresses its confidence that it dwells only on the firm ground of that which is obvious, and has walked away from the precarity of the supra-empirical claims of "religion". It also offers an unexpected security for the people and communities this story identifies as "religious". It gives them a specific identity in practicing resistance against the "secular world". They know who they are and what they need to do. Having a defined role can be attractive, even if it is a restrictive or burdensome one. The faint air of doomed heroism has a certain glamour about it. Nevertheless, this identity is not only a confinement, but one both recent and ill-fitting.

Over recent decades, scholars in history, sociology, philosophy, and theology have contested and redefined the meaning of both secularity and religion. The author of the largest recent survey concludes the burden of proof is now decisively upon those who seek to maintain any usefulness for the "secularization" concept, a shift he describes as having "been so remarkable as to make legitimate, if not mandatory, the reference to Thomas Kuhn's notion of a paradigm shift" (Costa 2022, p. 179):

> [O]ver the past fifty years, this 'package', i.e., the epistemic imaginary that has oriented for three centuries the understanding of the trajectory of religion in human history, has been first challenged and then gradually deconstructed both from a socio-historical and philosophical point of view (and, I suspect, also from a theological angle) to the point that, in the end, the burden of proof has shifted from the new to the old interpretative framework which, with hindsight, tends to appear apodictic, maximalist, and in some cases even proclamatory. (Costa 2022, pp. xxiii–xxiv)

Conversations among scholars are often thought to be, especially in anglophone cultures, "merely academic". This is one among many disproofs of that lazy generalization. How we frame ourselves and our identities has immeasurable practical consequence. Perhaps I am under the impression that the woman I am trying to have a conversation with is a French speaker, when she is in truth a German speaker. In this instance, the knowledge that she is a German speaker is not "merely academic". My ignorance of this will render the conversation a failure. I need to "frame" her as a German speaker—that is, I need to characterize her accurately—in order to communicate with her. If I maintain an invincible ignorance on this point, if I refuse to reframe the situation, we will never have a conversation. Finally, if it turns out that I do not presently speak German, then insofar as I take it on myself to communicate with her, I must learn German.

In view of this, it is surprising that conversation in society and church remains so enchanted by the secular-religion frame and invokes it with as much gusto as ever. If scholarship proposes that the secular-religion frame is a theoretically defunct model of the contemporary imaginary—or, more weakly, if scholarship indicates that that frame does not capture as much as, or as accurately as, it claims to—then this is anything but a specialist conversation for experts. It is an urgent matter to attend to, for all who use the frame. The slowness with which the scholarship is entering the mainstream is an indication of how embedded the secular-religion frame is. It is the "water" we are swimming in.

2.1. Retiring "Religion"

If modern usage of the term "secular" takes its primary meaning from the term "religion", then without a stable meaning for the latter, the former loses traction. But the

term "religion" is functionally empty. As Paul Griffiths (2000, p. 30) writes, the scholarly discussion of the term

> rapidly suggests the conclusion that hardly anyone has any idea what they are talking about—or, perhaps more accurately, that there are so many different ideas in play about what religion is that conversations in which the term figures significantly make the difficulties in communication at the Tower of Babel seem minor and easily dealt with. . . . [This goes] far toward an explanation of why the discipline [which studies religion] has no coherent or widely shared understanding of its central topic.

It is unclear what the empirical referent of the term is. Generations of scholarly efforts to devise a definition have produced nothing that satisfies everyone. Defining it narrowly in terms of reference to the supernatural, or the worship of a deity, excludes much of what most of us instinctively call "religion": Buddhism or Taoism, for example. Focusing the definition on a system of beliefs excludes the unsystematized character of "Hinduism", or the practical focus of Confucianism.[9] Definitions referring to "institutions" tend to exclude the non-institutional "religions" of, for example, indigenous or East Asian communities of practice. Define it broadly in terms of ideologies or axiologies, however, and the term gathers up nationalisms, political systems such as Marxism and capitalism, and civic movements such as environmentalism.[10] Terms such as "meaning" or "the spiritual" include phenomena that most people do not want to call "religion", especially when "religion" and "the spiritual" are often used now as antonyms. William James' (1970, p. 59) effort to define the term as belief in "unseen order", aside from the limitations of the word "belief", suffers obvious empirical limits. The world is full of unseen order, many aspects of which, such as the law of gravity, have no obvious connection to "religion".

The phenomenological inadequacy of the term is by itself grounds to wonder whether the work it is doing is more a reflection of a contingent schematization of different realms of human activity than it is of empirical fittingness. The history of the term bears out this suspicion. Originally, the word named a virtue of Roman religion ("scrupulousness"), and then a virtue of Christian religion ("faithful observance"). Only in the sixteenth century did the term shift towards its contemporary usage, according to which it refers to a genus with a number of members, of which something called "Christianity" is one.[11] This usage generated the familiar "World Religions paradigm" and with it the genesis of a discipline called "religious studies". This paradigm takes it that we can identify a set of members of this genus which share given characteristics, rather as we might compare different types of cars: this one has four doors, this one two; this one has manual, that automatic transmission, and so on. This is how the subject is taught in European schools: we make tables in which a column represents a "religion", and the lines have titles such as "beliefs", "scripture", "rituals", and "ethics".

Connotations of dogmatism (in the negative sense), violence, and institutional control are internal to the term "religion"; the sixteenth-century European 'Wars of Religion' are present within the word itself, and therefore implicit by inversion in the term secularism, which appears an agent of peace and freedom. With these associations, the application of the word cannot but confine and pigeonhole those so labelled. Not only do contemporary northern Europeans often profess with feeling that they are "spiritual, not religious"—the assumption being that these are alternatives, or at least in some tension—but Christian thinkers have distanced Christianity itself from the term. Theological sensibilities as different as those of a Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or John Milbank see that somehow the category has falsified Christianity itself. Brother Roger of Taizé, for example, felt the need frequently to explain that "Christ did not come to earth to create a new religion, but to offer to every human being a communion in God" (Ateliers et Presses de Taizé 2008, n.p.).

If we ask where the category "religion" comes from—the features which characterize the members of the genus—the answer is Christian Europe of the sixteenth century. European Christians who encountered non-European cultures sought to categorize those

cultures in terms familiar from their own, using distinctions based in Reformation Protestantism which were not only foreign to those cultures, but often functioned to suppress and control them.

> [R]eligion was supposed to be an otherworldly belief system, a contract agreed upon by God and believer. This disembodied, propositional definition of religion was the template that allowed European intellectuals to make sense of the ideas of colonized subjects. By reducing difference to sameness, by disembodying subjects' ideas and practices, comparative religion functioned as a strategy of intellectual and political control. (Peterson and Walhof 2002, p. 38)

The current usage of the word tells us more about the European Christianity of those who went out with the word "religion" in their minds than it does about those they encountered.[12] Many of those cultures do not, for example, distinguish between "supernatural" and "natural", "belief" and "practice", "spiritual" and "material" or between a realm called "the religious" and others that we might think of as "political", "economic", and so on. Others have no use for notions of "revelation", "deity", or "institution".

Categorizing phenomena as "religious" was an act of strong interpretation, not description, in which a contingent conceptual schema was universalized, and then used to carve up phenomena to which that schema was wholly extraneous.

In searching for the concept of religion outside the West, Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote: "One is tempted, indeed, to ask whether there is a closely equivalent concept in any culture that has not been influenced by the modern West". Smith answers the question with a "no". Since Smith, a generation of scholars has pursued this question and shown, in increasing detail, that his negative answer is correct (see Smith 1962, pp 18–19, quoted in Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 85–86).

The idea of religion as a genus is hidden even in the labels we use: Buddh*ism*, Hindu*ism*, Juda*ism*, Tao*ism*. None of these are names these communities natively give to themselves. At the risk of falsifying with further simplifications, but to make the point: there are those who take refuge in the Three Jewels, who live as members of the *sangha* and who practice the *dharma*. There are the members of the people of Israel, an identity which has nothing directly to do with profession of belief, or even to some degree with self-conscious belonging. There are those who let themselves be taught by the Tao Te Ching, there are those who hold Muhammed to be the final prophet of God, there are those who consider themselves bound by the Mandate of Heaven, and so on. Only by an act of, at least, interpolation, can these people be accurately characterized as "Buddhists", "Jews", "Taoists", "Muslims", and "Confucians".

The ruthless homogenization implicit in the word "religion" has impoverished our understanding of both past and present.

> Think about it: if 'religion' includes every single human culture from 50,000 BC to about AD 1500 (50,000 BC being approx. for the beginning of behaviorally modern humans), plus about 84% (Pew Foundation 2012) of the world's current population—what does this vast category of people have in common, such that we can profitably generalize about them? (Brewitt-Taylor n.d.)

If there is no definable essence of "religion" (cf. Asad 1993, pp. 27–54),[13] the concept of the "secular" starts to slip through the fingers.

2.2. Retiring 'Secularity'

If we take over the secular-religion frame uncritically, we define our present over against an imagined past. But as decades of scholarship have established, this "past"—this opposite to secularity called "religion"—was really just the Christianity of sixteenth-century Europe. It existed in such a partial and limited way that to use it to define the whole present, the whole "modern", can only be misleading. Insofar as conversation in society and church remains strangely separate from these findings, the causal role of this falsifying metanarrative in shaping our minds and societies remains invisible, and so

cannot readily be questioned, even though it is unjustified. In consequence, interrogations of contemporary culture too often remain superficial.

The ambivalence of the common-sense understanding of "secularism" has been underscored by scholarship over the last five or more decades. There is increasingly less consensus on when secularization begins; a wide diversity of theses about what secularization is caused by, or correlated to; and little consensus on what sort of change secularization is.[14] Is it a change in people's institutional memberships? In their formally professed beliefs? In their self-description? In their feelings?

> [T]he debate on secularization is not only very complex—a judgement that could probably be applied to any other socially relevant phenomenon being studied today—but also messy. In many cases it is not clear, in fact, what exactly is at stake, where are the most significant disagreements, even whether the basic premises are agreed upon or not. (Costa 2022, p. xxii)

The term "secular" has itself had a complex evolution. In original Christian usage, the term expressed the Christian meaning of time. The *saeculum* was the age between the first and second comings of Christ, an age in which the temporal order was conceived, and granted its own legitimacy with associated legal, social, and commercial autonomy. A concern with periodization might be expected in any cultural lineage with Messianism in its DNA. "Secularization" in this original sense was the first periodization; an identification of history in terms of eras which were successive and progressive, a view famously associated with Joachim of Fiore. Now, secularization means the opposite: the de-Christianization of time and history.

Two recent historiographies of the British twentieth century present an opportunity to reconceive what is being claimed, and what is hidden, in the concept of secularization. Both recognize that the term denotes a critical change in the social consciousness, but locate that change later than is usually imagined, in the revolutionary decade of the 1960s.[15] The two scholars, Callum Brown and Sam Brewitt-Taylor, characterize this decade differently, however. Brown argues that people suddenly emigrated from the moral universe of their forbears during this decade, particularly because of the "mutually enslaved" changing perceptions of femininity and piety. This universe "quite quickly collapsed . . . when women cancelled their mass subscription to the discursive domain of Christianity" (Brown 2000, p. 195, quoted in Morris 2003, p. 968). "[A] major transformation in leisure culture—in music, in magazines, in newspapers, and so on—finally killed it" (Morris 2003, p. 968). On Brown's account, the sex and gender revolution is as important as it thought it was at the time, or perhaps more so. It is what underpins the loss of credibility of the churches and of faith more generally. Brewitt-Taylor, in contrast, proposes that secularism was a deliberate invention of church leaders during the 1960s. This concept of the secular, however, did not bear its present meaning. It signified not the retreat of Christianity, but its final victory. It was a term which communicated not "desacralisation, but . . . universal resacralisation" (Brewitt-Taylor 2018, p. 48). Brewitt-Taylor argues that this meaning of "secularity" expressed a radical theology prompted by the Cold War era.

These two theses—that secularism is fostered by a cultural transformation at the level of anthropology, and that secularism is an explicitly theological invention—form historiographical counterparts to established philosophical and theological unpackings of the secular. Charles Taylor has argued that it is the moral horizon, rather than the metaphysical, that defines the secular, and that this moral change involves a new stress on the individual and his or her self-expression, a valorization of authenticity, and a naturalized understanding of the world in which the human self lives (Taylor 1992). John Milbank argues that the secular is a theological invention, founded on an incorrect understanding of creation, namely that creation's autonomy consists in its occupying a space where God is not—the space of the *saeculum*, whose meaning came to signify a reserve apart from God. This space is then supposed to be characterized by the "independent" operation of temporal powers (Milbank 2000). What these accounts have in common, with their disparate geographical and temporal remits, is that the change that the notion of "the

secular" is supposed to capture is not only or mainly a change in what people take to be true, but in what people take to be good. The goods at stake are human goods; they concern what it is for a human being to be well; to be herself; to be human. The so-called sexual revolution, for example, is an outcome of an extended process of social change regarding what is good for human beings to be and to do.

One obvious way to resist the universalizing simplicity of the secular-religion meta-narrative is to make it more granular. Rather than asking about "religion" and "secularity" in generic and global terms, we can ask particular questions of particular places and times, defining and redefining our terms to meet specific domains of concern. Such an approach has the advantage of recognizing the contingency of the ways we set up the conversation, and the emptiness of the terms when used as universal genera. Costa (2022, pp. viii–xix) describes this methodology:

> The search for their intemporal essence has been set aside, the 'religious' and the 'secular' open up to a situated and tentative work of redefinition and reimagination, offering themselves as culturally determined routes that coexist alongside other options that can be appropriated in different social contexts and adapted to them. Hence, there are no longer two simple substances competing for the same share of reality, nor is there a single (anthropological) matrix that manifests itself in different guises according to the stage of development reached by humanity, but we have a plurality of contingent cultural constructs whose understanding cannot be separated from thick and contextual descriptions.

At the scholarly level, such a method has evident utility. What it does not immediately address is the way in which the secular-religion frame is—or has become—intrinsically *causal*. Additionally, that among its effects is that it limits and determines the conversation that communities popularly characterized with these terms are able to have about themselves and their cultural environment. At this level, the established metanarrative is still an active agent, even if broken down by ground-level analysis. The confining effect of the metanarrative is all the more objectionable if its justification is conceptually empty.

If the terms "religion" and "secularity" have no safely generalizable meaning which transcends the particular, the localities of time or place, one needs to ask what the point is of continuing the terms at all. If they are wholly equivocal across specific applications, why continue to use them? Why speak about "Buddhism", rather than "Pure Land"? Is not even "Pure Land" too general? Do we not need to rather speak about "Jodo Shinshu"; or "Shinran's Jodo-Shinshu"; or even "Shinran's Jodo-Shinshu of fourteenth century Honganji"? Careful study at granular level is of course empirically responsible and useful. But if we are going to talk *only* about this or that community, in this or that place and time, and the diverse loyalties which feature there and then, we need some other frame in order not to have wholly equivocal conversations, conversations which therefore do not illuminate *one another* at all. In which case, we are arguably better off adopting a different frame altogether.

3. Changing the Subject *to*: The "Human"

The issue which emerges from reflection on the question-begging nature of the terms "religion" and "secularization" is not the familiar one of: why does something called "religion" no longer exist in contemporary society? This term typecasts the communities labelled with it. They need a frame for their own identity, and their surrounding identities and cultural landscapes, that does not so deterministically govern what they can say and do. We need less naïve terms with which to identify the positive content of contemporary cultures, to conceive and frame their constitutive value claims.

An instructive comparison in academic terms is the recent development in the field of "science and religion". A group of scholars have noticed that the reification represented by these terms is historically and philosophically unsupportable. They have responded by insisting on an exclusively granular, topically specific approach to interactions between these fields, pioneering a new methodology: "Science-Engaged Theology" (Perry and

Liedenhag 2021, pp. 245–53). The instinct is an admirable one, but despite its best efforts, the new trajectory reproduces the essentialization it tries to resist (Grey 2021). This instantiates the difficulty involved in the present proposal. If the conversation is to go on, a moribund frame cannot easily be retired without the articulation of a positive alternative which is able to work at a general level.

An alternative to the secular-religion frame is the frame of the *sacred*. In this frame, one does not inquire into an alleged disappearance of a social phenomenon, but asks rather about a migration of the locus of value from one sphere into another (Cavanaugh 2011). In the lineage of Emile Durkheim, who saw the cult of the human as the heir to what he defined as premodern religion, sociologist Hans Joas has analyzed contemporary societies in terms of a migration of this locus of value—"the sacred"—from deities or transcendent spaces into the human person (Joas 2013). He defines "the sacred" not as a (in the conventional sense) "religious" quality, but as a site of "subjective self-evidence and affective intensity" (Joas 2013, p. 5).

Rather than seeing a set of claims called "the religious" as having given way to a space in which no substantive claims are made, no "beliefs" are proposed or defined, thinking in terms of the migration of the sacred delineates contemporary societies as loyal to a positive, definable constellation of values. Where the primary moral term—the term in which a shared sense of the normative was expressed and codified—used to be "religion" and its cognates (that which is "revealed", for example), our languages of value now make reference to something called "the human" instead. This is the ground on which shared moral consensus is now built. These are the terms in which moral authority is invoked.

If there is a methodological assumption here, it is the broadly Tillichian one that society will always organize itself around some values taken to be "ultimate" or governing in this way, explicitly or tacitly. In the contemporary West, that place of ultimacy is accorded to the human itself. This holds true even in a culture for which the valorization of the human sits uncomfortably close to what is derogatively called "anthropocentrism", and which is making tentative moves towards "post-humanism". How long the resulting tension can be maintained given the (current) fragility of the idea of the human, as argued below, remains to be seen.

The quality of *self-evidence* possessed by this new sacred is illuminated by historian Alec Ryrie. The individual dignity of the human becomes self-evident to Western Europeans in what Ryrie calls "the age of Hitler": the post-World War Two era in which public morals are defined by negative contrast to the horrors of Nazism. In this period, the Western world

> rushed to embrace and define itself by a new concept: *human rights*. In the age of Hitler, the post-Second World War age in which we live, that idea is our *shared faith* ... [I]n the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 [Thomas Jefferson] famously wrote that 'we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights'. You will notice, of course, that he did not mount an argument for the existence of these rights. [...] He insisted they were self-evident: just obvious. Which is, not coincidentally, exactly how generations of clergymen claimed that we know that there is a God. Subsequent declarations of rights have done the same thing. The French declaration simply asserts that the rights it describes are 'the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man'. So how do we know that human beings have rights? The answer is that *we just know*. (Ryrie 2022, italics added)

One can capture the absoluteness of this self-evidence, and the affective intensity which accompanies it, by imagining its contravention.[16] In doing so one can grasp the contemporary imaginary's positive content—its being, so to say, a set of definitively held constitutive values, rather than the evacuation of a space. Let us place ourselves imaginatively in the presence of an act of (deliberate) torture. Such acts were once, in principle, uncontroversially licit. We might not have liked being there when it was done, but that is different from experiencing it as absolutely beyond the pale. Our reaction now when we imagine such a scene, as a creature of a moral universe in which the human has been

sacralized, is not one of mere dislike. No; we are overwhelmingly revolted. We are appalled. For us, it *self-evidently* violates an absolute sacrality, an indubitable norm: the dignity of the person, of her bodily integrity. Additionally, we experience this violation with *affective intensity*. We are horrified; outraged; nauseated; rendered speechless.

The idea of the human exercises a near-universal degree of moral command across late-modern northern hemisphere societies. The investment of sacrality in the human person is most obviously expressed in contemporary cultures through the conceptual vehicles of "dignity" and "rights". This language is the core of what is in reality "a *de facto* global civil religion" (Madsen and Verschraegen 2016, p. 275).[17] It is the language of governance, political, legal, and economic practice. The resemblance of this social structure of value to what is typically thought of as "religion" is inescapable: the public profession of belief in non-empirical axioms leading to expected, and policed, social practices. The "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" of 1789 can, in this account, be seen as the first institutionalization of beliefs that become obligatory for all citizens, expressing positive and publicly binding moral content in a socially decisive way. Many of the things that make modern societies distinctive vis à vis premodern ones can be connected with the valorization of the human, and especially his or her bodily integrity and individuality: an international legal political order grounded in shared norms; representative democracies; modern practices of punishment; public administration; the abolition of slavery; and the codification of these in the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" of 1948.

Three particular features of this sacralization of the human are worth adverting to here. Firstly, and to repeat, the social change it manifests and represents is a change not in what we consider to be "true" but in what we take to be "good". The human being and her welfare is now the yardstick of the good. Second, the role played by the sacralization of the human is related to the disintegration of alternative grounds of consensus: the increasing societal differentiation which is characteristic of modernity.[18] It is a way of forming a unitary social purpose, a sense of shared identity, without having to invoke (what are seen as) divisive "religious" claims about which we cannot expect or engineer substantive agreement. Thus, language about the human is in some way a direct substitute for language about God or revealed truths. Thirdly, the social salience of this language is measured not in whether we actually *do* value the human, but whether we *say* we do. Rather, as the Romans expected public obeisance to the defined deities from everyone, including those who privately denied those deities' importance, contemporary societies define moral acceptability by professed subscription to human rights. It is a litmus test of public credibility.[19] Arguing that the human is the new locus of the sacred is not to say that the human is always treated as sacred—this is very obviously not the case. Nor is it to say that there is a unified conception of the "human" to whom those rights adhere. It is just to say that this is the conceptual territory on which arguments about "what really matters" are conducted. If one wishes to have salience in contemporary culture, one needs to speak to this. The critical point the present argument seeks to make is no more than this: that it is time to change the subject. A new frame for engaging contemporary culture is needed, and that frame must focus on the idea of the human, and the goods enmeshed within its fabric.

We can, however, briefly raise the question of what specific opportunities the sacralization of the human presents. For Christians in particular, it is tempting to move into this space by claiming it immediately as already "Christian" territory. This seems an attractive move in apologetic terms. A good deal of human rights literature is essentially an extended argument that this lineage emerges seamlessly from core Christian claims and histories, and that therefore Christianity alone can provide justification for the key moral structures of contemporary post-Christian societies. But is not straightforward to claim the sacralization of the person as a vindication of Christianity, or even a cultural situation which demands Christianity for its justification. As Joas (2013, p. 5) caustically remarks, this kind of view is unable

> convincingly [to] explain why a particular element of Christian teaching that for centuries proved compatible with the broadest range of political regimes,

none of which were founded on the idea of human rights, should suddenly have become a dynamic force in the institutionalization of those rights. . . . Even if we concede, at least retrospectively, that human rights may to some extent be considered a modern rearticulation of the Christian ethos, we must be able to explain why it took seventeen hundred years for the Gospel to be translated into legally codified form in this regard. . . . It looks a bit of a sleight of hand when something is claimed as an achievement of one's own tradition despite its having been condemned by representatives of that same tradition when it first emerged.

That is not to say, that human rights are not compatible with the Christian tradition—they are. Hastening to apologetics, however, is unwise. What we can rather do safely is drawing two practical conclusions from the new status quo. Firstly, there is nothing obvious about this migration of the sacred, and it will enjoy no necessary permanence. Indeed, the conversation this culture is increasingly having with itself is not the older one of "religious"/"post-religious" (or "Christian"/"post-Christian"), but "human"/"post-human". This is the cultural frontier in Northern Europe, and there is a real conversation to be had here. Secondly, some conversations that faith communities may be shy about or exhausted with are, for better or worse, as important as they seem.

On the first point: making contemporary people more self-conscious about what they take for granted immediately creates the possibility of a meaningful dialogue. Why do we locate goods—that is our sense of what is important, what is valuable—in the place(s) that we do? What kinds of histories are assumed here? How can this sense of what is good be sustained, narrated, defended? What kinds of justifications are needed, if any?

There is some awareness that the concept of "personhood" is both delicate and wrought. Less often considered is the conceptual fragility of the term "human" itself. "The human" seems to be available as an empirically circumscribable physical object, a naturally occurring organism with multiple instances. Therefore, it seems plausible to construe it in the way it is unreflectively understood: namely, as a natural species. This account satisfies the subtraction thesis: we only believe now in that which is "given"; which is obvious because it is naturally available. But, to paraphrase Milbank commenting on the term "the good", the idea of the human "is [not] more finitely secure, less mythological[,] than the term 'God'. . . . [It] condenses a narrative of absolute finality" (Milbank 2000, p. 233).

"The human" looks at face value as a readily available species term, but the nominalism of contemporary natural sciences rules this out as a secure means of reference. The existence of natural kinds in biology has been contentious since Darwin; modern biology actively undermines essentialism about species (Hull 1986). The natural variation of *homo sapiens*, both synchronically (people are different, also genetically) and diachronically (its having developed in a continuous series from what we would consider the pre-human and the semi-human) has made it difficult for biology to be realist about it. Additionally, it is complex to use biology to critique essentialism about race and at the same time use it to defend species realism; and that is without starting on the critique of "speciesism" which is increasingly popular in ethics.[20] There is a pervasive intuitive nominalism about universals in popular consciousness, and most do not want to reach for Platonism to make sense of the notion of a human species. This is in considerable tension with our desire to maintain an objective and universal referent for the term "human".

Furthermore, modern biology, as usually understood, does not establish that the human is characterizable in a more-than-biological way. Even if biology were to supply a satisfactorily realist account of natural species, the "human" to which we ascribe rights and dignity—the human which has been sacralized—is more a cultural than a natural object, as trans- and post-humanistic literature has long pointed out.[21]

The sacralized human person is no less "mythological" than any (so-called) religion, or indeed than the secular itself. It is not a mere empirical object. Contemporary cultures have not transferred loyalty from a non-empirical and therefore precarious object to an empirical and therefore epistemically secure one. They have transferred loyalty from one

storied fabrication to another. A project of narration is needed to explain, to scrutinize, and to defend that change. In that project, new styles and modes of engagement, both critical and constructive, become possible. The fact that "the human" has little self-evident meaning taken by itself is no charge against it. It is just that, as with many other concepts on which we rely daily, such as the notion of the good, it is narratively dense. It contains a world-picture that cannot be unstoried. It is a member of the history of ideas. As long as we are not afraid of this in principle, there is no reason to wring our hands about it.

One is not ipso facto granting normativity to contemporary culture, nor to the potential idolization of the human as its new sacred, if one consents to engage it on its own ground. On the contrary, tracking the migration of the sacred enables the new locus of normativity to come to light, and therefore to be interrogated. Nor is one (necessarily) critiquing the lack of a substantive definition, or justification, of the idea of the human. It is arguable that a failure to articulate a coherent concept of the human will hamper the effort to universalize human rights; and that relativism about those rights is not unrelated to a lack of conceptual architecture propping up the idea of the human (Brown 1997, 2013). The notion of rights is one among the many areas in which the idea of the human has become a civilizational lynchpin. Rights language mediates the concept of the human in many debates which are now central, including gender, sexuality, migration, genocide, artificial intelligence, and bioethics. Asking searching questions about what kind of philosophical architecture we might need to conduct these debates well has never been more important. Nevertheless, the claim here is not a normative one about the desirability or not of a particular idea of the human, nor of the necessity of certain kinds of conceptual justification for that idea, but simply that the human is the point of salience now. It is the accepted yardstick, in contemporary northern Europe, for distinguishing progress from regress, civilization from barbarism. It is the temple in which—rightly or wrongly—people worship. It is the hill people will die on.

Many urgent questions arise as to the legitimacy, dangers and potentials of this sacralization. These cultures do betray some awareness of the fissures in the dominant way of thinking about the human. There is for example a lively anxiety around "anthropocentrism" in its alleged role in causing the environmental crisis (White 1967). But such issues cannot helpfully be framed, let alone answered, if the ideological topography is not mapped in wider perspective. Aside from a real preparedness to acknowledge everything that is at stake in the idea of the human, a mere critique of anthropocentrism will remain superficial (cf. Grey 2020). The debate about the supposedly baleful effects of anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism is empty if conducted in the absence of a deeper conversation about what we now take an *anthropos* to be, and what justifications are needed and/or available for such a construal.

On the second point: insofar as it is the horizon of the good and not the true which defines this situation, and insofar the human is at the center of that picture of the good, issues such as those identified as central by Callum Brown have become flashpoints for a reason. They are where the birds of the sacred come home to roost. They concern, on the one hand, the question of the dignity and integrity of human bodies, and, on the other hand, the question *to whom* that identity belongs. Exhausted though faith communities may be by the obsessive focus on these issues in their engagement with contemporary cultures, they cannot get around it by arguing that questions of sexuality, gender, bioethics, etc., are secondary in comparison to supposedly primary issues concerning truth claims about ultimate matters. The human good *is* the ultimate matter for contemporary cultures. Perceptions of that good directly mediate dominant conceptions of what is and is not *given*, fixed or non-negotiable in 'the human'. This is where ultimacy abides now.

Although it remains culturally compartmentalized, there are signs of a new attentiveness to the idea of the human in the development of a vigorous debate around trans- and post-humanism.[22] Three qualifications are worth noting, however. Firstly, this conversation has more public attention in continental Europe than it has in the United Kingdom. Secondly, as with pro-life politics in the United States, there is a danger that the debate func-

tions as a mere proxy within a territory that is governed by a secular-religion dichotomy. Specific issues in applied ethics—say, around human enhancement, stem cell research, or gay marriage—then become fortresses to be gained or lost in a battle that is still, underlyingly, about something called "religion", and its struggle to the death with something called "secularism". Thirdly, this debate demonstrates with disturbing clarity both how fragile is our idea of the human, and how little we have grasped what is civilizationally at stake in it. The status quo in global governance, economics, politics, law, health, medicine, development, and much of the machinery of the modern state, is directly implicated in the good functioning (or not) of a concept of the human.[23] In this sense, the debate over post- and trans-humanism is more central than its usual treatment suggests. It is really a conversation about the coherence of the single term which is most central to our shared discourse. This is not a concern first of all of practical ethics in the narrow sense; it is about the sustainability of the contemporary imaginary, and all the shared practices which arise from it.

If these proposals have intentionally been offered in rather deconstructive mode, they need not remain there. The trajectory adopted so far was meant to resist the idea that contemporary culture is characterized by a disappearance of something, a non-belief in something; but this was established in order that its constitutive values, its positive content, can come to light. It has been suggested that this positive content is nested in the idea of the human, and in the light of this, a constructive moment becomes possible. There is an objective need for rigorous thinking about the human, but this is not only or mainly an imperative of theoretical import. These are cultures convulsed by arguments about gender and race, but with no substantive agreement about that of which gender and race are predicates: the human itself. Ours is an age whose defining horizon is anthropological, but in which there is no satisfactory account of what an *anthropos* is. In this territory, a genuine *novum* can be explored; an innovative cultural engagement can take place.

To ask in any detail what that constructive moment should look like is beyond the bounds of the argument offered here, which has sought minimally, if stringently, to advocate for a change in subject. But we can speculate on some parameters for a fruitful way forward.

Such an engagement would, firstly, support and affirm the process not of disinterested but of interested conversation—because the human in our time is the object of ultimate concern. This would involve creating or sustaining civic and public spaces for conversation, as indispensable features of a society which seeks to consistently treat the human as sacred. These would be conversations which allow people's felt sense of moral horizon to come to the surface, there to be expressed, attended to, and constructively contested. The central premise of such spaces would not be a particular content, but simply the importance and urgency of the conversation itself, and they should be structured to promote the widest possible participation.

Secondly, and relatedly, this engagement would stand as an act of recognition of the worthiness of the enquiry itself. It would celebrate and affirm the human precisely *as a question*. The question that the human *is* persists no matter whether it is recognized, and no matter whether one accepts "Christian" humanism or not. The Second Vatican Council made this recognition central to the Church's task in the world: "Every man [sic] remains to himself an unsolved puzzle, however obscurely he may perceive it" (Vatican Council II 2012, p. 21). If something here is to be resisted, it is the elision of the question in public discourse; an impatience—all-too-characteristic of our age—with the unboundedness of the inquiry, which can lead its short-circuiting by technical or practical agendas, which seem to have to the virtue of avoiding pointlessly speculative enquiry, but which in reality treat the question as though it was already answered. This, however, only fortifies implicit and uncritically presupposed notions of the human, which should be brought to light. To honor the question that the migration of the sacred into the human raises is already a constructive undertaking. What is a human being? What is a person? In what does her sacredness consist? "What Augustine said is still true: man is an abyss; what will rise out of these depths, no-one can see in advance" (Ratzinger 1969, p. 1).

In the last analysis, however, such engagement would not merely be a conversation facilitator, and would not stop at the posing of questions. It would have a positive vision to articulate, which speaks to the dominant moral instincts of the moment. The Christian churches in particular will be at their most salient if they offer a holistic humanism. At its best, this would be a narration of the human as an ecologically embedded social animal, whose identity is incapable either of empirical or logical reduction, but which is not therefore unsusceptible to reasoned reflection and discernment. John Paul II described the vocation of the churches as essentially, and not merely contingently, humanistic. "Man" [sic], he said, "is the way of the Church" (Pope John Paul II 1991, p. 6);[24] "For the Church, all ways lead to man" (Pope John Paul II 1979).[25]

Understanding the relation between Christian humanism and the humanism of contemporary cultures is a critical theological task, one which will inevitably bring to the surface differences between theological sensibilities. Classically Catholic and Protestant voices may find themselves in dispute over the assessment of contemporary valorizations of the human. This is rightly contested ground. The important thing is that the theological conversation not become a self-referring enclave, but touches contemporary people's felt concern. If a person is really hungry, then whatever you have to say to her, you are more likely to be listened to if you frame it in terms of food.

4. Conclusions: Starting from Where We Are

The secular-religion frame remains too often the term of reference in which "faith communities" have tended to frame their activity, and by which they are in turn framed by the societies in which they exist. When these are such questionable concepts, doing so much illicit work, why take them as reference points? One effect of the dominance of this framing has been to obscure how question begging the contemporary settlement itself is. It distorts our perception of our time, of our selves and our world, of the role and task of churches and other communities who may consider themselves to be at some distance from the surrounding culture, if we let those terms be our organizing logic. There is nothing given about the set of goods which are enshrined in the contemporary imaginary. That is clear both from history and from the precarious realities of the present. Whether we wish to see those goods be sustained and grounded in a governing position, or whether we wish to contest them, they need to be seen as the historically contingent insights that they are. They need analysis, explication, interrogation, illumination.

In the case that we *do* want to defend these goods, to substantiate and consolidate them, justification must take the form of *narration*, because nothing else is likely to break through the fragmentation of public conversation into camps. In any case, we should consider carefully what such analysis and narration could or should look like; what resources there are for it within contemporary culture, and whether those are sufficient to animate the idea of the always-sacred human person. Exploring such terms is a task for another and larger enterprise, one which must ask whether a purely immanent frame can sustain a sacralization of the human, and if not, *which* transcendence would do.[26] Christians in particular are likely to be worried by a humanism which refers to no norm beyond those specified by humans themselves. To this concern, only two brief responses can be made here.

Firstly, the present argument has sought only to establish a frame for cultural engagement. This has been, in the non-pejorative sense, a pragmatic proposal. It has been argued that engaging via the idea of the human has more salience, begs fewer historical and conceptual questions, and gives less away, by retiring a frame which bestowed a false normativity on what is merely another contingency. Second, whatever the constructive enterprise will look like, it must desist from any nostalgia for, or fond reimagining of, a foundationalist epistemology. A certain epistemic circularity is not avoidable for anyone, whoever they are and whatever they think. The question is whether one construes this circularity as vicious or virtuous, as a closed circle, or as a spiral. An account of human reasoning as reliable *in* and not *despite* its embedded, embodied, and relational character

will be intrinsic to a credible humanism. Christianity is, arguably, uniquely equipped to articulate this.[27]

The question about the sustainability and justification of our current values is not, however, the one this article has sought to address. The concern here has been to invite a change in subject. Apologists, theologians, and churchmen have often tried to engage contemporary culture by defending the existence of "God", or by pursuing engagements between "religion" and "science", or asking whether "religion" causes violence, and so on. These are distractions. Those who take up these weapons (if we can for a moment use a martial metaphor) are boxing with shadows, because they pitch the battle on the wrong territory, where the opponent is no longer interested in fighting. The conceptual site on which contemporary culture is meaningfully engaged is not that of "religion", or even "God". It is that of "the human" and her good.

The interesting question to put to contemporary people is not "What do you believe?", but "Who are you?"; "Who are we?" The important conversation—in the literal sense of possessing *import*: weight, significance—is a conversation about what a human being is. What fulfils her; what hurts her; what renders her life meaningful, worthwhile, or not; what makes it possible for her, despite everything, to go on. In the opinion of the authors, it is as a humanism that Christianity finds itself most salient, most vital, in relation to contemporary culture. "Since this [concrete, historical] man is the way for the Church, the way for her daily life and experience, for her mission and toil, the Church of today must be aware *in an always new manner* of man's 'situation'" (Vatican Council II 2012, p. 21, italics is added). The "religion-secular" frame no longer captures this situation for people in contemporary northern Europe.

An old Irish joke tells of a tourist in Galway who asks one of the locals for directions to Dublin. The local replies: "Well, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here". It is time to walk away from the wreckage of decades of increasingly sterile debate about something called "religion". If the place we want to get to is, at least, a real conversation—not small talk, entertainment, or painfully circular role-play—then we should not start from here. Instead, we should pick up the idea of the human, and go on from there.

Notes

[1] Wallace's speech, at Kenyon College in 2006, is described by *Time* magazine as one of the best commencement speeches of all time. It was eventually published as a short book (Wallace 2009), but is much better watched as a video. It is available online.

[2] On the historical invalidity of this "distinction", see Harrison (2015).

[3] Christian communities in particular are invited to ask to whom they are witnessing. There is an interesting grammatical ambivalence in the English term "witness". If a Christian "witnesses to", the "to" may specify either that which one testifies about—"I bear witness to the truth"—or the person(s) before whom one witnesses: "I witnessed to them about Jesus". The former "object" of witness perdures, but the latter is in continual change. If the witness to the unchanging is to land amidst the changing, the church must read "the signs of the times", as Pope John XXIII (1961) proposed in his Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis*. This was the document convoking the Second Vatican Council. The phrase was taken up in multiple successive teachings, pre-eminently the Council's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. As a piece of biblical interpretation, John XXIII's instruction has had its critics (concern about this was current at the time of the Council; see, for example, Chenu (1965)). But the phrase aptly expressed the increased contextual sensitivity of Christian evangelism over subsequent decades.

[4] This is of course a key qualification of the argument which follows. Aside from considerable portions of contemporary North American culture(s) which might also be described in this way, the world as a whole needs to be characterized in quite different terms. At the global scale, the issues which the "religion-secular" framing is supposed to capture are not only salient but increasingly so (cf. Pew Foundation 2012).

5 "The main features of this rickety theoretical construct are as follows: (a) religion is thought of in terms of origin, past, descent; (b) intentionally or not, Christianity and religion tend to become interchangeable terms; (c) modernity is conceived as a largely homogeneous phenomenon; (d) change is always interpreted in a *weltgeschichtlich* key, that is, in terms of universal history" (Costa 2022, p. xxvi).

6 Sam Brewitt-Taylor (n.d.) summarizes the picture that the "post-secular turn" in historiography contests. This is explored in more detail in Brewitt-Taylor (2021).

7 It was largely "uncontested" at the time of Cox's writing, but two decades later, that consensus has cracked.

8 "I will be making a continuing polemic against what I call 'subtraction stories.' Concisely put, I mean by this stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside. Against this kind of story, I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life" (Taylor 2014, p. 22).

9 For a representative example, see, for example, the debates in Chen (2013).

10 Cf. for example, Please see the reference Reigel (2005).

11 For a genealogy of the concept in the West, see Cavanaugh (2009).

12 "From this awareness comes the need to rethink the very concept of secularism, which not only could not be understood, but in all likelihood could not have spread so rapidly if it had not served the interests of the new entrepreneurial classes both within Europe's borders, and outside, in colonial expansion" (Costa 2022, p. xviii).

13 Cf. Russell T. McCutcheon (1995, p. 285) who asks: "What counts as religion and, more importantly, who gets to decide? How useful is this category, given its clearly European and largely Christian-influenced heritage?"

14 The work of Burchardt et al. (2015) has been instrumental exposing the changing meanings and effects of the notion of the secular across diverse spatio-temporal contexts at the global scale. Their important contribution confirms the contested and fragmentary purchase of the concept, but remains to one side of the argument here, which is concerned with unpacking the situation of contemporary northern European societies, not the concept of the secular across cultural boundaries.

15 In suggesting that the advent of "the secular" is more recent than previous scholarship had understood, they offer an important corrective to the metanarrative of a steady, predictable, and invincible decline. A later dating of the secular breaks the key connection, still deeply embedded in popular consciousness, between secularism and the scientific worldview, and between the secular and modernity, in any directly causal sense.

16 Both the effectiveness of this example, and Ryrie's argument that public moral sensibilities in the West are in some sense reactions to Nazism, exemplify the point made at a general theoretical level by Hans Joas: experiences of violence and trauma play a decisive role in our conscious appropriation of particular values (Joas 2013, p. 69ff).

17 Perhaps the word "global" here requires some qualification; across China, some of the Arab world, and much of the former USSR, the notion of human rights exercises less command. The point here is not that these regions are the sites of multiple human rights abuses. The point is simply to note that the notion of human rights lacks discursive authority in these societies.

18 Please see the reference (Joas 2013), Chapter 6.

19 Ryrie (2022) notes the instantaneous fall from grace which accompanies the public departure from this norm.

20 Seminally, Please see the reference Singer (1975).

21 For an influential example, see Haraway (1991).

22 For a critical assessment, see Dürr (2021a, 2021b).

23 Yuval Noah Harari (2017) is right about this in "*Homo Deus*"; however, the conclusions he draws from this are highly contestable.

24 He continues: "[The Church's] sole purpose has been care and responsibility for man . . . We are not dealing here with man in the 'abstract,' but with the real, concrete,' 'historical' man. We are dealing with each individual, since each one is included in the mystery of Redemption, and through this mystery Christ has united himself with each one for ever. It follows that the Church can not abandon man, and that 'this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission . . . the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption.' This, and this alone, is the principle which inspires the Church's social doctrine" (Pope John Paul II 1991).

25 He writes: "We are speaking precisely of each man on this planet . . . This man is a way that, in a sense, is the basis of all the other ways that the Church must walk—because man—every man without any exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man—with each man without any exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it" (Pope John Paul II 1979).

26 Christine Korsgaard (1996), for example, argues that the source of ethical normativity is the rational, reflective and immanently-known self-consciousness of human beings. John Paul II, in contrast, takes it that only a Christological anthropology and a synthesis of faith and reason can ground the sacredness of the person (cf. Hittinger 2016).

27   Cf. Please see the reference Grey (2023), especially Part I.

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Article

The Contribution of Christian Values to the Common Good

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Abstract: How, in a democracy, in an open, plural society, can decisions be reached that are defensible in terms of a global common good? This question is also challenging Christian churches to search for an answer while witnessing Christian faith and the Gospel. The main current and future tasks of the church will include enabling people to deal responsibly with freedom. Christianity continues to have major significance for Europe and the West.

Keywords: Catholic social doctrine; culture of freedom; responsible freedom; Centre for Cultural Witness

1. Introduction

How, in a complex, varied world with diverging interests, with partly contradictory needs, and with a variety of players, is it at all possible to reach viable, reliable, and sustainable decisions? How, in a democracy, in an open, plural society with divergent opinions and options, can decisions be reached that are defensible in terms not only of economic efficiency but also of the common good, or indeed the global common good, and that are so not only in the short term but also in the long run, taking the coming generations into account? These questions represent significant challenges.

We could easily deal with this in a few key words—for instance, responsibility, progress, sustainability, etc.—but this does not lead to a satisfactory resolution. The term responsibility, for example, becomes devoid of content and, in fact, degrades to become a mere key word if it is paraded in an undifferentiated, overly reckless manner. This ultimately promotes the opposite: Awareness of responsibility is eroded because it is always the others who did not meet their responsibility, for instance, by saying "I meant well, I made it possible, organized the funding, developed the idea, and so on, but other people spoiled my well-laid plans". The constant call for responsibility can lead to a slow-moving process towards irresponsibility, and this would be the end of a free, complex, plural, global society that is able to reach decisions. This could be conceived of in many areas, be it the economic, political, or technical domains. It is therefore a matter of freedom and responsibility, institutions and virtues, Christianity and Western civilization. In this contribution I would like to approach the question in several points, without going into the far more comprehensive topic in detail (cf. Marx 2013, 2020).[1]

2. Freedom, Democracy, and the Common Good

"Die Luft der Freiheit weht—Videtis illam spirare libertatis auram" (Ulrich von Hutten) was suggested as the motto for Stanford University in the early 20th century, which in some respects has been discussed controversially (cf. Casper 1995). Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523) was a German humanist and revolutionary, defending Martin Luther and criticizing the Catholic Church. It is often translated as "The wind of freedom blows". There are many methods to the present day to interpret Ulrich von Hutten's actions and publications, and he is by no means without controversy. It would nonetheless be interesting to critically re-examine this individual, not only because there are links with the Bishopric of Trier, where I was bishop before coming to Munich[2], but also because in 2017, especially in Germany, we commemorated the beginning of the Reformation. This was not only a task for the Protestant church in Germany, but also presented a challenge for the Catholic Church.

In fact, it is not a commemoration that can be separated along denominational lines, but imposes on us, as Christian churches, a joint responsibility to find the right relationship between faith and society and to give a joint Christian witness to our society.

What can this motto "The wind of freedom blows" mean if it is understood in the context in which Hutten wrote it? Von Hutten wanted to teach the unspiritual clergy a lesson and restrict their excessive power. There were certainly good reasons to wish to do this. As with Martin Luther, he was deeply rooted in the piety and mysticism of his time, which had already demonstrated church-critical potential before his time. Luther's aim was not to split the church, but to use his reforms to point out unfortunate circumstances that cast a shadow on the message of the Gospel. We can thus also understand Hutten's statement, after Martin Luther had been found guilty, as an unambiguous warning that the wind of freedom that had blown open doors in the Reformation would not subside as a result of the condemnation of Luther's Theses; the forecast was for change and upheaval to come. To a certain degree, Hutten was also right: As painful as the separation of the churches is, it is also clear that we can no longer turn back from the Reformation questions and the impetus for change to which they led.

2.1. A Culture of Freedom

What can an appeal for an unstoppable wind of freedom mean? Freedom is certainly one of the basic prerequisites for all academic activity and thought. Without freedom there is neither research nor progress, neither criticism nor preservation of tradition. Freedom is without a doubt a high individual and institutional value. We can certainly speak of a culture of freedom, and we may be grateful that we live in free, democratically legitimated societies.

The call for freedom has increasingly been linked in recent years to the call for responsibility, as well as to the call for ethics. Where does this come from? On the one hand, it is caused by the technological revolution in the broader sense, by the discovery that we are able to do and achieve more and more. The technological imperative would be: Anything we can do, we should do. Nothing that we can produce, do, and achieve technically should be prevented. There is a virtually infinite possibility as a result of technical feasibility. We are finding exponential growth, particularly in the digital economy, the bounds of which we are unable to foretell. The question thus also arises with this technological imperative: How is this progress to be guided in such a way that it does not do harm to humankind?

Added to this is an economic imperative. There have been heated discussions on this matter in recent years, particularly in the wake of the financial and economic crisis, but we have not concluded this process. The economic imperative can be considered as: What is profitable may not be prevented. This suggests, in effect, a pure shareholder value orientation. There is naturally also a call for responsibility here: Does this not have consequences that are damaging? This leads to a discussion of a primitive, overflowing capitalism that, in fact, does not serve humankind but is damaging to us.

We could say that these two imperatives have become linked: What is possible in technical terms is combined with the economic interests in the course of a global competitive aspect of a market that knows no bounds and no framework, and that has also become partly detached from economic realities. In particular, in a high-speed economy, there is a need to say in global terms: The one who first achieves technological progress and first makes the profits sets the pace, the direction, and the conditions. We should adapt ourselves and orient our societies towards this. It appears that this stipulates something fateful, since freedom is basically suspended.

In times past, one would perhaps have called this fate or tragedy. The decisive element of Greek tragedy is not the sad event, but the fact that, in a tragedy, those involved are no longer able to act any differently. It already becomes evident in the first act that people here have been placed in a dilemma from which they are powerless to free themselves. The situation progresses unstoppably towards disaster, and indeed cannot be changed.

This naturally profoundly contradicts our image of humankind and of our entire civilization. It is a matter of course that there are coercive situations, but regarding our own lives and social development as a fate hanging over us would mean taking leave of any kind of cultural mandate, all politics, all civilization—both nationally and globally. This process has always happened and will continue to happen. Thus, it is important to make it clear that this is not just something which has developed in a global world and to which we can only react. It is not a matter of wishing the world to be the way we would like to have it, but of seeing the world the way it is. This is true of the technical possibilities, the economic possibilities, even the political possibilities; we must see the world as something we can shape as we see fit. A complex process of coordination with many other players is needed because we are not alone in the world, neither as individuals in a country, nor as nations or companies, nor as religions.

If we wish to protect and promote the culture of freedom—and not only in a limited fashion for us here and now, but sustainably and globally—we need a critique of freedom. This quite literally means a distinction of freedom. We need to realize that freedom can only be protected if it limits itself and becomes responsible freedom that is obligated to the common good, not simply blindly following the technical and economic imperative.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these questions became even more significant and important for all nations and societies around the world. In his message for the 56th World Day of Peace, Pope Francis (2023), reflecting on the last three years, which were marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, raises an essential question: What did we learn from this? His answer: "Certainly, after directly experiencing the fragility of our own lives and the world around us, we can say that the greatest lesson we learned from COVID-19 was the realization that we all need one another". This is probably as true for interpersonal relations as it is for relations between states, economies, and social groups. The pandemic has revealed how ramified the global network is, how dependent all economic sectors and nations are on functioning supply chains, and how vulnerable these systems are. Not everything has proven to be effective; some things will have to be agreed upon anew, both globally and in bilateral treaties and agreements. It has also become clear that, far too often, those who do not sit at the nodes of the network are left out of the picture; this applies to states as well as individuals. The tendency towards isolation, including stronger nationalism and borders, also makes it clear that the decisive factor for the survival of humanity and, at the same time, for the active preservation of creation, is to be found in the common good. Especially as Christians, we must also say in retrospect of the COVID-19 pandemic that worldwide solidarity is needed more than ever. Pope Francis concludes, "[T]hat our greatest and yet most fragile treasure is our shared humanity as brothers and sisters, children of God. And that none of us can be saved alone. Consequently, we urgently need to join together in seeking and promoting the universal values that can guide the growth of this human fraternity" (ibid.). This also results in an agenda of all the tasks that we urgently need to actively address and continue: The list ranges from fostering peace and reliable health care to shaping climate change, promoting integration, protecting human rights, combating water shortages, hunger, and poverty worldwide, and to creating just global economic structures. There is much to do—and we can also do something as a church, now more than ever. The greatest source of change available to all people is humanity, which shows itself in responsibility and compassion.

2.2. Democracy as a "Precarious" Structure of the Community

Can freedom be guaranteed, and if so, how? Is for instance democracy a guarantor of freedom? We would presumably intuitively answer "Yes" to this question, but in fact the answer is not quite that simple. Democracy is not a natural value, derivable directly from the fact of being human. The bridge to it is built from freedom *and* responsibility.

There are at least two "Achilles heels" of the modern world and of free society. Pope Benedict XVI pointed to one in a speech before the German Bundestag in 2011: the *question of majority and truth* (Pope Benedict XVI 2011). We as a church believe that we invoke

natural law and hence that we can rapidly solve the question of truth because we, as "knowledgeable people", only must make it understandable to others. However, natural law is not a sanctified collection of knowledge, but something which should be evident for all. We therefore need the mediation of the future. The relationship between majority and truth is a critical "Achilles heel" of the modern world. We must awaken a sense in our societies that not everything is subject to the democratic majority procedure. However, Benedict XVI, in his contribution, also stated that a majority decision is sufficient as a rule (ibid., p. 32). We should not consider his speech to consist of a fundamental criticism of democracy. He simply pointed out that there are certain points that cannot be subject to a majority decision. We also know this in constitutional law; for instance, in German law, fundamental rights may not be abolished by Parliament. There are elements that can be regulated by law by majority and those that cannot be regulated, which as stated in German constitutional law, have eternal value.

The second Achilles heel consists of the *freedom to make decisions*. Freedom achieves its goal if it has opted for what is good, as Pope John Paul II remarked. What, however, happens if people do not opt for what is good? This is a question that we cannot answer. This does not mean that freedom is taken away from us, but it means that we—also as churches—must do everything we can to show people that a decision based on what is good is not only the right way, but the way leading to a larger life and to greater happiness, enabling us to "have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). It is therefore a special task to take up a position on current political and social issues, including showing an argumentative Christian justification, and in doing so not to disregard the ability to make compromises in a plural society.

2.3. The Two-Fold Meaning of the Common Good

In addition to "freedom" and "democracy", "the common good" is the third term used to anchor the topic. The common good is a central term of Catholic social doctrine, although it is difficult to grasp and permits many different interpretations.

In the understanding of Catholic social doctrine, the common good is a "service value", referring to "the sum of those conditions of social life" that allow for all people without exception "relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment". This is stated in No. 26 of the Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et spes", an important document of the Second Vatican Council. It is therefore a matter of creating frameworks allowing individuals and various groups to pursue their goals in an open society whilst respecting human rights and human dignity.

The aim is specifically not the happiness of as many people as possible as understood in a utilitarian sense. The common good is understood, rather, "with regard to the possibilities which it creates for the individuals and sub-groups in a society to reach their personal goals" (Kerber 1986, p. 857). This means that the concrete manifestation and shape of the goals are not defined in advance but must be constantly redefined in the dialogue between individual and joint interests. The scholarly formulation of the definition of the common good therefore does not assume a more traditional Aristotelian–Thomistic view according to which "the good of each individual is fully contained in the common good as an ethical value according to the principle that 'the whole is more than the sum of the parts'" (ibid., p. 858).

As an *individuum sociale*, people can only reach their goals in community with others. Individual interests and the interests of others must be equitably balanced; moreover, there are values that can only be striven for and achieved jointly.

The definition of the common good therefore reveals the entire tension between individual and social ethics. This is a tension that has fundamentally led to Catholic social doctrine existing at all, as the conviction spread that the judgment of individual acts and the evaluation of complex social action contexts belong to different levels.

When we speak of the common good, we mean first the fundamental conditions in which it is made possible for people to live with one another constructively. The content

version of a *bonum commune* would then be referred to in the strict sense as common property or as an inherent value, and hence should be placed within a social structure, a society, or even worldwide in the sense of human rights and human dignity. However, a tension also exists when it comes to common property, between what is stipulated by nature, creation, or religion and what depends on acceptance by the members of a social structure. It is important to note first and foremost that guaranteeing the common good as an organizational value is ultimately an administrative task in the broadest sense, whilst common property cannot be directly realized by these means (cf. Kerber 1986, p. 858).

While these tensions become more potent if we imagine the common good at global level, it is important to consider this scale. In 1987, more than 35 years ago, Pope John Paul II stated in "Sollicitudo rei socialis" that an orientation towards the common good can only function on a global scale (cf. Sollicitudo rei socialis (Pope John Paul II 1987, para. 39)). He primarily appealed here to the growing awareness of global solidarity and an orientation towards the poor. Pope Francis repeatedly emphasizes this concept in his words and deeds. He does not tire of recalling that all players must take as the criteria of their free, responsible decisions the consequences of their actions on a global scale and across generations. Pope Francis has made this perspective particularly clear in his encyclicals "Laudato si'" (Pope Francis 2015) and "Fratelli tutti" (Pope Francis 2020).

3. The Contribution of the Churches

How can we as churches now help ensure that people freely choose what is good? This can be achieved primarily through upbringing, education, modelling, and keeping open the question of and the search for God through proclamation and liturgy. This also requires constant communication and translation of the Christian Gospel into contemporary issues. The "Centre for Cultural Witness" can make an important contribution to this.

The main current and future tasks of the churches will include enabling people to deal responsibly with freedom. We cannot expect our circumstances to become simpler. We will no longer experience closed cultures. If we want freedom, we will live in plurality; however, this requires enabling people to responsibly opt for what is good in complex circumstances and situations.

Learning responsible freedom is also the model for upbringing and education as well as for what we can pass on in Catholic social doctrine as a concept for a society. This is what the church should be proclaiming. We are fighting for responsible freedom, and we wish to help ensure in our educational facilities and initiatives that freedom can be enjoyed in a responsible fashion.

3.1. Freedom as Responsible Freedom

Freedom and personality are at the heart of Catholic social doctrine. This concept is important because it not only considers humans per se, but also their relationships with others, thus understanding the person both as an individual and as a social being. Freedom is hence led by a perception of humankind in which freedom and social obligation, personal responsibility, and solidarity are inseparable.

The link between freedom and the Gospel is highly important for me personally. After being appointed bishop, I therefore selected for my motto a quote from the Second Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: "Ubi spiritus domini ibi libertas" ("Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom") (2 Cor 3:17). I wanted to use these words to make it clear that freedom is the main topic of our faith. Freedom in this sense does not mean that I can do or not do whatever I choose. From the outset, freedom corresponds with responsibility for my own acts and their impact on others and on society. Freedom is therefore of necessity connected with a striving towards justice.

Particularly because the freedom of the individual forms the basis for the Christian understanding of humankind, it is worrying that freedom is no longer appreciated to the degree it deserves. This is linked, first and foremost, with the frequent restriction of the definition of freedom to economic freedom only. In this process, the freedom thus

restricted is frequently decoupled from the responsibility that accompanies it. The low level of appreciation of freedom could, however, also be rooted in the lack of experience that freedom provides the individual in terms of opportunity to develop, and indeed to live at all.

A free, just society must offer adequate opportunities to everyone and must enable them to develop and live their lives in line with their talents and skills, whilst at the same time providing a safety net to protect them against social risks. It must offer opportunities for societal participation and advancement. To this end, all people must be enabled to contribute their gifts and hence to make their own unique, irreplaceable contribution. Everyone should be offered the chance to make personal use of the opportunities for freedom provided in our societies.

This leads to the concept of a society founded on equal opportunities, as the German bishops also put it in 2011 in their text entitled "*Chancengerechte Gesellschaft. Leitbild für eine freiheitliche Ordnung*" (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2011). All efforts to bring about a society founded on equal opportunities must center on concern for the individual. Their participation in social life must be safeguarded. It will only be possible to find answers to the challenges of our time with a human orientation. As is noted in "Gaudium et spes", humankind is then the pivotal point and the central social-ethical standard for all political and economic actions (cf. *Gaudium et spes* [1966] 2008, para. 25). The personality and the concomitant unique value of each individual are founded in their being made in the image of God. Human freedom is the expression of this fact of having been made in the image of God.

The individual is not simply a product of social conditions or circumstances. However intensively people may interact with their social environment, they are nonetheless unique personalities. The individual and the social nature of the individual belong together: A human is both an individual being and a member of a community. This gives rise to a four-fold determination of the free responsibility of the person, which the German bishops also worked out in their above-mentioned document entitled "A society founded on equal opportunities" (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2011), and which I would like to outline very briefly here:

- Each person bears responsibility for their own life and for their individual development (subsidiarity principle).
- Each person also bears responsibility for others and for shaping the co-existence within society (solidarity principle).
- The state bears responsibility for the citizen, and there is a joint responsibility incumbent on the people who form a society for its members. A social order is to be measured by whether it serves people (justice principle).
- Society bears responsibility for itself. If the societal order is to serve the life opportunities of each of its members, the community must continually re-examine whether its rules and its institutions are geared towards achieving this goal (responsibility for the creation, sustainability principle).

The idea of responsible freedom also calls upon the individual and appeals to his or her virtues; however, this is by no means the be-all and end-all. The individual ethical requirement must not take a back seat to the institutional ethical requirement. The two must not be played off against one another.

3.2. The Co-Existence of the State, Society, and Churches

The German historian Heinrich August Winkler (2016) starts the first volume of his three-volume *Geschichte des Westens* with the following sentence: "Am Anfang war ein Glaube: der Glaube an einen Gott" ("In the beginning was a belief: belief in a God") (p. 25). Winkler names as the main elements of the "normative project of the West" the rule of law, the separation of powers, democracy, and finally, the right to inalienable human rights. He particularly stresses the fact that the political culture of the West is a pluralistic one. There are certainly different manifestations within Europe and also between Europe and

the United States of America (USA). Finally, the shared features of the West are particularly noticeable in comparison with other societies and cultures.

The dualism of the state, or society, and the church, or religion, is a necessary condition of democracy that is aware that it lives on preconditions that it cannot itself guarantee (this is how the German lawyer Böckenförde (1992) put it, the so-called "Böckenförde-Diktum"). French philosopher Philippe Nemo shows in his book *What is the West?* (Nemo 2005) five steps in development that have led to the cultural formation of the West and to its rise. Nemo starts by mentioning the invention of the *polis*, freedom under the law, science, and school by the Greeks. He then goes on to discuss the invention of the law, of private property, of the 'individual' and of humanism by Rome. This is followed by the ethical and eschatological revolution brought about by the Bible. He regards biblical ethics as consisting essentially of a moral of empathy, sharpening the perception of human suffering. It leads to regarding as abnormal and insufferable those evils that humanity had previously regarded as constituting an unchangeable element of the eternal order of things. A decisive novelty is hence formed by mercy, which goes beyond justice. It would naturally be useless to take as our agenda the eradication of evil if one believed that the world of the future would be no different. In this regard, the eschatology opens up a future-oriented time, a time that begins with the Creation and advances towards the "end of all days". A further factor for Philippe Nemo is the "Papal Revolution" from the 11th to the 13th centuries, which chose to use human reason in the shape of Greek learning and Roman law in order to permanently anchor biblical ethics and eschatology in history, and which hence brought about the first real, successful synthesis between Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. Nemo finally mentions the promotion of freedom-based democracy by what is generally referred to as the "great democratic revolutions".

We can therefore only understand our culture of freedom in the context of the major contribution made by Christianity. We can hardly understand the "West" and develop common visions for the future of Western societies without Christianity. This contribution needs to be repeated with vigor in practice and theory. The churches must therefore establish symbols of charity and take up a public position on topics related to politics and society. However, an indispensable prerequisite for sustainable cultural witness is also the credibility, connectivity, and readiness for dialogue of the Christian churches, including the Catholic Church.

3.3. The Framework of Freedom

The common good, and in turn the global common good, as an instrumental orientational framework can only be realized in political terms if this orientational framework can also be made understandable to the populations. The orientational framework is basically none other than a renewal of regulatory policy concepts at national, European, and global levels.

This is also the actual challenge for an orientation towards the global common good, given that what the state must be and is, as the guarantor of regulatory policy at the level of a society, can indeed perhaps not exist in this way at the global level. We nonetheless need a framework permitting peoples and individuals to develop and to live in a dignified fashion. It is a matter of enabling all peoples to have "fair access to the international market", "based not on the unilateral principle of the exploitation of the natural resources of these countries but on the proper use of human resources" (Pope John Paul II 1991, *Centesimus annus*, para. 33). This demand, incidentally, is also valid for the digital economy and for information technologies, as it is for finding sustainable solutions to the climate crisis and re-achieving a world in peace. To quote Pope Francis (2023): "In order to do this, and to live better lives after the COVID-19 emergency, we cannot ignore one fundamental fact, namely that the many moral, social, political and economic crises we are experiencing are all interconnected, and what we see as isolated problems are actually causes and effects of one another".

The debates on a new economic order and on the baseline of global economic ethics point to this problem, which is still in need of a solution. Without structures and without secure frameworks, the orientation towards the common good remains a "paper tiger". It is therefore a matter of enforcing regulatory policy approaches on the various levels.

4. The Project of the West—The Contribution Made by Christianity

I have already quoted the historian Heinrich August Winkler and the philosopher Philippe Nemo, who addressed in detail the question of what the "West" is and whether this category can actually still exist. They are far from being the only ones addressing this problem; in fact, there are many contributions towards the debate.

This discussion is also not new. Let us consider Francis Fukuyama (1992), who helped provoke these questions back in 1992 with *Das Ende der Geschichte* (Engl. *The End of History and the Last Man*), and simply remind ourselves of Samuel Huntington's (counter)hypotheses on *Kampf der Kulturen* (Huntington 1998) (Engl. *Clash of Civilizations*).

As another representative in this debate, I would like to briefly mention the Scottish historian Niall Ferguson and his book entitled *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (Ferguson 2011). In this "history of the clash of civilizations", Ferguson hypothesizes that the West rose above the other civilizations from 1500 onwards thanks to a number of innovations, which he refers to as "killer apps" (p. 12). He lists six parameters, which he neither weights nor places in a specific sequence: 1. competition, 2. the scientific revolution, 3. the rule of law, 4. the major progress made in medicine, 5. consumerism, 6. the work ethic. Ferguson therefore offers a further approach towards the term "the West".

Regardless of our interpretation, each contributor shows the many sides of the phenomenon and the difficulty arising in covering it. At the same time, it is made clear how necessary it is to define the Western values. The discussion appears to me to be led, above all, by the following questions: What distinguishes the West? What are the values of the West? What is their relationship to the Christian perception of humankind? What is Christianity for the West and vice versa? Is Christianity a self-critical resource of the West? Is it possible to conceive of and wish for the West without Christianity? How uniform is the West? To what degree does the West perceive itself as being the West? Is there one understanding of the West in Europe and another in the USA? Do we need to advocate an understanding of the West against this background? Must the West develop stronger combined structures? Is the West falling? Or is the West able to assert its cultural, economic, and political predominance in the world—and what good will it do in the future?

An Exemplary Concretization: The Economy—Thinking beyond Capitalism

I would like to take the economy as an example and detail the relationship between Christianity and Western civilization, before underlining the significance attached to the church and the Christian faith.

With his encyclical "Evangelii Gaudium", Pope Francis triggered in 2013 a rather contentious debate, particularly with the phrase: "Such an economy kills" (Evangelii Gaudium (Pope Francis 2013, para. 53). The debate on this phrase centers on the accusation that the church does not actually understand capitalism, and that capitalism has in fact made the world a better place. The church is said to despise the rich and ultimately do nothing to improve the situation in which the poor live, to only have a response of caritas for the social problems. However: Is this really the thread that can be followed from the Gospel, via the proclamation of the church, through to Catholic social doctrine?

The discussion of the crisis of capitalism was triggered because we have experienced an exacerbating development since the 90s towards financial capitalism, which has led to a crisis. Even economists have complained of the new "casino capitalism". This type of capitalism destroys human lives and causes detriment to the common good. A phase of uninterrupted self-awareness of such accelerated capitalism, for which the very concept of the social market economy was a socialist aberration, was followed by the crisis; however, this has not seemed to lead to any real reorientation. Capitalism and the market economy

are not the same thing. The term "capitalism" is misleading, as are all "-isms" that claim to be able to define all of life from a specific point. What sort of view of the economy and of society takes capital as its starting point and reduces the actors on the world's stage to mere marginal figures or cost factors? Those who reduce economic acts to capitalism have not only chosen a starting point that is morally wrong but have also taken the wrong economic path in the long term. This brings us to the core of the question: What is the West and what does it stand for?

Self-sufficient sub-systems such as the economy or the political arena defend themselves against external intervention. We have naturally become accustomed to making a distinction between the spheres of life that sociologists have described in the modern world. We nonetheless feel that if we wish to be a community, a people, as well as a planetary community of peoples, we cannot only start from our own interests and separate, distinct spheres of life, but must have regard for the whole picture. Furthermore, it then becomes clear that the distinction is not so far-fetched, since a new, integrated view has underhandedly developed in the Modern age, namely the economization of all spheres of life. Economization ultimately means making the rhythm of society comply with the interests of capital exploitation at a global level. This essentially makes capitalism the global, single standard, against the background of an unenlightened ideology that understands progress as an evolutionary process of this very capitalism, to which people, their cultures, and lifestyles must conform. Capitalism is ultimately regarded as an intrinsic stream of events, and the task of people and of policymakers is one of adjustment. The shaping of markets, the political correction of market results, and the regulation and ordering of capital markets is seen as a disturbance or as a necessary evil.

However, the idea that there are pure markets somewhere, which then bring forth what is good in free competition, is an ideology in itself. Another important aspect of thinking about market, money, and morality, which cannot be elaborated here, is described by Michael J. Sandel in his work *What Money Can't Buy* (Sandel 2012). Capitalism may not become the model for society, since, ultimately, it has no regard for the fate of the individual, for the weak, or for the poor. In particular, because we have freedom and responsibility as our starting point in the Christian perception, we may not provide a space for such ideas. This has nothing to do with a rejection of the market economy, which is necessary and sensible, but has to do with serving people. The writings of the church's social doctrine speak of this; the spiritual foundations of the social market economy are characterized by Ordoliberalism, which in turn was largely inspired by Christian models.

These ideas have not, however, played a major role in the major, worldwide economic debate. That markets are "products of civilization", that they are meant for shaping, that the economy is to serve the common good, that the material foundations are a prerequisite but cannot stipulate the goal of human co-existence—these are all discussions that are necessary, important, and helpful, particularly today.

Pope Francis (2013) writes: "The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies. At times, however, they seem to be a mere addendum imported from without in order to fill out a political discourse lacking in perspectives or plans for true and integral development" (Evangelii Gaudium para. 203). This makes it our task as bishops, and also as laity, to call for politics to be given an ethical foundation and to make our church's contribution to politics. Nowadays we need to re-think capitalism, to even think beyond capitalism.

5. Conclusions: Evangelization and Renewal: Renaissance, Not Restoration

As Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger stated, Christianity in Europe is still in its infancy; its heyday lies before us (cf. Lustiger 1990). But most people in Europe have the impression that the heyday of Christianity is *behind* us and that we should be defending the last bastions in house-to-house fighting. This is, however, not my vision, nor is it the vision and idea of the "Centre for Cultural Witness". The Gospel has yet to have the final word, both

for society and for our lives. One element is to proclaim and live a responsible freedom, including within the church.

From the beginning, the Bible presents freedom as a gift and a task, as a charisma and a mission. God wants us to be free in the sense of a responsible freedom. This is a powerful message for our time. The question of God is linked to the concept of responsible freedom. In the crises of our present time (e.g., climate crisis, post-COVID, inequality, migration, war in Ukraine), we can draw from a rich spiritual Christian treasure and bear witness to it in our societies. This is and shall be one of the main tasks of the "Centre for Cultural Witness".

I believe that Christians have major significance for Europe and the West. The future of Europe requires much more than the defense of prosperity or a reduction in the logic of capitalism, as the current tensions and crises also show.

We must also address economic questions in the context of the future idea of Europe. And should this future idea not also encompass a common orientation of the West? This is precisely where we as Christians should be involved. Where are these ideas to come from if not from the spirit of the Gospel? In this respect, the questions of Christianity, and of all religions, are also about the future viability of the "Western model".

The Gospel is the most important enlightenment in the history of Europe. This enlightenment is by no means complete; some have not yet heard it, including among our own. The potential of this Gospel remains powerful.

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Notes

[1]   Basic ideas of this paper have been presented several times, e.g., at the Roger W. Heyns Lecture on Religion and Society at Stanford University, 2015.

[2]   Hutten joined Franz von Sickingen, who in the "War against Trier" besieged the then Archbishop of Trier and Elector Richard von Greiffenklau, and failed.

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Article

A New Way of Life: The Challenge of Cultural Witness in the Early Jesus Movement

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Abstract: This article portrays innovative and distinct features of the Christ groups of the first decades with the underlying premise that the lived reality of the early Christian communities has the potential to inspire present-day churches in Europe when they face the challenge of cultural witness. People were drawn to Christ groups because they were different from the surrounding culture. Christianity would not have survived if it did not offer a counter-cultural ethical stance; a new social imaginary; alternative membership options; a flexible organizational structure; a holistic worldview; and a creative, innovative communication style—in one phrase: a new way of life.

1. Introduction

Can Christianity in postmodern Europe learn from premodern Christianity in the Roman Empire? Is post-Constantinian Christendom in any way comparable to the early Jesus movement? The way that I phrase these questions already anticipates my response: Indeed, paying a historically attentive visit to the early Christ groups can be a rewarding and inspiring endeavor. Two caveats need to be kept in mind: First, we should not be tempted by the hermeneutical naiveté of inferring direct answers to modern questions from an ancient phenomenon, falling prey to the charm of a romanticized new beginning. Second, the empirical reality of a Christian community, its structure, beliefs, and practices, can never claim universal normativity, not in the first century and not today. However, to the degree that such features witness to the story of Christ, they can be a (less or more) inspiring impulse for those who seek to do just this: reflecting and retelling the story of Christ in their being church.

In what follows, I am interested in innovative and distinct features of the Christ groups of the first decades (cf. Schliesser 2022). It is my underlying premise that the distinctiveness of early Christian communities, compared and contrasted with other groups in the Roman Empire, promises profit for our present-day ecclesiological reflection. My analytical focus, therefore, is on those "pull-factors" of the early Jesus movement that could be of relevance even for today. Though in this historically oriented study I do not offer straightforward applications, I believe the findings by themselves will capture the imagination of both church theorists and practitioners. In the conclusion, I point to some avenues for further thought and action.

Distinction and innovation point to the driving force of an emerging movement, and for early Christ groups this driving force was, among other things, the concern to witness to Christ (just as a group of devotees to Jupiter would want to reflect the values of their god in their community life). Six distinctive features of early Christianity will be illustrated by way of a journey through the Ancient Mediterranean, from Rome to Greece, Asia Minor, and North Africa. Brief visits to better and lesser-known places of the early Jesus movement exemplify the challenge of cultural witness for the first generations of Christ-believers.

2. Witness to the Vulnerable: An Ethics of the Protection of Life

Charming medieval alleyways, art workshops, an exciting nightlife: Trastevere is nowadays the liveliest district of Rome. The name Trastevere is derived from Latin, trans Tiberium, "beyond the Tiber," because, seen from the historic city center, the picturesque neighborhood lies on the other side of the Tiber. In the first century, visitors to Trastevere would be numbed by the horrible stench emanating from the tanneries and brickworks. They would encounter the hustle and bustle of the streets around the countless taverns and stores, a deafening noise from the port facilities on the Tiber, where sailors had been busy since dawn unloading their cargo and transporting it to the merchants. Some, however, might have dreaded the sight of parentless babies abandoned by their families in public places. They knew it would not be long before the child fell into the hands of a pimp who would raise it and train it for prostitution or a slave trader who would sell it for as much profit as possible. The pater familias had the right to give up for adoption, sell, or abandon a new-born child that he did not accept as part of the family. Particularly affected were handicapped children, illegitimate children, and girls.

In the year 1 BC, the seasonal worker (or soldier) Hilarion sent the following lines from Alexandria to his pregnant wife Alis (P.Oxy. IV 744): "Many greetings . . . Know that we are still in Alexandria; and do not worry if they all come back, I remain in Alexandria. I ask you and entreat you, take care of the child, and if we receive our pay soon, I will send it up to you. If perhaps you bear a child and it is male, let it be; if it is female, throw it out" (trans. Johnston 2020, p. 148). Today's readers can hardly escape the intuitive shock of these statements. However, the end of the letter is quite emotional: "how can I forget you?" and it does not make Hilarion appear as a cold tyrant.

It is disputed how widespread the practice of infant exposure was, but recent research suggests it was an important resource for the supply of slaves and prostitutes. Christian criticism of this practice drew on early Judaism and its appreciation of human life as a gift of creation (Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 3114f.; Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2202); some Stoic philosophers reached similar conclusions. One of the earliest extra-canonical Christian writings, the Didache (ca. AD 100), says: "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not sexually abuse children, do not engage in sexual immorality. Do not steal, do not practice magic, do not use enchanted potions, do not abort a fetus or kill a child that is born" (Didache 2:2; trans. Ehrman). Not only do we find here a ban on child exposure but also the prohibition of infanticide and abortion, in fact the oldest tangible evidence of the prohibition of abortion from early Christian literature. Furthermore, the command "do not sexually abuse children" features a striking element: Using the extremely rare verb *paidophthorein*, Christians condemned the practice of pederasty, i.e., sexual intercourse with children, a practice that was widely tolerated socially and praised by poets and writers such as Juvenal, Petron, Horace, and Lucian (Hurtado 2016, p. 167). The emphatic rejection of pederasty demanded a new label for this practice: Christian authors do not speak of "child love" (pederasty) but of "child abuse."

We stay in the capital Rome and look ahead into the mid-third century. Eusebius reports that the Roman church supported 1500 widows and poor during the episcopate of Cornelius (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6,43,11). This number prompted historians to estimate the size of urban Christianity in Rome. Edward Gibbon calculates that at this time about 50,000 Christians were living in Rome. "The populousness of that great capital cannot perhaps be exactly ascertained; but the most modest calculation will not surely reduce it lower than a million of inhabitants, of whom the Christians might constitute at the most a twentieth part" (Gibbon [1776] 1998, p. 284). Probably, Gibbon's guess is too high, as Robin Lane Fox (1986) notes, offering a most interesting reason for his assessment: the guess is too high, "not least because widows and the poor were strongly represented in the Church's membership" (pp. 268–9). Why is that? Why did they become part of the Christian communities? At least one fourth of the women in the Roman Empire were widowed. Widows in need of help received special recognition and protection. They were treated thusly in Jewish communities, but now the ethnic barriers were removed. Conflicts in the congregations

could not be avoided (cf. Acts 6:1–7), and soon further regulations were necessary (1 Tim 5:3–14). Care for widows is a telling example of how Christ groups stepped into the breach where people fell through the cracks of imperial care. In the mid-second century, the satirist Lucian of Samosata mocked the stirring care of the imprisoned Christian Peregrinus (*Peregr*. 12) and the Christian hope for the afterlife as a spiritual resource in crisis situations (*Peregr*. 13). Adolf Von Harnack (Von Harnack 1908) comments: "He would certainly have made a jest upon it had any occurred to his mind; but whenever this nimble scoffer is depicting the faith of Christians, there is a remarkable absence of anything like jesting" (p. 111). Lucian's puns are evidence of the resonance of early Christian social ethics. During his lifetime, the "Antonine Plague" was brought in from the East and wiped out a quarter of the entire population. Membership in the Christian network perhaps even increased the chances of survival. Historian Kyle Harper (2017) recently confirmed this assessment: "The compassion was conspicuous and consequential. Basic nursing of the sick can have massive effects on case fatality rates [...]. The Christian ethic was a blaring advertisement for the faith" (p. 156).

Charity in early Christianity did not remain abstract. On the contrary, even outsiders noted that Christians cared for the sick, eased the suffering of widows and orphans, buried the deceased, welcomed strangers, offered spiritual resources in times of crisis, and even loved enemies and adversaries. Painfully, often they failed in their ideals. But they programmatically called for altruistic care for precarious milieus and the marginalized. This, of course, does not mean that the majority culture was cold and heartless but mottos of Hellenistic popular ethics illustrate the distinctiveness of early Christianity: "Aphorisms such as 'look after your own things' . . . , 'look after yourself' or 'do good to yourself' . . . , and 'look for advantage' . . . provide interesting examples of somewhat self-centered ethical imperatives which were commonly accepted in the ancient world" (Winter 2001, p. 82). The early Christian "ideology . . . of love and service" (Ehrman 2018, p. 6) could prove attractive in a culture that tended to idealize apathy and to brand empathy as an unreasonable movement of the soul.

3. The Witness of a New Social Imaginary: Transcending Boundaries

In 1929, the so-called Erastus inscription was found near a paved area northeast of the theater in Corinth. It can still be looked at today. The inscription informs us that a certain Erastus laid the pavement at his own expense in return for his aedileship. He took his election as aedile as an occasion to be a benefactor to the city. Historians of early Christianity were thrilled. Incidentally, a man by the name Erastus is mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans, written from Corinth. He sends his greetings to the Roman church and is identified as the *oikonomos* of the city (Rom 16:23). This is actually the only passage in the corpus Paulinum in which a (secular) office of a person is mentioned. And the Greek *oikonomos* is most likely to be translated with aedile. So, is the Erasmus of the pavement the same Erasmus who is part of the Corinthian Christ group? We will probably never know for sure, and some skepticism is appropriate (e.g., Friesen 2010).

Be that as it may, we can assume that the Christian Erasmus belonged to the decurial class and was thus part of the social elite (Weiss 2015). Such details cannot be overemphasized. For a long time, it was considered an incontrovertible truth that the early Christian communities were composed of the socially marginalized, the lawless, the poor, and the enslaved. Nietzsche's ([1894] 2005) phrase still resonates in the collective memory: "In Christianity, the instincts of the subjugated and oppressed come to the fore: the lowest classes are the ones who look to it for salvation" (p. 18). Since the 1970s, however, scholars tend to think that the early Christ movements of the first century included the middle class of the imperial society and were not simply a proletarian movement of the desperately poor. Our knowledge of the composition of the early congregations, of the social position and status of their members, is admittedly exceedingly slim. Let us stay, for a moment, in Corinth: An interested observer would not have counted the majority of the members among the wise, powerful, and distinguished (cf. 1 Cor 1:26). Nevertheless, he would

have noticed educated and respected people. That there were higher-ups in the Corinthian church—though "not many" (1 Cor 1:26; cf. 3:18; 6:5)—can be inferred not only from the brief remarks about the persons mentioned by name, but also from the social tensions that existed in the church, especially with respect to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17–22); from the demands made on the rhetorical skill and erudition of a public speech (1 Cor 2:1–5); from civil disputes that were settled in the courts of the city (1 Cor 6:1–8); from the gatherings within the social network, which included banquets and prostitution (1 Cor 6:12–18); from the invitations individual church members received to the temples (1 Cor 8:10); and finally from Paul's expectation that the Corinthians would be able to make a substantial contribution to the Jerusalem collection (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8–9). The visitor would probably have been surprised by the role of women in the Corinthian meetings, for they prayed and practiced prophecy (1 Cor 11:5). New and unique opportunities for participation opened up for women, which stood out in an urban culture. Wealthy and educated women in a Christian congregation had the opportunity to interact with the intellectual male elite or to seek patronage of a Christian assembly. Chloe (1 Cor 1:11) may have been such a woman, as well as Phoebe, who served as patroness of a congregation in neighboring Cenchraea (Rom 16:1).

Overall, the Corinthian assembly reflects the society in which it is embedded. Christ-believers "would seem to be a mirror and microcosm of the city itself. The majority were poor, lacking education, wealth, and birth, nobodies in terms of public honor; some had fallen below the level of subsistence and depended on the communal meals for nourishment. A few were persons of middling incomes, shop-keepers, perhaps, or merchant-traders" (Welborn 2016, p. 73). This insight is less banal than it appears at first glance. Even though Roman society allowed for social mobility, all areas of daily life were permeated with a remarkable awareness of status. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, while not entailing a social change of status, transcended ethnic, social, and gender differences. The relapse of individual Corinthian Christians into status thinking is immediately and sharply criticized by Paul (1 Cor 11:18–22).

4. Communal Witness: Bridging and Bonding for Christ's Sake

In recent times, a group of Athenians who worshipped the god of wine, Dionysus (Lat. Bacchus), came into the focus of biblical scholarship. The so-called Iobacchoi ran a cult association that allowed only initiates, i.e., paying members of the association, to enter. Comprehensive regulations, codified in 164/165 AD, structured the life of this group, and it is worthwhile to quote a few sentences (IG II[2] 1368, trans. Ascough and Kloppenborg):

> It is not allowed for anyone to become an Iobacchos unless he has first registered with the priest the customary notice and is approved by a vote of the Iobacchoi, if he appears to be worthy and suitable for the Baccheion. The entrance fee shall be 50 denarii and a libation for one whose father was not a member . . . The Iobacchoi shall meet together on the ninth of each month, on the annual festival, and on the Bacchic days, and if there is any occasional feast of the god. Each member shall speak and act and be zealous for the association, contributing to the fixed monthly dues for wine. If he does not fulfill these obligations, he shall be shut out of the gathering . . . In the gathering no one is allowed to sing, cause a disturbance, or applaud. Rather, with all order and decorum members shall speak and do their parts, as the priest or the head of the bacchic-devotees directs . . . If an Iobacchos dies, a wreath worth up to five denarii and a single jar of wine shall be provided for those who attend the funeral. But no one who is absent from the funeral itself shall have any wine.

Voluntary associations were the most common form of sociality in the ancient world (e.g., Eckhardt 2021). The detailed text of the statutes of the Iobacchoi and numerous other inscriptions from the entire empire pose some interesting questions: Were the first Christian communities a kind of voluntary association? What did they have in common? How did

they differ? Why should anyone become interested in having a closer look and even in becoming a member?

And in fact, a curious observer of the urban religious scenery could easily have come up with the idea that Christ-believers were a new cult association, even though Christ groups did not use common association terminology to designate themselves but rather the political term *ekklesia*. The observer would notice that members of a Christ group gather regularly to have communal meals commemorating the founder and worshipping a deity. Their groups of a few dozen people meet in private homes or inns under the sponsorship of a patron. They call each other "brother" and "sister" and subscribe to high ethical standards. They are just another elective cult and find themselves on the religious marketplace next to other cults. But the points of comparison should not blur the distinctive profile of Christian associations, which would have caught an observer's eye and might have attracted or repelled him. They programmatically questioned and reevaluated status boundaries and gender roles. Unlike in other associations, membership was free of charge, and members' missteps were not punished with fines. On the other hand, Christ groups cared for needy network members that extended not only to the local association but also, as in the case of the Jerusalem collection, to members far away. The frequent weekly gatherings allowed less well-off members to eat their fill on a regular basis, and, moreover, they had access to otherwise closed circles when they were invited to the homes of more affluent believers. Unlike other associations, Christ groups engaged in trans-local networking, visited each other, exchanged letters, and supported each other even financially. Most other associations were organized on a local basis, and a member of a Dionysos cult in Athens could not expect to be welcomed as "brother" in the Corinthian Dionysos group. Furthermore, associations did not tend to produce literature so that "the intellectual activities of Christ assemblies are clearly one of their signal *differentiae*" (Kloppenborg 2019, p. xiii). The missionary zeal of the Christ groups is without analogy in antiquity and will have been perceived by some as a "shocking novelty" (Goodman 1994, p. 105). Last but not least, the legal status of Christ groups stands out, which, unlike associations, attracted the attention of the Roman authorities and could be subject to punitive measures.

So, in some sense, Christ groups were just like any other association in the ancient world (e.g., Kloppenborg 2019). But at the same time, they created a novel form of sociality that was at least as innovative and revolutionary as it was conventional.

5. Unimpressive Witness: A Religion without Temple

When the Apostle Paul travelled to Ephesus in the middle of the 1st century AD on his third missionary journey, Ephesus was a flourishing Roman provincial capital. Outside of the city he, like any traveler, was overwhelmed by the Artemision, the temple of the goddess Artemis, the most impressive and most lavishly decorated temple in the Roman Empire—one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The building was surrounded by a double colonnade, with 127 marble columns, of which 36 stood in front of the building. According to Luke, the town clerk addressed the agitated citizens of Ephesus: "Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis?" (Acts 19:35). No one could resist the magnificence of the building, a powerful public witness to the great goddess, intimately connected with the imperial cult. How about the Jesus followers? Ephesian Christ groups, like many communities of the early Jesus movements, did not meet in temples or sanctuaries, at grottos or springs, at holy trees or rocks, but first and foremost in houses. Obviously, they could dispense with a sanctuary since they did not need a place to sacrifice. But the reasons go deeper. Holy is not a place or a building, but the community itself. "Christians stood out in a world whose pagan majority, full of ambition, built magnificent temples, while the Jews at least lived in hope of rebuilding their magnificent, immensely large temple" (Leppin 2021, pp. 123–24). Meetings took place where family, professional, or social life took place. Private space became an ad hoc place of worship, table fellowship, and instruction. More recent scholarship is moving beyond the house walls, pointing to other possible venues: "Shops and small workshops,

i.e., *tabernae*, were probably the abodes and workplaces of many urban Christians . . . and thus would have been among the most convenient meeting locales" (Adams 2013, p. 156). The literary sources and the archaeological evidence are notoriously difficult to evaluate, but we can assume that the gathering places of the Christ groups were more flexible than commonly assumed. Theologically, the flexibility goes back to the "metaphorical sacralization" (Bormann 2017, p. 242) of the Christ groups as the "body of Christ" and the "temple of God." This self-understanding, and not a specific location, secured their identity.

In Ephesus, more than in any other city of early Christianity, there was very soon a colorful coexistence of Christian groups. Ephesus became the melting pot of the Jesus movement. Numerous people and traditions are closely connected with Ephesus: Paul and his fellow missionaries, disciples of John the Baptist, the Alexandrian Apollos, Prisca and Aquila, the Epistle to the Ephesians, Luke's writings, the Johannine circle, the Nicolaitans (cf. Rev 2:6, 15), the Pastoral Epistles, and finally Ignatius's Letter to the Ephesians (e.g., Trebilco 2004). This marks a tremendous plurality in the 1st century AD alone. How could such diverse Christianities coexist in one city? Christ groups were faced with a challenging, oftentimes arduous (and not always successful) identity management. Long and bitter struggles over what is "orthodox" were already part of the first decades of Christianity. Overall, however, "From the post-Easter beginnings, groups of Christians with different views and practices of faith lived side by side—in a relatively uncomplicated relationship, despite differing views on the whole" (Lampe 2017, p. 52). Furthermore, Christ groups approached questions of organization and leadership rather pragmatically and "charismatically." Until well into the 2nd century, the assemblies were characterized by decentralized and flexible leadership structures. They mimicked local organizational structures that they encountered in their polis or in philosophical schools, associations, the synagogue, or the house. Each community created their own leadership structure according to their needs and to the abilities and resources of their members. It is no real surprise, therefore, that Paul and Timothy greet "bishops" in the community in Philippi (Phil 1:1), even if in the undisputed letters of Paul, the title "bishop" is not used and one would expect the singular, after all. For Paul, offices are a "manifestation of the Holy Spirit" and not a form of the Spirit's deterioration (Lauster 2021, p. 62). A characteristic innovative leap is the principle of personal charism: authority is not derived from external factors such as status, but from the activity of the Spirit. Women could therefore also assume leadership functions. Such innovations were not only potentially attractive but also conflictual. This is already impressively documented in the New Testament.

6. The Witness of Holistic Faith: Exclusive and Universal

Around AD 109/110, Pliny the Younger: lawyer, author and friend of the Emperor Trajan, crowned his political career when he was made governor of Bithynia–Pontus in Asia Minor (the northern part of modern Turkey). The situation had gotten out of hand, and as a reliable official it was his job to bring affairs back in order. Incidentally, he came into contact with the "problem" of the Christian movement. He turned to Trajan to ask for advice, and their correspondence is not only revealing regarding the legal status of Christians but also on their self-understanding and their way of life—and death. Much ink has been spilled on this correspondence, but for the purpose of this essay, I will let Pliny himself have his say (Pliny, *Epistulae* 10:96, trans. Walsh):

> I have never attended hearings concerning Christians, so I am unaware what is usually punished or investigated, and to what extent. I am more than a little in doubt whether there is to be a distinction between ages, and to what extent the young should be treated no differently from the more hardened; whether pardon should be granted to repentance; whether the person who has been a Christian in some sense should not benefit by having renounced it; whether it is the name Christian, itself untainted with crimes, or the crimes which cling to the name which should be punished. In the meantime, this is the procedure I have followed, in the cases of those brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they

were Christians. If they admitted it, I asked them a second and a third time, threatening them with execution. Those who remained obdurate I ordered to be executed, for I was in no doubt, whatever it was which they were confessing, that their obstinacy and their inflexible stubbornness should at any rate be punished . . . They maintained, however, that all that their guilt or error involved was that they were accustomed to assemble at dawn on a fixed day, to sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as God, and to bind themselves by an oath, not for the commission of some crime, but to avoid acts of theft, brigandage, and adultery, not to break their word, and not to withhold money deposited with them when asked for it. When these rites were completed, it was their custom to depart, and then to assemble again to take food, which was however common and harmless . . . I found nothing other than a debased and boundless superstition. I therefore postponed the inquiry, and hastened to consult you, since this issue seemed to me to merit consultation, especially because of the number indicted, for there are many of all ages, every rank, and both sexes who are summoned and will be summoned to confront danger. The infection of this superstition has extended not merely through the cities, but also through the villages and country areas, but it seems likely that it can be halted and corrected.

Pliny is aware that the Christian movement attracted people of all ages, every rank, and both sexes. He cannot verify that they committed crimes (quite the opposite), but he is appalled by their obstinacy and stubbornness and calls their faith a superstition, i.e., a degraded cult or sect. Apparently, some Bithynian Christians were ready to die for their faith, which did not seem to bother Pliny. The early Christians' readiness for martyrdom is conspicuous. Already, the earliest reflections on the death of Jesus suggest that his followers need to be prepared to die as well. The importance of the martyrdoms of the first decades—Stephen, James, Peter, and Paul—can hardly be overestimated. They contributed decisively to the self-understanding of the Jesus movement, drawing a demarcation line between the faithful on the one hand and the persecutors and apostates on the other. Even if the number of persecuted and killed Christians was lower than the narratives indicate (Moss 2013; Rebillard 2020), they still reflect an attitude according to which faith has a value worth dying for. As Jan Bremmer (2021) recently argued:

> [W]hen we see the attachment of the martyrs to Christ and the emotional descriptions of their interrogations, tortures, and deaths in some of the martyr Acts, it is clear that emotions must have played an important role in early Christianity . . . No other cult or religion in the contemporary ancient world knew a comparable devotion with worshipers prepared to die for their faith, except perhaps the Judaeans in their revolts against Rome in the 1st and 2nd centuries. (p. 249)

The readiness for martyrdom is an expression of the exclusive–universal and the eschatological nature of early Christianity; all areas of life, even the boundaries of life, are determined by faith. According to Adolf Von Harnack (Von Harnack 1908), "From the very outset Christianity came forward with a spirit of universalism, by dint of which it laid hold of the entire life of man in all its functions, throughout its heights and depths, in all its feelings, thoughts, and actions" (p. 513). A more recent voice, Bart Ehrman (2018), agrees, "One other feature of Christianity that made it different from all the pagan religions throughout the empire is that it encompassed numerous aspects of life that had always been kept distinct" (p. 127). From its very beginning, early Christianity entertained a "totalizing discourse" (Rives 2011), claiming that believers orient their whole existence exclusively to the new way of life. By contrast, "The pagan gods . . . are not jealous of one another; they form, as it were, an open society," as historian and anthropologist Walter Burkert explains (Burkert 1987, p. 48). In a religious atmosphere in which elective cults vie for followers and religiously musical people assemble their patchwork religiosity, the early Jesus movement's claim to exclusivity also brought a reduction in complexity. According to these early movements, full membership in the church and in eschatological salvation

consists in a relationship of trust and loyalty (*pistis*) to the Creator and Redeemer—not in philosophical education, ethical perfection, esoteric knowledge, a mystery initiation, nor in belonging to a social class or a religious–ethnic group. This kind of religious allegiance: universalistic, exclusive, and eschatological, is a novelty in the religious landscape of antiquity. Faith as a new and distinct identity marker sums up the nature of Christ groups as networks of trust, held together by a strong sense of belonging, shared ethical values, and mutual reliability (horizontal axis), as well as by the opportunity to enter into a direct, personal relationship with God that lasts beyond death (vertical axis).

7. The Witness of the Spirit and the Spirit of Witnessing: Spirit and Scriptures

A final aspect, notoriously neglected in Continental European scholarship, is the factor of religious experiences. The Jesus movement understood itself as a spirit-driven movement. Believers observed and experienced manifestations of the Spirit, according to the early Christian texts. The extraordinary was normal. The New Testament reports an abundance of individual and collective experiences associated with the Spirit: Epiphanies of the risen Jesus, visions, prophesies, exorcisms, healings of the sick, ecstatic raptures, and glossolalia. Paul stresses that the Spirit also provides gifts of creation, i.e., natural abilities: Wisdom and knowledge (1 Cor 12:8), ministry, teaching, and exhortation (Rom 12:7–8). Those who believe receive the "fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22–23).

It is not a coincidence that the last stop of our trip through the Ancient Mediterranean takes us to the African continent and, from there, back to Europe. Apuleius, philosopher and rhetorician of the 2nd century AD, lived in a city in the Roman province of Numidia (modern-day Algeria) but was a globetrotter who studied in Carthage and Athens and also came to Rome, Greece, Asia Minor, and Egypt. He is most famous for his novel, *The Golden Ass* (*Metamorphoses*), an imaginative portrayal of the initiation of the story's hero Lucius into the mystery of Isis in Cenchreae (near Corinth). In his less well-known philosophical work *De deo Socratis*, Apuleius brings to life the *daimonion* of Socrates, a supernatural voice unique to Socrates that purportedly gave him advice from time to time. Middle-Platonist philosophers in the 1st and 2nd century penned monographs on the *daimonion* of Socrates and created demonologies to reflect on the role of such inner voices in the human being. According to Apuleius,

> [A] human being has no secret from those guardians, either within his mind or without; no, they involve themselves attentively in everything, see everything, learn everything, and dwell in the very recesses of the mind as conscience does. This being that I talk of is a personal guardian, single overseer, household watchman, private caretaker, intimate acquaintance, tireless observer, inescapable onlooker, inseparable witness, who reproves your bad deeds and approves your good ones. (Apuleius, *De Deo Socratis*, 16,5–9, trans. Jones)

The correspondences between the middle-Platonic "demons" and the Christian "Holy Spirit," which appear striking at first glance, point to substantial differences and highlight the distinctiveness of early Christian pneumatology: While middle-Platonic demonology teaches a hierarchy and plurality of the demons/spirits with the *daimon* of Socrates ranking first, early Christian pneumatology knows but one divine Spirit. The personal *daimones* remain intermediate beings, never becoming an immediate influence or presence of the supreme God. By contrast, the Spirit in Christian understanding constitutes a direct connection between Creator and creature, carrying this idea to the extreme when the Spirit is described as interceding before God with groaning (Rom 8:26–27). Unlike the middle-Platonic individual *daimon* dwelling in a person, most forcefully in a wise man like Socrates, the Spirit in early Christianity functions as an equalizer, as it were, transcending ethnicity and gender, status, and lifeworld. The Spirit is democratized: all Christ-followers, it is believed, experience the Spirit in their reality of life. The Spirit is not merely an inner phenomenon but comes from outside and radically reconfigures the believers' existence. "Such a transformative efficacy of the Spirit is without parallel in the Graeco-Roman

tradition. It is grounded in the Spirit's connection with a personal and universal God" (Feldmeier 2022, p. 128). Despite all necessary methodological restraint, it cannot simply be argued away that Spirit-talk in fact correlates with Spirit-experience and that religious experience was a decisive factor in the spread of the Jesus movement. Larry Hurtado (2000) points out: "The success of earliest Christianity and its appeal and credibility in the eyes of converts seem to have been heavily connected with its ability to provide religious experiences that correspond to its rhetoric of being 'gifted,' 'filled,' 'anointed,' and 'empowered' by the Spirit of God" (p. 193).

Though it seems counterintuitive at first glance: "The spirit takes form, materializes" (Lauster 2021, pp. 56–57)—not only in social forms but also in literary forms; a new kind of theology, a new self-understanding, and new experiences required new forms of expression. Christ groups, in distinction to mystery cults and other associations, became "early adopters of bookish practices" (Kloppenborg 2019, p. xiii). In fact, they creatively developed and reinvented existing literary genres such as the letter and the biography; Paul's letters represent a new shape of the epistolary genre in terms of length, addressees, and purpose, and soon after Paul penned his letters, Mark created a new literary genre: the Gospel (*euaggelion*). In the first decades of the Jesus movement, there was an apparent urge to literalize and reflect on its founding figure Jesus Christ and on the transformative experiences associated with him. Most interestingly, Christians danced out of line in their choice of medium. They preferred the codex over the scroll. If the illustrious library of Alexandria still existed in the times of Paul and Mark, it would have been stacked with scrolls rather than codices. "About 95 percent of extant second-century AD non-Christian copies of literary texts are bookrolls, and about 5 percent are codices. But at least 75 percent of all second-century Christian manuscripts of any text are codices" (Hurtado 2016, p. 134). Possibly, there was a general cultural trend toward the codex in the 1st century, but it was early Christianity that made it the spearhead of their movement. New wine is put into fresh wineskins. Like the later Reformation with its printing press, early Christianity was media avant-garde and the catalyst of a communications revolution.

8. Conclusions

In the 2nd century, the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* reflects on the way of life and self-understanding of the believers in Christ in their social and cultural context: "Yet while living in both Greek and barbarian cities according to each one's lot and following local customs with respect to clothing and food and the rest of life, they illustrate the admirable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship" (Diognetus 5,4, trans. Jefford 2013). These lines epitomize "the rallying cry . . . 'how do I live a lifestyle that reflects my faith?' " (Jefford 2013, p. 218)—a cry which is as relevant today as it was back then. The times are gone in which Christians could celebrate that "Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth" (Gibbon [1776] 1998, p. 244). The times are gone in which Christians could simply claim to have the better arguments for their faith. The times are gone in which Christians could rest on institutional stability and religious homogeneity. We need to move beyond a naïve philosophy of history, simplistic apologetics, and nostalgia for times past. In fact, some expressions of the rallying call of the first Christian generations might help us to become better witnesses in the twenty-first century (cf. Schliesser 2023).

I will briefly recapitulate the exemplary characteristics of early Christ groups discovered on this virtual tour from Italy to Africa with an attempt to leap over the ditch between past and present, giving voice to a multi-confessional cloud of witnesses.

1. Child abandonment, abortion, and abuse were soon and forcefully denounced by Christians. It can be suspected that the early Christian commitment to the life of the vulnerable and defenseless attracted attention. A simple ethic of the protection of life motivated not only mothers but also girls to consider joining the Jesus movement. Even today, cultural witness needs to recognize the importance of a "contrast ethic" that neither conforms to social mainstream nor adheres to a moralism remote from the

world. It aims for a provocative distinctiveness and divergent priorities, embodying what Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh (2016) has called "the deep solidarity of all human beings": "The kind of church I dream of goes out into the world and helps to bind wounds by taking on the suffering of others into the suffering body of Christ. All people, Christian or not, are members or potential members of the body of Christ, as Dorothy Day liked to say" (p. 5).

2. Christian existence is an existence "between the times," as it takes place retrospectively in the light of the Christ event and prospectively in the horizon of Christ's return. In this cosmic interval, mundane contingencies such as status, ethnicity, and gender can no longer be decisive before God. It should deeply trouble Christian communities if they are no longer a mirror and microcosm of their neighborhood and if they lose contact with some segments of society. Former Lutheran Bishop Wolfgang Huber (2010) expresses his agony in these words: "For we do not know the sorrow of many people, nor their joy. We do not suspect the doubts they carry within them, but we are also unfamiliar with their firmness of faith. We do not appreciate the commitment of the elites and are speechless towards the excluded at the margins of society. Crossing milieu boundaries is what the church of freedom is called to do" (p. 71). One of the main challenges of churches in Europe is to be a corporeal witness of a new social imaginary.

3. Regardless of their self-understanding, Christian communities in Europe are commonly perceived as some kind of voluntary association. They have to respond to the same question as the first Christian communities: why should anyone seek to become a member of this group? Christ groups of the early days constantly negotiated status boundaries and gender roles, they met weekly not only to worship but also for table-fellowship, they cared for the underprivileged and engaged in intellectual conversation about their faith, they maintained relationships to other Christ groups in the region but also internationally, and they engaged in mission. These characteristics were quite distinctive in the Roman Empire, and this distinctiveness is, not least, based on the formative power of the Christian worldview. Quoting Patriarch Bartholomew, Eve Tibbs (2021) underlines the orthodox view of equality and inclusivity as a thoroughly theological idea: "The Kingdom of God is itself a welcoming and inclusive reality, and 'the whole world is a sacred cathedral; no person is unordained for the kingdom, and no place is unhallowed in this world' " (p. 62).

4. Today's visitors of the Artemision will be gravely disappointed. They will see remains of the temple's foundations and a bit of rubble. The solitary column erected from composite remains is but a gloomy relic of a grand past. In many communities all over Europe, church steeples are no more than a memento to the formidable history of Christianity in the West. This might be the time when Christians are reminded that their beginnings were humble in terms of their outward representations but most extravagant in their self-understanding as the "body of Christ" and "temple of God." They had neither power nor means to build temples. And they did not need to. The lack of one central building not only offered accessible points of contact with interested people of the family and professional network but also promoted the emergence of variegated expressions of church, leadership structures, and theologies. Gayle G. Koontz (2020, p. 183f.) recalls the anabaptist ecclesiology of "the church as the visible body of Christ—a community of yielded, regenerated, faithful, committed, baptized believers." Developed in the sixteenth century, this vision could lead (not only Anabaptist) churches into the future, despite, or rather because of, its inherent fragility and plurality. Plurality can be celebrated and practiced as long as and insofar as it takes place in the light of Christ-faith: less provincialism, clericalism, and confessionalism and more mixed ecology, multi-professional leadership, and generous orthodoxy.

5. "Faith" (*pistis*), a scintillating term including belief, trust, faithfulness and much more took center stage in early Christianity. The discovery of faith in early Christianity

was a *new* discovery in the religious landscape of antiquity; there is an explosion of faith-talk in the New Testament. It is high time that Christ-faith is rediscovered, not only as a mode of receiving salvation, but as a mode of existence that embraces the whole human being and is at work in "networks of trust," whose witness has the power to impact neighborhoods and all of society. Such communities are neither ashamed of their faith nor shun its costliness, but rather incarnate its provocative, reality-changing power. The site of action of such faith is not the pious soul but the public square. This has been argued and put into practice most perceptively by archbishop Rowan Williams (2013), summarized in his book *Faith in the Public Square*, in which he seeks "to find the connecting points between various public questions and the fundamental beliefs about creation and salvation" (p. 225).

6. As early Christianity was challenged to put its new wine into fresh wineskins, churches in Europe are challenged to rediscover their potential as culturally avant-garde in how they communicate. Inspired by the diverse expressions of Christian life in the early decades, they exercise experimental freedom in questions of organizational structure, meeting place, worship time, liturgy, and forms of communication. Also, faith and experience move closer together. Paul believed in the Spirit because he had experienced the Spirit. His theology is an expression of his experience. It is only fitting that an African theologian has his say in the end. Reflecting on the Holy Spirit in West African Christianity, Ghanaian Pentecostal exegete Michael Wandusim (2023) concludes: "No Holy Spirit, No Ghanaian Christianity." One does not need to have the gift of prophecy to expand this assessment: no Holy Spirit, no European Christianity, and indeed, no World Christianity.

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Article

Inclusive Heritage: Implications for the Church of England

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Abstract: The Church of England's historic buildings represent the single largest group of heritage sites in the UK, playing a key public-facing role in the church's 'cultural witness'. However, they are complex historic environments implicated in the recent focus on 'contested heritage' and imperial legacies. The wider heritage sector's answer to the adversarial nature of this debate has been to turn contested histories into dialogical opportunities; participatory and collaborative approaches to interpretation and curation have become an important feature of much recent secular heritage work. Yet, the CofE has not yet articulated or embraced the value of similar initiatives for its own collections, with guidance at the institutional level aimed primarily at conservation and protection. This paper initiates a discussion about how engagement with sensitive memories enhances the importance of CofE's cultural heritage. It offers a preliminary report of a research project led by the author titled 'Inclusive Interpretations of Christian Heritage', carried out between 2021 and 2022 at iconic churches in central London. After discussing the theoretical context, project rationale, and method, the paper discusses the connections which Christians from ethnic minority or immigrant backgrounds have to ecclesiastical spaces usually associated with national history. The perspectives of previously unrepresented groups can supplement expert assessments concerning a site's significance, revealing important areas in which the CofE's cultural assets hold meaning beyond national or aesthetic importance. The paper argues that widening community engagement represents a crucial task for accentuating the social and civic importance of the CofE's cultural heritage.

Keywords: heritage; contested; colonialism; postcolonial; memorials; inclusion; engagement; Anglican; Church of England

1. Introduction

One sign of the Church of England's (CofE) central role in the public realm is the undisputed cultural importance ascribed to its historic buildings. The Church of England is responsible for one of the nation's largest collections of cultural assets, in the form of a staggering 42 cathedrals and 12,220 listed parish churches, representing nearly 45% of all Grade 1 listed buildings in England (Taylor 2017, p. 11). However, Anglican churches are complex historic environments. Recently, questions have been raised about the relation of the CofE's estates and endowments to the transatlantic slave trade and other exploitations, and about ecclesiastical monuments commemorating figures whose actions or affiliations brought suffering to other individuals.[1] Beyond these, England's central role as progenitor of global Christianity also presents deep postcolonial dilemmas: European expansionism, missions and conversion, the spread of Western values and standards, and racial hierarchies all affect social cohesion, equality, and sense of belonging (Choy 2021).

The reception to the CofE's reckoning with its imperial legacies has largely mirrored the culture wars in the public sphere: while some individuals welcome it, many others perceive this move as unpatriotic and needlessly emotional. The wider heritage sector's answer to the adversarial nature of the debate has been to redress the exclusionary impact of monumental histories and sites: if statues, like the national and authorized stories they serve, promote a one-sided history, what is needed is to turn them into dialogical

opportunities. Giving marginalized communities a voice through participatory and col-laborative approaches to historical research and interpretation is now widely accepted as "best practice" in the heritage sector, crucial for helping build community cohesion and achieve civic ideals. The term "sites of conscience," for example, was popularized in the late 1990s to describe the duty of historic places, museums, memorials, and other settings to preserve difficult, painful, and uncomfortable aspects of the past in ways that turn "memory into action."[2]

However, though community engagement and their resulting co-productions, co-curations, and co-creations have been a feature of much recent secular heritage work, the CofE has not yet articulated or embraced the value of similar initiatives for its own collections. This is somewhat surprising, because the CofE stands at a distinct advantage in this regard. For in contrast to other contested historic sites such as palaces, stately homes, museums, and galleries, Christians from diasporic communities are personally invested in England's places of worship simply by virtue of their faith: belonging is assumed on the basis of religious affiliation. This pre-existing and elective link between a collection and an audience—the envy of any heritage institution—should mean that the CofE starts from a stronger position than most other sensitive sites of memory in its capacity to promote social connections amidst contestations. However, much of this potential lies buried and little understood, with guidance at the institutional level aimed primarily at conservation and protection, and passions at the public level heated over the perceived threat to historic collections. This paper initiates a discussion about how widening engagement with sensitive memories enhances the importance of the CofE's cultural heritage. The paper refers to a research project led by the author, titled 'Inclusive Interpretations of Christian Heritage'. It was carried out between September 2021 and August 2022 at Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, and Southwark Cathedral, and made possible by a Durham University Common Awards Seedcorn Grant. As the project needed to address the funding body's mandate of strengthening Anglican theological education, this research was necessarily limited in scope, and concerns the specific question of Christian identity and belonging within historic Anglican spaces. The following paper first establishes the theoretical context, then briefly summarizes the project rationale, method, and key insights to argue that the CofE should be confident about the value of opening up its collections to marginalized groups for new historical insights and interpretations. In particular, the paper offers preliminary indications about the ways in which previously unrepresented perspectives enrich our stories about the CofE's historic churches: their reflections allow us to tell a deeper and more profound story about our cultural assets and reveal areas in which the collections hold meaning beyond national or aesthetic significance. In this way, widening community engagement represents a crucial task for accentuating the social and civic importance of the CofE's cultural heritage.

2. The CofE as Cultural Heritage Guardian

The CofE has been described as "an accidental heritage steward" (Berry et al. 2020, p. S1). Listed churches are exempt from secular listed building consent, but are subject to the CofE's internal system for the care and conservation of its buildings, churchyards, furnishings, and contents. Applications for changes to the building's fabric are weighed against considerations of potential harm or loss caused to the site or object's "heritage value," largely defined in terms of architectural, artistic, historic, and archaeological merit (ibid., S2). Experts are called upon to regulate, explain, and manage heritage assets, making judgments about the meaning and importance of a site based on its esthetic importance or rarity, authenticity, and contribution to a national story (Smith 2006).

There is an increasing recognition within the wider heritage sector that this privileging of experts over communities can reinforce long-standing prejudices and inequalities by either deliberately or unintentionally suppressing versions of the past that allow subordinated groups a sense of belonging within that heritage (Little and Shackel 2016, p. 42). Conflict arises when the "official" interpretation about a site's significance ignores how it

might be experienced by a diverse range of people, thereby offering inclusion to a certain demographic while excluding others. Practices are now promoted to prevent this dissonance and redress the inherent power imbalance between professionals and local communities. The Faro Convention adopted by the Council of Europe prefers the term "heritage community" to "heritage site" to emphasize that the value of a place comes from the affinity which a wide range of people feel for it, beyond the judgments of conservation experts.[3] Furthermore, the task of heritage interpretation is now widely considered crucial for promoting civic goals such as equality and tolerance, and respect for people, places, and the environment. Building on Freeman Tilden's (1957) classic *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Tim Copeland has made a powerful argument for a "constructivist" approach to heritage management which mediates the present experience of visitors with the complexities and challenges of the historic environment through collaboration and reflection. Far from complicating heritage sites unnecessarily, the aim is rather to arrive collectively at new knowledge and understanding, and to promote a sense of belonging and ownership which are the essential ingredients for active citizenship (Copeland 2006, 2009). Likewise, Yujie Zhu (2021) has described a "ladder of heritage interpretation" for understanding five purposes of visitor engagement, beginning first with entertainment and consumption, then secondly knowledge and fact-sharing (e.g., about events and figures), and thirdly understanding and recognition (e.g., of historical impact and legacies). However, it is co-production which unleashes the true potential of heritage tourism—the fourth and fifth rungs: imagination and reflection (e.g., about feelings and future behaviors and actions), and healing and reconciliation (e.g., from conflict, trauma, loss, shame). Thus, recent theoretical approaches challenge the view that heritage institutions and practitioners should be conservative forces for preserving static categories such as nation or tradition; rather heritage spaces should be "interlocutors and co-inventors in the creation of new social possibilities, and alternative stories about what it means to belong" (Sontum 2021, p. 44). Heritage is envisioned as "something that is done" rather than something "to have" (Smith 2006, p. 65).

Applying these theories to the CofE context would entail viewing historic churches not as "heritage sites" with fixed meanings, but as a living "heritage community" of global Christians, and embracing the ways in which this heritage community changes the meaning of a historic space. But what precisely would this achieve? The leading professional heritage interpretation provider for CofE churches and cathedrals, the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture (CSCC) based at the University of York, adopts a highly collaborative and locally-led approach to ecclesiastical heritage interpretation. Their projects involve lengthy consultations with stakeholders at multiple levels to ascertain the significance of the site, and volunteers are often involved in the production of interpretive content. However, the CSCC is keen to point out that writing and installing some facts about the history of a church for a passive visitor experience is easy enough; the much more difficult task is deciding what emotional response and behavioral change a building and its collections ought to stimulate. This observation suggests that though there might be support in general for the idea of diversifying audience engagement with the CofE's cultural assets, the larger obstacle is understanding how this would substantively improve the heated and adversarial nature of the debate over contested heritage. Indeed, encouraging greater diversity in public engagement seems to require some justification, as it departs from the currently dominant conservation- and expert-led approach to the CofE's collections, and the individuals who control, influence, and take the most interest in the church's heritage work are still overwhelmingly drawn from the white British demographic. Put bluntly, what would be gained by encouraging minority groups to offer their views and reflections on what is frequently referred to as "the nation's heritage"? What is the value of a dialogical approach to the CofE's cultural heritage spaces?

3. Inclusive Interpretations of Christian Heritage

Stemming from these theoretical issues, a research project was conducted with the aim of enriching interpretations about London's most iconic churches by revealing the

connections that Christians from ethnic minority or immigrant backgrounds have to heritage spaces usually associated with national history. The primary question was, "In what ways do their responses to a historic church differ from, or supplement, expert assessments concerning the site's significance?"

A participatory method was crucial, for which the "autoethnographic walking interview" was selected. In autoethnographic research, the participant uses self-reflection to explore how his/her autobiographical story connects to wider cultural, social, and political questions; the life of the participant becomes a conscious part of the place or object being studied (Ellis 2008). In this way, narratives about heritage assets prioritize the participant as author and interpreter, rather than as a passive receiver of knowledge, and stresses the participants' journey rather than the objective qualities of the site itself. Investigating historic places through autoethnographic observations can draw out tensions between the values ascribed by its living community and those enshrined in official designations by heritage agencies. The "walking interview" is similar to a tour in representing the conventional way in which heritage sites are experienced, but differs from a tour in placing the participant in the position not of "tourist" but as someone with capacity to articulate attitudes, knowledge, and responses to the surrounding environment.

Several themes emerged from 37 autoethnographic walking interviews conducted at Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, and Southwark Cathedral with participants ranging in age from 20s to 70s across Protestant denominational affiliations (Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, congregationalist), from countries of origin in the Caribbean, North America, South Asia, East Asia, and Africa. The following is only a preliminary synthesis of some key insights which begin to reveal new ways of understanding historic ecclesiastical sites. A fuller and more detailed publication will follow in due course.

3.1. Understanding Why England's Ecclesiastical Heritage Matters to Ethnic Minority Christians

It is difficult to overstate the fact that Christians from diasporic communities generally begin with an instinctive and positive affinity for historic churches, and are uniformly taken in by the impressive architectural beauty and incredible workmanship. Such positive feelings often come from personal autobiographical perspectives. Standing under the dome of St Paul's, one participant said:

> *For my ancestors, they would never have ever imagined I'd be standing in a place like this, being in this space, surviving even . . . that this would even be allowed to happen.*

Another said:

> *I'm just thinking about my grandmother in the Caribbean who was Anglican through her veins. She would be absolutely thrilled to know I'm walking through this place right now.*

These reflections show that it is impossible to escape or underestimate the historic impact of England's role and of Westernization. Many remarked, for example, on the transporting of the architectural form of the church to the colonies, not unlike (to use examples mentioned by participants) plug sockets or the English language itself. Upon hearing an organ, one participant from East Asia said:

> *Where I'm from, some people don't think that you can have a proper church without a pipe organ . . . . It wasn't so long ago that only the piano or pipe organ were allowed in churches. Our own instruments were considered secular.*

The wooden quire stalls in Westminster Abbey reminded another participant of his childhood memories waiting for his mother while she had choir rehearsals in similar looking stalls in a former British colony. One participant saw the British coat of arms in Henry VII's chapel at the Abbey and remarked that it is almost identical to the Hong Kong coat of arms.

The reminders of a mutually entangled history have a powerful impact. One individual said:

> *In my country, we have no Christian heritage sites before the English arrived. It's not until I stand at the tomb of Elizabeth and Mary [here at Westminster Abbey] that I realize, 'Oh so this is what it means to be an Anglican.'*

Another remarked that her country's colonial administrators came and went, but seeing their monuments at Westminster Abbey made her realize "this history actually happened," that governance over colonies was not trivial or negligible for the British, but was celebrated. This made participants wish that the history told here included the stories of everyone involved:

If there is something here that celebrates an administrator in India, it's equally important to include the perspective of someone from India. These statues were at its time made for the consumption of a particular audience valorizing a particular set of people, and this history is rejected and embraced in different ways now.

One participant from the Caribbean said of St Paul's Cathedral:

For us this is the mother church, but I have to remember my family at their Anglican church back home – that was also our mother church. What's the definition of a mother church? I don't see this as being inherently higher than that, it's on the same level – ultimately the church belongs to God.

One participant, commenting that Westminster Abbey in the popular imagination symbolizes "the heart of Anglican Christianity," asked:

Why should Nigeria, which has the largest number of Anglicans in the world, not have some representation here? It would only be right for some aspect of the story of Nigerian Anglican Christianity to be told here.

Much as it is impossible to visit an Anglican church in Nigeria and not think of England, so for some, it is not right to visit an Anglican church in England and not think of Nigeria. For them, celebrating English Christianity comes hand-in-hand with acknowledging the story of Christianity in other nations.

While white British visitors can choose whether to acknowledge or disregard the history of the colonies, for ethnic minority Christians the need to think constantly about the complex and entangled histories can be mentally exhausting. Descendants of enslaved peoples in particular can never "just enjoy" the building. As one participant said:

I'm awed by this architecture. But then you start asking questions that draw you away from that initial feeling of heightened religiosity. Where did all this wealth come from, who built this, where did the gold and materials come from? How many lives were lost overseas or here to enable this greatness to be constructed?'

Another individual, reflecting about her relationship with St Paul's Cathedral, said:

I have a very strong sense of my family history which is more locally located, more socially located, outside of this grandeur, outside of this building. I don't relate to the memorials here in the same way I relate to the white-washed walls of my ancestors' church in the Caribbean, the oldest church there, knowing that my ancestors helped to build that and occupied the pews and worshipped there.

This reality, she said, means she cannot help but think outside of the official "heritage significance" ascribed to the collections at St Paul's:

These colonial monuments, it's skewed: Sure, here's an administrator of the French West Indies, here's another of the East India Company. But when I think about my home, what this represents is far more complex. It's the relationship with my ancestors, and this doesn't ever come out in the audio guide or the guidebook you get about why this monument is very important—the more complete, multi-layered history.

Contrary to assumption, the challenge posed by commemorative monuments, then, is not only the fact of historic injustices, but even more pressingly the current-day suppression of voices and of dignity they represent if left unmediated. Despite the complicated histories which bind colonizer with colonized, commemorations perpetuate the myth of a single narrative: far from simply chronicling a "dead past" as some would argue, their messages can have a painful effect beyond the immediate historical event in question, so pervasive are the legacies of empire. One participant of Indian origin paused at the memorial to

Stringer Lawrence, commander of the East India Company's troops, at Westminster Abbey, and saw the lines "For Discipline Established, Fortresses Protected, Settlements Extended, French and Indian Armies Defeated." While he had consistently spoken positively about the monuments until this point, this one prompted him to remark:

> *I see this and now I'm annoyed. In my town we saw these symbols of British power. You know, the clubs where only the British were allowed and so on, and my relatives who are wealthy sometimes take me to these clubs now, because when they were young, they weren't allowed in these places. My grandmother once asked, after my mother had moved to the UK in the '70s, 'Are you allowed to talk to British people?' And she couldn't get over the fact that you could.*

Another participant said:

> *When we were in Hong Kong, my dad and I went over on the Star Ferry to Kowloon, and we looked back and he started telling me about how Chinese people weren't allowed to live on the Peak and that kind of thing stays with you. Because you realize your ancestors wouldn't have been allowed to live there.*

Looking at a commemoration of the first bishop of Calcutta at St Paul's Cathedral, one participant said:

> *I am grateful, but this also inevitably makes me think about my family's conversion to Christianity by missionaries, and how much of it was based on a Eurocentric idea that the English were inherently better. Whether deliberately or subliminally, a whole generation of black people have grown up believing they were inferior.*

Another participant coming from Hong Kong and finding herself in front of the monument at Westminster Abbey to Lord Palmerston (who as Prime Minister pursued war with China to force the legalization of trade in opium), said:

> *There has got to be a way of celebrating these figures and these things without muting other voices; but this is muting my place in the memory. England is a dream place I want to go to, a dream country, the place I wanted to come, there are so many things that are familiar—even the way the churches are. Where I'm from was a mini version of here. But I feel like I'm standing in front of these things and feeling again and again how it was when my mother was told that the only way I was allowed to go to school was if I had an English name, and my mother, not knowing any English names, told them to choose, and that's how I got my name. So what it feels to me is that I am holding an unrequited love: there's a love—there's a part of England that I love, but at the same time the way they speak, it is a shallow monologue which hollows out the depth and dimensions of the story that I'm written in that is in relation to them. I'm still looking for a place where I would feel acknowledged as part of the story of Palmerston and of this country.*

The overall effect produced by the monuments should be acknowledged. One person remarked that these monuments cement the link between Christianity and political and military power in a stronger way than necessarily accurate or required:

> *For many people who were in churches in India, like some of my ancestors—their primary link was to the missionaries. They were Christians first, and their primary experience of Christianity was through the Bible and prayer and the missionaries, not through politics or the army. But suddenly we come here and see a much stronger link between empire and Christianity, it just becomes suddenly apparent. It's things like this which lend themselves to more postcolonial critique: so now I come to England, and I have to equate Christianity with empire.*

Arriving at what was meant to be the highlight of the tour, the sacred site of pilgrimage, the shrine of Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey, one participant said:

> *The antiquity of this shrine doesn't compensate for what I've endured for the past 25–30 minutes walking past imperial-era monuments. The journey I've just taken hasn't prepared me to be here and be prayerful.*

One participant was visibly distressed by the end of her walk around St Paul's: standing beneath a pair of monuments to Admiral Nelson and Marquis Cornwallis, both in swagger pose and accompanied by figures of Britannia with her plumed helmet and spear, she stated:

> *I couldn't sit here for a service anymore—I can't unsee what I've seen. I'd actually say to the steward 'I'm not gonna sit here' because this is about colonial violence.*

These heartfelt remarks show us that the CofE's public—and specifically national—character often catches by surprise those whose interest in churches is spiritual. Some individuals express this in positive terms: one participant described his admiration, through reviewing the monuments to military leaders, politicians, and writers, that Christianity plays an important role in the life of the nation and is not just about transcendent faith and doctrine. Another remarked about Nelson's tomb:

> *In my country I had to learn about Nelson from a textbook. The teachers told me about his heroic victories at sea. How I relate to a national hero is that when I settled down in this country, he became my hero too.*

However, for others, the function of churches as public spaces causes tension:

> *Somehow churches are so willing to assert the dominance of the earthly kingdom, while they're claiming that this is the place for everyone to come here to worship.*

One participant argued that it is very important for places of worship to emphasize "the heavenly kingdom" out of respect for those who had wholeheartedly accepted the spiritual vision presented by missionaries. Confronted with the tomb of an English missionary at Westminster Abbey, his thoughts turned to Samuel Ajayi Crowther who, having spent his life converting Africans to Christianity, was removed from the Niger mission and placed under the supervision of European secretaries who were resistant to the idea of native self-determination:

> *He died a heartbroken, depressed man, because he realized that these people, though they preach Christianity, what they're practicing is English culture.*

Sentiments such as these suggest that the CofE must make a deliberate effort to underscore that its cultural assets do not exist principally to preserve "Englishness" but to maintain the spiritual purposes to which many have converted at great cost.

For those whose interest in the CofE's churches is not ethnic or national but primarily religious, the definition of what "community" means in the context of the nation's iconic churches is necessarily spiritualized. One individual at Southwark Cathedral remarked that migration means the constant feeling of homesickness, sense of separation, and distance:

> *There is nothing here that reminds me of home—the colors, the scents, the fabric, the sounds . . . —which means to engage here I must detach the concept of the church as a building from the church as the people of God. I tell myself that if I'm here and I have other people here with me in worship, it is hallowed ground regardless of what it is . . . It is worshipping with people that makes a church a church.*

Thus the medieval statues of saints in Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster Abbey prompt one individual to say that her sense of spiritual belonging comes from the living community of faith around her since she does not have the historical knowledge required to appreciate saints celebrated in medieval churches. Highlighting a similar barrier, another participant remarked with puzzlement on Poet's Corner:

> *I remember being ushered here to sit for Evensong. I saw the names and assumed they were fellow Christians before me. They are not someone important but just people who have prayed in this same space and then who were worshipping just like me, and I was overwhelmed by the sense of being connected with Christians in the past or all the forerunners before me so that I was surrounded by witnesses. But now I realize that maybe they're actually not even churchgoers, just the most significant literary writers and artists. They don't even need to be Christian even.*

One individual commented that though surrounded by symbols of status and power all around the church, she knows most of the work is carried by the community, and the church is transformed by the people of that community, and that therefore:

> *What's in the flags, stained glass windows, statues . . . it's just 'brick and mortar'.*

Such comments show the strong desire to find a sense of spiritual community in an environment comprised of historic objects or commemorations which may be alienating.

Participants were therefore inclined toward features which they felt most clearly expressed the fundamental meaning of Christianity. The Abbey's Great West Doors with the statues of modern martyrs prompted several reflections:

> *This is the Christian faith; it is Hebrews and Peter and Paul talking about suffering as the mark of Christianity. In this great building of power, it's important, this recognition of suffering for Christ as the benchmark.*

The statues moved another participant on a personal level because of the reminder of the reality of persecution in his own country:

> *For me at first Westminster Abbey was just a tourist attraction. With this I found a personal link. Because otherwise for me it's all foreign. Now if I'm not Christian, this is a place where I take some photos and then leave. But because I am Christian, I'm always pushing to find out more about, spiritually, what are the meanings here that I can find. This is definitely one of them. He is here because he sacrificed not for other things but for Christ. And being a Christian myself, and connecting to this brother—I've never met him, didn't even know who he was—but looking at him links so much to what it means to be a Christian in my country.*

An image of Christ in glory, a mosaic of the Last Supper, a 12th century consecration cross, medieval wall paintings of the crucified and resurrected Christ—these were pointed out as particularly meaningful objects in the churches not only because of their artistic beauty or antiquity, but because they offer "respite" (to use one person's word) from the overtly militaristic and nationalistic imagery all around, and anticipate the eternal and heavenly kingdom which binds us to each other.

3.2. Acknowledging the Dignity of Ethnic Minority Christians in Sensitive Historic Environments

The above reflections expose one very important dimension of the visitor experience at historic churches which must be acknowledged: namely, the interior cognitive processes that diasporic individuals exercise to comprehend their own presence in monumental spaces. Frequently, the lavish furnishings and opulent contents of iconic churches led participants to voice moving reflections about humility. Looking at the coronation chair at the Abbey, one participant said:

> *I need to be comfortable with who I am, I'm not royalty, I'm not in any family tree, I don't have a lineage that links me to anybody in a history book. Maybe I wish I was in the lineage, but it just seems so arbitrary, and social advantage likewise seems so arbitrary.*

The portrait of Richard II prompted another to remark on the orb and scepter, symbols of power:

> *So he's Richard II, he's got a portrait in Westminster Abbey, and I'm only me. But when we're face to face with Jesus, we're both standing on the same line, so I think that's why I'm not intimidated because I give all reverence to Jesus. I'm not nothing without the Abbey or the Queen. It has a lot to do with how ethnic minorities read the Bible: we're always focused on 'this is what sets me free' . . . We're always reading Scripture for what sets me free from every kind of injustice, everyone who thinks that they can have a dominion over me, and when I read the Scripture, I realize Jesus sacrificed for me. King Richard didn't do anything for me. My faith in Jesus is so secure, so I'm not intimidated by these things.*

Again, the coronation chair and portrait of Richard II led another individual to explain:

I come from a ruling family in my little village. And my daughters who grew up in Britain cannot relate because for them ruling is all about 'you've got to be the Queen of England'. They don't have any concept about what coming from a ruling family in Nigeria is, because that was all lost. What I mean by 'lost' is that the power was taken away from our ruling families and placed in the governors which the British put there on behalf of England. So my ruling family became what you call just a ceremonial figure; the ruling person no longer has any real power and command, just a figurehead . . . . But I do not walk around wanting people to recognize my royal lineage. Because I believe there is a God and I believe God is awesome, all-powerful, all-mighty, and we need to stop going around having this superiority mindset because that is the same thing that has led to many years of putting down people—women and other groups . . . For me it's very much a case of my calling to ensure that we don't repeat the same mistakes going forward.

These remarks echo that of another who, when passing by a Bible on a lectern, spoke about how she has lived her life claiming promises from God's Holy Word. Another individual, pausing at the huge west doors at St Paul's, said:

It's a door that's bigger than my flat, I can't even take it in . . . Do I care that this door is only opened for special people and not for me? No, probably because my parents taught me to be humble and know my station in life and be content with what I have. Not that I'm berating myself, but society does have a structure and I try not to be jealous, try to be hardworking, and as my mum says, just 'serve my generation'. So I try not to spend too much time being jealous of bishops and queens. These are values I deliberately want to maintain and cultivate because they've served me well.

Another, training to be a priest, said:

What does it mean to be a Christian? It's not about the seat of power. So the primary question for me in being a Christian is how can I, in my parish, in a small way, show a true reflection of what being a Christian means? Because for me to be a Christian isn't about belonging, or even being, in spaces like this.

Many individuals were prompted by objects suggestive of wealth and status to reflect on their own life history. One said:

Of course I'm not acknowledged individually in this place. But I've never done things for the acknowledgement. I've grown up with not having a lot, and making do with what I had. So I'm quite proud of myself for where I've got to, because it has all been my own hard graft. Nothing was given to me. My dad was a laborer and my mom worked in a brewery and then she was a carer. And I didn't think I'd ever get to university . . . And I can say everything I have, I have worked for—I've not been gifted it, I haven't inherited it, so I'm really proud of myself for getting to where I am, which goes toward my self-assurance, because I depend on nobody to give things to me or hand things to me. And God knows I'm here. God sees me.

These all point to the psychological work which many individuals do in the face of monumental buildings and histories. As one participant remarked upon entering St Paul's Cathedral, many people of color can recall a time when they've been told "You're so black, or you're so brown," or, on the contrary, "you're so white [i.e., you're not black or brown enough]"—and both are acts of racialization to which one is particularly sensitive when entering cultural spaces such as abbeys and cathedrals. One individual said whilst looking at the monument of Trahearne, a porter to James I, in Southwark Cathedral:

You know, I understand what is going on when I come into a room that's a 'white space', a space like this cathedral. It's not just observation, it's surveillance: I'm watched. And I understand sometimes the energy of the room changes when I come in because it's like 'he's a big black guy' . . . and this then adds a type of resolve: I'm just going to resolve to make this space work for me. This means doing something as silly as looking at this monument and wondering about hygiene: how did people bathe back then. Just to humanize it all.

Another, prompted by the lofty and stunning nave of Westminster Abbey, said:

> *I am supremely impressed by this place of Christian worship—it is uplifting. But having said that, I am also conflicted. I'm just going back to the idea that whatever worship looked like in Nigeria, when missionaries arrived that was interrupted and denigrated and there was a loss of history, a loss of culture, and it destroyed the record of my people's search for God and their relationship to God, their theology.*

We must therefore not ignore the disorientation some feel when surveying ecclesiastical objects. Remarking on commemorations and statues, one participant said:

> *We were warned so strenuously against idol worship. So English missionaries taught my people to be wary of figural representations and I'm now here surrounded by statues applying this skill and it's very uncomfortable. Why was it wrong in Africa to put up statues of people in churches but right here?*

Another participant from the West Indies said:

> *Of course I get that this space is not supposed to be 'alienating'. But why is it alienating? Because you're asking people to see art and culture that can only remind them of what that culture represented to their grandparents and to their ancestors. You know for my ancestors all this art here would have represented oppression or abuse. You know there was a point in history when black people were considered to not even have the intellectual capacity equal to white people to appreciate the sort of art here. We were literally considered to be cattle at one point in history. So with me looking around at all of this stuff, I can appreciate it for its present beauty, but then I think about it historically and what it would have meant for the people of that time . . .*

But another, looking at a monument related the East India Company, admitted:

> *By skin color and my surname I have more in common with the Indians who were on the receiving end of the East India Company's actions. But by my education and the way I view the world, well I've been raised here and even my grandparents were schooled in British India, in British education, and in British manners and the British worldview. So the way I view and experience the world, I have more in common with the people who were there with the Company than I do with the Indians who I might look more like. So I can recognize the greed, the evil aspect of the corporation . . . but I struggle with feeling 'us vs. them'—'Indian vs. Brits'. I can relate to both, although I don't find much to admire in the behavior of the East India Company. But, simply to the extent that they were Britons as I now am and they saw the world in a British way, well I had their eyes even if I had the skin and hair and surname of the people they were colonizing.*

The range of tension and contradictions which surface highlight how historic churches are complex rather than straightforward environments for ethnic minorities and diasporic groups. Thus, it becomes even more imperative to understand the role of personal faith in such spaces. One person said:

> *It's my faith that draws me into this building, not its fame.*

Another said:

> *My faith in Christ means I'm always trying to resolve the contradictions, not magnify them. To see how all the different sources of influence in my life came together and made sense together . . . . I think the Christian worldview should go against having very nationalistic groupings of things or trying to pigeonhole as a way of separating . . . you know, are you being intentionally this race or that race, intentionally adhering to this culture or that culture.*

However, as another said, this comes at a cost:

> *My faith means that I will experience a place like this very differently from a typical tourist. That means even my own parents who follow traditional beliefs and who don't speak English . . . . And they don't get the reasons I'm interested in this history, and my parents may regret that they have sent me away—to create a figure that they're not familiar with. It is awkward.*

Thus, historic churches prompt something deeper than a simple enjoyment or admiration. This is perhaps clearest in the powerful reflections about service and vocation prompted by historic churches. One participant stopped at the statue of the first bishop of Calcutta, Thomas Middleton, to reflect on following God's calling as a missionary. Another was visibly moved by the presence of Nelson's tomb beneath the dome of St Paul's. Thinking about Horatio Nelson dying for his country, and looking up at the scenes from the life of St Paul painted on the interior of the dome, he remarked:

> *I have spent 60 years as an Anglican minister and none of it has been easy. An archdeacon quoted a traditional saying to me once, 'It appears that you always only get the bare bones, no meat. I will pray that you won't choke on the bones . . . '—meaning that my life was very hard, and he prayed I would survive. I worked in very difficult churches overseas, churches with no property and no money. I had to beg for even a candlestand and beg for an electric piano. And in the end, I can't entirely say that my ministry was successful. So this has been a healing pilgrimage for me to talk to you about my life in ministry, in this place where I encountered the tomb of someone who died for his country, and a church dedicated to a saint who worked very hard and dedicated his whole life for Christ.*

These remarks should not be easily glossed over, for what they reveal is the ability of individuals to tolerate or even overlook challenging aspects of the environment in order to sustain sentiments centered on faith, hope, and vocation. As one person said:

> *I'm a person who believes you can change anything—because what I'm focused on is the imprint I can make now. So I try not to feel oppressed by these invisible voices saying 'you know there's more of us and more of our history and we have more property and you will always be at the margins'. No, because I know my purposes are good purposes and we're going to have to utilize all of that good intention and what has to happen must happen because the world needs to change.*

Every individual interviewed found something in the ecclesiastical environment which led them to reaffirm their commitment to bettering the church and society through their involvement in varied areas of service in local communities, parishes, businesses, charities, the education and health sectors, and so forth.

4. Conclusions: The Value of the Dialogue

In spaces where the usual activity of visitors is to listen to the audio guide, read a guidebook, or follow a tour guide, this research has flipped the teacher/student relationship on its head and encouraged visitors to lead, direct, and speak—activities which enabled a deeply reflective way of experiencing historic churches. Perhaps many in charge of guarding the CofE's historic collections are anxious about what may emerge when those who, not being experts, break out of their position as passive heritage "consumers" and begin to voice responses and views. This research has shown the type of insights that such engagement would produce. Perhaps the most moving insights were those revealing how even monumental spaces, where strident symbols of historic domination dwarf (literally, in most cases) their audience, can prompt an individual to reflect on his or her own personal resolve in the face of past or present injustice. For one person, the sight of imposing floor-standing candle stick holders and the wrought iron sanctuary screen at St Paul's caused him to think about his strong sense of compassion toward others in the face of public displays of power and wealth:

> *I have an innate understanding that all people have a right to be treated with respect and dignity. I've always fought for that . . . I've always been against the treatment of people in ways that diminishes their humanity . . . There was one time when I was about five or six years old, and I was playing with a friend of mine and I got a bit rough and I hurt him and he started crying. And I remember looking at him and I remember saying to myself on that day, 'Never ever again will I use my force or my strength to hurt somebody'. Because I absolutely hated that moment . . . .*

Each individual brings his or her own conscience, ethical views, and sense of personal calling to an environment: this sort of sensitivity explains why the above participant had a particular response to candlesticks, or why another participant looked at the quire stalls organized by clerical rank and said:

> *I'm very comfortable with not laying claim to symbols of position or status, because I think you lose something the minute you do.*

Once again, such remarks reveal how the CofE's cultural assets function as "sites of conscience" where an individual's moral compass is exercised.

The discussion about the contemporary social meaning of our cultural heritage has often been reduced to a debate about whether we ought to be "proud" or "ashamed" of Britain's history, turning heritage sites into tests of patriotism. But this is to underestimate the civic potential of historic churches. In contrast with the heyday of empire when churches promoted narratives for national and imperial formation, their purpose today transcends nationalism, just as Christianity today transcends national boundaries. One participant's observations about the statue of Wang Zhiming, a pastor killed during China's Cultural Revolution, demonstrates the power of memorialization when it is permitted to cross national boundaries:

> *There's no public or state recognition of persecution, of what he did in China. There's no memorial to him there. But unbelievably you can find one here, in this institution which is a proxy for British culture. So when I saw this I became very emotionally attached to this place. It's so much emotion and history behind that statue which we can't find in China, which was actually the motherland of this person. So you learn something here which you would never learn in China because it's just not part of our education.*

In the wider geopolitical context, as former colonies confront their postcolonial identities and reassess their relationship with the English monarchy or the Commonwealth, the need to talk about shared pasts in ways which surpass nationalism on both sides becomes ever more crucial. One participant, reflecting on the memory of Englishness in India and its association with Christianity which many people are now strongly rejecting, contemplated:

> *I used to be very very vocal about nationalism and decolonialization. But nowadays seeing how this rhetoric can be coopted by Hindu [supremacist] nationalists and actually used against minority Christians, that changes the way I look at things . . . . Sometimes people take refuge in the myth of the single narrative: Christianity, empire, oppression, all one story . . . . But nationalist narratives today deny this complexity . . . . We need to be more watchful.*

Recalling the historic ties of former colonies to England and Western Christianity therefore, and perhaps counterintuitively, takes on increased importance, because it is the rejection of this history by supremacists which leads to the wholescale rejection of Christianity, and to the persecution of Christians. When Christians around the world are suffering for their faith, there is a moral imperative for this country to show that its Christian heritage goes beyond national interests.

Thus England's historic churches must not today convey the meaning that so many monuments do by their inscriptions—a message of victory, domination, supremacy, all enabled by God's providence on behalf of England. Unmediated, the toxicity of imperial monuments and opulent furnishings lies in their talking *at* participants who already come with the baggage of historic subservience. One participant paused at the marble monument to Charles Holme at Westminster Abbey, an admiral who had been active in her native country of Jamaica in the 18th century, which features a large cannon:

> *It's practically directly firing at the shrine of St Edward. It's about power, even down to the rope underneath the cannon, and it's completely out of proportion. I'm not offended because I'm putting history into perspective. But the only thing it's got to do with Jamaica is that the fleet was stationed in Jamaica, and it was a fight. There's nothing here that is particularly about the island or the people. So yes, Jamaica's mentioned, but there's nothing in this that promotes a connection to Jamaicans.*

The cannon is a useful imagery for capturing the nature of the dilemma here. For it is not just that representations of military arsenal are arresting inside a church: if the discomfort were simply owing to general ignorance today about the importance of historic battles for securing peace and freedoms, that could be easily addressed by an information panel. However, a metaphorical cannon is also fired every time a marginalized community's experience is dismissed in favor of an authoritative pronouncement about the historic, artistic, or national importance of a cultural asset. That the CofE still prefers top-down definitions about the meaning of its cultural heritage rather than community-generated ones is apparent in the recent judgment rejecting the application to remove a memorial to Tobias Rustat, a seventeenth-century benefactor who had invested in the Royal African Company, from the chapel at Jesus College, Cambridge. In Section 9 of the judgment, Deputy Chancellor Hodge argues that:

> *whilst any church building must be a 'safe space,' in the sense of a place where one should be free from any risk of harm of whatever kind, that does not mean that it should be a place where one should always feel comfortable, or unchallenged by difficult, or painful, images, ideas or emotions, otherwise one would have to do away with the painful image of Christ on the cross, or images of the martyrdom of saints.*

He goes on to say,

> *Whenever a Christian enters a church to pray, they will invariably utter the words our Lord taught us, which include asking forgiveness for our trespasses (or sins), 'as we forgive them that trespass against us.' Such forgiveness encompasses the whole of humankind, past and present, for we are all sinners; and it extends even to slave traders.*[4]

Setting aside Deputy Chancellor Hodge's ecclesiological or theological views as well as his decision, what ought to be noted is his authoritative pronouncement about the correct function of a memorial in a chapel—something to the effect of, "church buildings necessarily contain uncomfortable things, things which may require us to exercise forgiveness." The assertion assumes that it is the non-experts who need to learn something about the function, purpose, and intended effect of monuments in churches—a stance also assumed in the Burlington Magazine's editorial on the Rustat judgment. Here, the author writes that "art and architectural historians must realise how much work needs to be done to correct misapprehensions about church monuments, even in a place as well informed as a Cambridge college might be assumed to be," by which is meant that people need to learn that monuments "are not ornaments in a building that can readily be removed but are integral elements of its historical and cultural significance."[5] The rich collections in English churches are certainly a source of endless fascination which cannot be easily dispensed with. However, we underestimate the power of the CofE's cultural assets when a small group of custodians are able to tell a living heritage community what it needs to learn, and how its perspectives need to be corrected. This is to replicate what imperial monuments themselves do.[6]

The crucial step now is to permit a heritage community to change the very meaning of historic collections—even as they remain in situ, as most of them will. As one individual said, reflecting on the materials of churches—marble, wood, stone, glass—which speak to her of the many invisible people who both directly and indirectly contributed to the construction of the English CofE's achievements, victories, and heroes:

> *The whole thing about marginalization is that your stories aren't heard or told and therefore I am interested in those stories. And wasn't that quintessentially what colonialism did? It didn't acknowledge the contribution of the individuals within the country, within that colonial state to the British Empire. We failed to acknowledge the people that suffered and that labored—don't we owe it to them to do that even if it's uncomfortable, controversial what happened? One of the things I have thought about is 'How do I, in my being present here, acknowledge the thousands of people that contributed to this?' This informs my sense of vocation and also my sense of belonging: In this place of wonderful grandeur, how can I honor by my presence here every tear, every drop of blood, every drop*

of sweat? My presence acknowledges it, and that's part of our interdependence as human beings. This is why I love this building, I think, because it's not just superficial beauty.

Not just superficial beauty, because churches are not themselves "monuments" which are endangered by non-expert views and identity politics. Ecclesiastical collections are invaluable and worth preserving, not so they can induce nostalgic pride for a powerful empire: let that be the job of heritage collections in palaces and stately homes. But *ecclesiastical* heritage has a uniquely constructive potential, because its essential character resists monologue. Attracting a global community of invested and interested persons by virtue of a shared faith, historic churches are *shared* heritage spaces, and as such their significance can only be deepened, enriched, and extended by dialogue. "Widening engagement"—a social mandate now embraced in many heritage institutions but still yet to be largely adopted by the CofE—is, of course, the *raison d'être* of the Christian church as a whole. Furthermore, the Christian church from its earliest days has always nurtured the relationship between the living and the dead in order to anticipate a blessed, just, and peaceful future. The heritage value of churches must include the experiences of those around the world who, despite persecution, historic injustices, and persistent inequalities, have nevertheless taken up the faith.

Notes

1. See Church Commissioners for England, 'Church Commissioners' Research into Historic Links to Transatlantic Chattel Slavery', 2023. Available online: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Church%20Commissioners%20for%20England%20-%20Research%20into%20historic%20links%20to%20transatlantic%20chattel%20slavery%20-%20report.pdf (accessed on 6 March 2023).

2. International Coalition of Sites of Conscience website: https://www.sitesofconscience.org/ (accessed on 6 March 2023).

3. Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, Faro, 27 October 2005. Available online: https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=199 (accessed on 8 March 2023).

4. 'Application Ref: 2020-056751 in the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Ely before the worshipful David Hodge QC, Deputy Chancellor, in the matter of the Rustat Memorial, Jesus College, Cambridge', 23 March 2022. Available online: https://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/full_judgment_of_deputy_chancellor_hodge_qc.pdf (accessed on 6 March 2023).

5. Editorial: The Rustat Memorial, *Burlington Magazine*, Vol 164, No. 1430, May 2022.

6. For guidance on considering the impact of monuments on a congregation or community, see 'Contested Heritage in Cathedrals and Churches', guidance issued by the Church Buildings Council and the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England, 2021. Available online: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Contested_Heritage_in_Cathedrals_and_Churches.pdf (accessed on 6 March 2023).

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Article

Openness, Commitment, and Confidence in Interreligious Dialogue: A Cultural Analysis of a Western Debate [†]

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Abstract: In Western theological reflection, the relationship between openness and commitment in interreligious dialogue is often construed as a relationship between two ends of a seesaw or two arms of a balance; raising one end lowers the other, and one cannot therefore be simultaneously fully committed and open. In critical conversation with the work of Catherine Cornille and Marianne Moyaert, this paper argues that this perspective is related to a specific understanding of the "subject position" of the religious subject in late-modernity which is characterized by the subject–object divide. This divide characterizes many modern and postmodern epistemologies of religion, so that both commitment and openness are primarily rooted in the capacities of the religious subject. However, the Christian faith understands faith as a response to the divine initiative of God in Christ, and therefore understands commitment as grounded in confidence in this decisive divine salvific event. From this standpoint, both full confidence and openness are reconcilable and can even strengthen each other rather than being considered incompatible and in competition.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue; openness; commitment; postliberalism; language game; contrast experience; subject position; confidence

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate in the theology of religions on the proper relationship between openness and commitment in interreligious dialogue. How much openness to the other, and to alternative positions, and how much commitment to one's own faith is needed and appropriate when engaging in dialogue with other religions and worldviews? What is the appropriate balance and relationship between openness and commitment? This question is crucial for our lives, relationships, and identities in a multireligious world and has been central to reflections on the nature of the interreligious encounter. This issue is equally relevant for dialogue and witness in Northern Atlantic cultures and other contexts where more secular worldviews form the main conversation partners. The modern and late-modern world easily associates the Christian desire to share the faith with the idea that such people are "dogmatic," uncritically committed to inherited views, and are therefore unable to engage in open dialogue with other people. Perhaps this late-modern context makes it hard to be both committed and open, and so Christians tend to invest themselves in either open dialogue or committed witness but are less often able to combine both attitudes. In what follows, I will use the expression "interreligious dialogue and witness" as a term that also covers Christian encounters with secular worldviews which can be considered either "quasi-religious" or "pseudo-religious" attitudes to life (van den Toren and Tan 2022, pp. 210–13; Hamilton 2001).

The question of how to relate commitment and openness is important for both dialogue and evangelism. The World Council of Churches' (WCC) affirmation, Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes (TTL) (CWME 2012), truly notes:

Dialogue and mission are distinct but interrelated. [. . .] evangelism is not the purpose of dialogue. However, since dialogue is also 'a mutual encounter of commitments', sharing the good news of Jesus Christ has a legitimate place in it. Furthermore, authentic evangelism takes place in the context of the dialogue of life and action, and in 'a spirit of dialogue'–'an attitude of respect and friendship'. (CWME 2012, para. 95; quoting Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1991, para. 9)

Many everyday interreligious encounters cannot be classified as either "evangelism" or "dialogue" but instead combine aspects of both or move between the two. Such encounters are part of long-term friendships, family, and neighborly relations. They may well be more important for, and characteristic of, interreligious encounter and our understanding of it, rather than more formalized settings of either dialogue or evangelism.

As an intercultural theologian, I am interested in how current debates about openness and commitment are shaped by the North Atlantic cultural and social context. I use contrast experiences of different ways of encountering the relationship between openness and commitment in other contexts as a trigger to explore the way Western cultural and social contexts shape our understanding of the relationship between openness and commitment. I subsequently ask in what ways the North Atlantic context may hinder the understanding of this aspect of interreligious encounter and more specifically the nature of the Christian encounter with other religions. I will argue that this tension between openness and commitment is related to what I call the "subject position" of the knowing subject in Western late modernity. From a Christian theological perspective, we will need to have a different understanding of this subject position in relation to God's self-revelation. For Christians, the word-pair "commitment and openness" should be understood as a relationship between "confidence" and openness, in which a high degree of confidence can nurture openness rather than diminish it, and vice versa.

2. Contrast Experiences

An important feature of cross-cultural living and intercultural encounters is what we may call "contrast experiences." With this, I refer to an unforeseen shock that certain things we take for granted, and may even consider natural and incontestable, suddenly become a feature of our particular cultural or social location. In intercultural theological reflections, such contrast experiences can function as triggers that prompt us to explore certain aspects of cultural, social, or religious settings in depth in order to work out how they shape, enrich, and possibly distort the theological understanding and religious practices of ourselves and others. I suppose that Lamin Sanneh's influential reflections on the differences between Christian and Muslim attitudes towards the translation of the Holy Scriptures and religious contextualization were triggered by such contrast experiences (Sanneh 1989). In my own theological journey, such contrast experiences have, for instance, led to critical reflections on the role of materiality in the Western Christian understanding of salvation (van den Toren 2017a; translation forthcoming) and on the meaning of the victory of Christ (van den Toren 2017b). In my understanding, such contrast experiences are part of "the logic of discovery" rather than "the logic of justification": they trigger us to question given positions based on unquestioned presuppositions or angles that shape the discussion of which we may not even be aware. However, the justification of position will depend on how well theological positions do justice to the subject matter in question, whether it will be the nature of salvation encountered in Jesus Christ and its meaning in a particular context, or whether we are concerned with particular practices of interreligious dialogue or the place of commitment and openness in the faith of followers of Jesus (cf. van den Toren 2015).

Theological and philosophical reflections on the nature of interreligious dialogue are often conducted in a relatively context-less fashion with references to religious epistemology, religious identity, hermeneutics, etc. This may be counter-intuitive because people involved in interreligious dialogue are generally well aware of the degree to which cultural

frameworks and social context shape religious practices and understandings. For example, authors refer to the impact of the relative novelty of experiencing religious pluralism in the North Atlantic and to a sense of guilt about Europe's colonial past (Hick 1988, p. 17f). Yet, in general, reflections on the way cultural values, social relationships, and philosophical presuppositions share different approaches to interreligious dialogue are too seldom made explicit and are a matter of critical consideration. Gavin D'Costa has argued that Western approaches to religious pluralism have been deeply influenced by modern epistemology (D'Costa 2009, pp. 57–102), and Talal Asad has shown how Western understandings of the proper place of religion in society have equally been shaped by modern ideological interests (Asad 1993, 2003). In this paper, I want to focus on more recent approaches to religious pluralism that are shaped by postmodern understandings of language and culture. I will also refer to this context as late modern because it cannot be understood apart from modernity, and because some of the cultural factors at hand characterize both more modern and more postmodern approaches to religious plurality.

The contrast experience triggering these reflections is a growing awareness on my part that the relationship between religious openness and commitment in a religiously pluralist context is experienced differently in the late modern West than in many other parts of the world. With a rough indication, one can say that in the West the two are often treated and experienced as two arms of a balance. Raising one end lowers the other, which means one cannot be fully committed and fully open at the same time, thus highlighting the need to look for the right balance. Paul Knitter uses the metaphor of a "teeter-totter" or seesaw to structure the debate between different approaches to the theology of religions that either put their weight on commitment and less so on openness, or vice versa (Knitter 2002, pp. 212, 241).

I have the impression this is not the case in other parts of the world such as the Middle East, South Asia, and South-East Asia, where Christians have continued to live in religiously pluralist contexts since Christianity was introduced. Of course, not all Christians in those societies will be equally open to their neighbors who belong to other religious communities. This will at least partially depend on personality traits and social location, as it does in the West. However, it seems that many of those who are genuinely open to the experiences, insights, and perspectives of religious others would not experience that as a threat to their own commitment. Prime examples of this are Christians who are involved in evangelism, either formally appointed to do so by their churches or informally sharing their faith in Christ with family and friends. As far as I am aware, little research has been conducted on how these believers combine openness and commitment. This might well be a sign that this relationship is not as problematic as it is among Western participants in interreligious conversations. Studying how this works out in lived religion and ordinary theology would be of great value for the intercultural study of interreligious encounter. I encountered such unexpected ways in which Christians combined openness and commitment during a three-month sabbatical in Malaysia. Christians form a minority in this country which is largely Muslim but also contains a significant presence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese religions.[1] More research on this is needed, but these limited experiences suffice as a trigger and motivation to explore the relationship between openness and commitment in the North Atlantic context.

Equally or more theologically relevant would be an intercultural comparison on how the New Testament relates to this question. For the first generation of followers of Jesus, the relationship between openness and commitment does not seem to be an issue in the same way as it is today. These believers are deeply committed to Jesus Christ as "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6, New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]) and they are convinced that "there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, NRSV). Yet, unlike many Western Christians today, they do not seem to worry about how to square this with the religious plurality amongst which they live. They do not only see their position as contrasting with other "religious options" (though that language would be anachronistic), but see their message as against the grain

of the shared approach to religious pluralism that characterized most of the Hellenistic world (Hurtado 2016, pp. 37–76). However, it did not stop them from dialoguing and debating intently with others (cf. Acts 17:17; 19:9). For many of them, this dialogue was not merely a dialogue with outsiders, but a recollection of an inner dialogue they had with themselves in the course of their conversion process. The experience of the encounter with the risen Jesus played a crucial role here.

> Especially in the earliest days, the startling conviction that God has raised Jesus from death was obviously crucial and was the ignition point for the new level of enthusiasm among Jesus-followers and for the emphasis on these high claims about him. The proper response to the claims that Jesus' followers urged was to accept them and to live in full trust in Jesus' status and efficacy. (Hurtado 2016, p. 69; cf. Wright 2003)

In this paper, I focus on the relationship between openness and commitment in religious epistemology on a theoretical level. This issue does not merely play out at the theoretical level, however, but also in the psychological and sociological reality of interreligious encounter in our society. We easily suppose that in a religiously pluralist society, those who are fully convinced of the truth of their religious position and consider it of ultimate value for all are fundamentalists and that those who are fully open are relativists. Given that many Christian believers find both attitudes unhealthy—and this for good reasons—they try to find a livable position somewhere on the line between full commitment and full openness. These psychological and sociological realities of fundamentalism and relativism may also be closely related to the cultural and sociological make-up of late modernity in the West, but this will require further research.

3. The Need for Both Openness and Commitment

Some older approaches to interreligious dialogue argued that one needs to be completely open to the religious other if one wants to engage in genuine dialogue. According to Paul Knitter, one of the "[c]onditions for the possibility of fruitful interreligious dialogue" is that . . .

> . . . religious believers cannot approach the table of dialogue with claims (on or below the table!) of having 'the final word' or 'the definitive revelation,' or the 'absolute truth,' or the 'absolute savior.' (Knitter 1990, p. 31)

This is a position, however, that is more easily taken by individual thinkers than by religious communities. We already pointed to the WCC affirmation, TTL, which sees dialogue as "a mutual encounter of commitments" (CWME 2012). This could be understood as the type of commitment that Langdon Gilkey (1988) describes as a "relative absoluteness" (p. 47) which accepts "a rough parity . . . the co-validity and co-efficacy of other religions" (ibid., p. 37) with "an absolute commitment" to "our ultimate value or values" and "a view of all of reality" (ibid., p. 45). However, most Christian communities and many other religionists are committed to the idea that their religious tradition is the steward of a unique and final access to ultimate reality that is not on par with other religious traditions, be it the canonical witness to Christ, the Quran as the revelation received through Muhammad as the seal of the prophets, or the teachings that arose from the enlightenment experience of Gautama the Buddha. Demanding that people relinquish such commitments would therefore a priori exclude many or most religious people from the dialogue. Furthermore, all participants have certain religious and other commitments when engaging in dialogue, even if they do not formulate them in ways that we understand to be related to particular religious traditions. Examples of this could be: "in interreligious dialogue, we always need to recognize that the divine remains a mystery beyond all human formulations" (cf. Samartha 1988) or that "religions are only good in so far as they contribute (or at least do not diminish) justice and human flourishing" (cf. Knitter 1990; Aloysius 1988). If people had no such commitment whatsoever, they would probably not engage in the exhilarating, yet arduous and time-consuming work of deep dialogue.

For Christians, commitment is a direct result of their allegiance to Jesus Christ whom they recognize as Lord over all. However, what that commitment means is contested precisely because we see in our pluralist society a need to combine that commitment with an openness to others, both religious others and others who embrace a secular worldview and lifestyle. Hans Küng argues that such openness, which he calls "dialogability," is required by the "modern Enlightenment ideals such as freedom, autonomy and tolerance" and by "insight into the *historicity of truth* and the relativity of *one's own standpoint*" (Küng 1991, pp. 239, 240, italics in the original). Yet, though attention to dialogue has flourished in the context of modernity, insights into the historicity of human knowledge are rooted in Christian anthropology, which is aware that human knowledge is different from the all-encompassing knowledge of God. Human understanding is always shaped by a particular location within creation and from a particular historical, cultural, and social perspective (cf. van den Toren 2011, pp. 96–105). Twentieth century ecclesial and ecumenical documents have also stressed the importance of religious freedom, which has been championed under the conditions of modernity, but which is actually rooted in the Christian conviction that God invites human beings to freely respond to God's offer of covenantal love (John Paul II 1991, para. 8; CWME 2012, para. 96; Lausanne Movement 2010, para. IIC.6).

Hans Küng (1991) and Catherine Cornille (2008, 2013) rightly consider openness and commitment or dialogability and steadfastness as *virtues*. They cannot be merely commanded. They are attitudes that need to be nurtured and that demand a certain level of religious and personal maturity. They also come in degrees: one can grow in both openness and commitment.

Even though it is now widely agreed that we need both openness and commitment in order to engage in interreligious encounter (Küng 1991; Küster 2004; Cornille 2005), it has proved harder to decide how the two should be balanced. In modern pluralist approaches to religious diversity, the relationship between commitment and openness was not so much of a problem—or perhaps the problem easily hid itself from view. For example, in the pluralism represented by John Hick or Stanley Samartha, the religious commitment to one's proper tradition is basically a "relational distinctiveness" (Samartha 1988, p. 70) that reflects the loyalty of children to their father while realizing that others are similarly loyal to theirs (Ariarajah 1985, pp. 21–27). The absolute commitment is to the divine mystery beyond words that is only partially and presumably equally expressed in different religious traditions. The problem with this configuration of commitment and openness is that it replaces the commitment of particular religious traditions with another religious commitment to a new pluralist understanding of the divine mystery. In the process, representatives of such pluralism deny the legitimacy of the strong commitments people have to their particular religious traditions and hides the particularity of the supposedly overarching pluralist religious perspective from view. This pluralist perspective may be rooted in a Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, as in Hick (1989, pp. 236–46; cf. Knitter 2002, p. 115f; Moyaert 2012, p. 31f) or in an *Advaita Vedanta* metaphysics of a divine mystery beyond all human words, as in Samartha (1988, pp. 72–81). In this way, such pluralisms are equally as inclusivist or exclusivist as the positions they critique (cf. D'Costa 1996).

Postmodern or postliberal reflections on religious pluralisms are much more aware of the inescapable historical location of particular religious traditions and the concomitant challenges for interreligious encounter. Catherine Cornille refers to *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* in one of her book titles because of "the impossibility of reconciling religious commitment with the recognition of the radical equality of religions" (Cornille 2008, p. 88). She supposes here that full openness and full commitment are incompatible: our religious stance demands full commitment, but our religiously plural world demands that we approach religions openly as fundamentally of equal value. Both attitudes cannot be fully maintained at the same time. The certainty of the exclusivist is therefore "at the expense of openness" (Moyaert 2012, p. 27). As Marianne Moyaert (2011, p. 278) states: "There is no correct proportion [between openness and commitment], no definitive answer,

no exact balance. [. . .] This fact yields a certain restlessness, even discomfort." Openness requires that we put our own commitments into the balance, yet our own religious identity requires that we remain faithful to our tradition with its commitments. Interreligious dialogue will therefore always create an awareness of the fragility of religious identity (cf. the title of Moyaert 2011).

4. Dialogue Encounter of Traditions and Interreligious Hermeneutics

In this paper, I use Moyaert and Cornille as the most important conversation partners on the relationship between openness and commitment. Both have contributed to a broader movement of the theology of religions which has recently moved beyond earlier debates that were structured by the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. In line with the postmodern awareness of the particularity of religious traditions, they intend to leave behind the more modern approaches that tended to be based on implicit or explicit understandings of some sort of universal nature and/or of religion. One of the critical questions that needs answering is whether they have sufficiently done so. Moyaert and Cornille are also worthwhile conversation partners because their theoretical approaches reflect broader post- or late-modern cultural sensitivities about how religious plurality is understood and approached. Modern pluralist approaches such as those of Hick (1988, 1989) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1988) did, to some degree, reflect modern sensitivities. Similarly, Moyaert and Cornille reflect postmodern sensitivities, and elements for their ideas are more widely reflected in broader contemporary attitudes towards religious pluralism beyond the academy. It seems to me that one aspect of their approach to religion that is more widely shared is that religion is not about some shared religious experience, but that religions may, in their particularity, represent diverse (yet each in their own way valid) lifestyles that help us organize life and give meaning to experience. Finally, these authors allow us to explore and evaluate how their approaches to religious pluralism—and the broader cultural attitudes they reflect—relate to a particular late-modern or postmodern Western context.

As indicated, these authors are representative of a wider move towards recognizing the particularity of different religious traditions. Knitter (2002) labels this as the "acceptance model" which he adds as a new model in the theology of religions beyond the earlier exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist models (which he labels, respectively, as the "replacement model," "fulfilment model," and "mutuality model"). Knitter (2002) notes the link with the postmodern context (pp. 173–78) and the postliberal theology of George Lindbeck c. s. (pp. 178–90), which later plays a crucial role in the work of Moyaert (2012, p. 35) and Cornille (2005, p. 35). Knitter sees this acceptance model represented in Paul Griffiths, Mark Heim, and the comparative theology of James Fredericks and Francis Clooney. Yet for our purposes, the later contributions of Moyaert and Cornille are important because of their work on openness and commitment.

Lindbeck's (1984) crucial contribution to this conversation is his so-called "cultural–linguistic theory of religion." This approach primarily understands religions as language games in line with Wittgenstein and as symbolic systems that give meaning to life, as developed in cultural anthropology by Clifford Geertz. Geertz himself was influenced by Wittgenstein (Geertz 1973b, p. 12) and saw cultures as semiotic systems that demand "thick description" so that one can understand them in their irreducible particularity. In comparison to modern pluralism, this understanding of religion reverses the relationship between religious language and religious experience. Religious language is not seen as a symbolic expression of a pre-existing religious experience; rather, it is the religious tradition and language that make the experience possible (Lindbeck 1984, pp. 36, 41; Moyaert 2012, p. 35f). In cultural anthropology, this crucial understanding of culture was used for a description of religions from an outsider perspective. The crucial move that Lindbeck makes is that he now also accepts this as an appropriate description for religions in general, and Christianity in particular, from an insider perspective. This has major implications for the reference of religious language. Where believers tend to understand religious language

as referring to or being representations of a transcendent reality, Geertz understands this transcendent reality not as something that is discovered or recognized, but as a creation of the imagination:

> [A] *religion* is *(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.* (Geertz 1973a, p. 90, italics in the original)

A continuous debate concerning Lindbeck's proposal has investigated what this means for the nature of Christian faith, doctrine, and theological language. Lindbeck is not entirely clear and consistent in his reflections on the nature of "first order language" of faith expressed in the Christian life, such as in prayer and worship. This language can have an ontological referent beyond the speaker and the speaker's community (Lindbeck 1984, pp. 35, 51, 66). However, Lindbeck's expressions that religions "construe" or "create" reality, and the concept of "performative language" suggests that the truth of expressions such as "Jesus is Lord" are the result of the right use, rather than a recognition of a reality independent of the user (ibid., pp. 47, 65, 117). The second-order language of doctrine and the third-order language of theology merely refer to the first order language and practice of the Christian community (ibid., pp. 113–24; cf. van den Toren 2011, p. 49f).

Moyaert and Cornille are both critical of Lindbeck's tendency to see religions with the language of Kuhn as "incommensurable" (ibid., p. 48). This would limit interreligious dialogue to "ad hoc" exchanges where occasional cultural–linguistic overlap can be noted (ibid., pp. 129, 131; Moyaert 2011, p. 159) without due attention to the possibility of interreligious dialogue (Cornille 2008, p. 187). Lindbeck makes religious traditions fundamentally incommensurable and untranslatable (Moyaert 2011, p. 159). He rightly shows that we should be careful not to look for superficial parallels and translations, but that does not mean that dialogue is impossible. Yet, Lindbeck's proposal does not do justice to the reality that religions are not closed systems but continuously interact with the cultures around them and other religious traditions they encounter (cf. Tanner 1997, pp. 104–19). In contrast, both Cornille and Moyaert approach religions as fundamentally "cultural–linguistic systems" which then leads to a hermeneutical approach to religious difference. "[T]he search for God can never be done outside of hermeneutics" (Moyaert 2011, p. 278; cf. Cornille 2008, p. 6f). Moyaert argues that we should move beyond a theological approach and soteriological openness to interreligious dialogue, to a hermeneutical approach and hermeneutical openness (Moyaert 2012, p. 38). She develops this hermeneutical approach with reference to Paul Ricœur. According to Ricœur, the reader must move from a pre-critical or naïve reading via a critical phase that places the text at a distance, to a new appropriation of the text that leads through an enlarged self by exposing ourselves to the text (Moyaert 2012, pp. 42–44; cf. Moyaert 2014). The focus on hermeneutics corresponds to a focus on practices that is equally in line with such postliberal approaches (cf. Winner 2018, pp. 167–80), when it is said that "Particularists thus speak of religion as a way of life, a pattern, or a paradigm. [. . .] Religious identity is acquired not by digging into one's deepest self but by becoming a member of a community" (Moyaert 2012, p. 35f; cf. Lindbeck 1984, p. 132).

We see the same postliberal tendency to focus on religion as a cultural–linguistic reality in Cornille's work and her focus on tradition. In her chapter on "commitment," she formulates this consistently as "commitment to a particular religious tradition" (Cornille 2008, pp. 59, 94).[2] In her reflections on Christian commitment, she notes "the epistemic priority for believers of faith and revelation" (ibid., p. 8) and the necessity of understanding the virtues needed for interreligious dialogue as "embedded within Christianity" (ibid., p. 11). She does not reflect on the central place of commitment in the Christian tradition to Jesus as the Christ.[3] She does not explore why Christians are committed to this particular tradition, a question that seems to me, cannot be answered apart from the Christian commitment to Christ. Alister McGrath criticized Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine* because it treats doctrine as embodied in a community and a linguistic tradition, and does not

ask after *The Genesis of Doctrine*: why did Christians begin to believe in these doctrines? According to McGrath, this question can only be answered with reference to the narrative of Jesus Christ, which I would call the witness to the person, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (McGrath 1990, pp. 100–2). In the same way, we need to question Cornille and Moyaert about the *genesis of this tradition*, of this cultural linguistic interpretation or reality and the genesis of the commitment to this tradition.

5. Critical Evaluation

As I indicated earlier, from a sensitivity sharpened by intercultural exchange, I want to ask the following: In what way are approaches to religious pluralism and to openness and commitment in interreligious dialogue, which we may label "particularistic" or "postliberal," shaped by their late modern Western context? Here, I want to draw attention to what we may call the "subject position." With this I refer to the understanding of the role of the knowing subject. In modern pluralism, this is the universal Kantian subject that relates to a shared noumenal world, yet is only able to express this experience symbolically, without the possibility of knowing in any way how this symbolism corresponds to the noumenal world. In the postliberal approach, it is the subject that basically shapes the world either individually or communally through language and practice. In both understandings of the human epistemological predicament, the knowing subject is (again, either individually or communally) left with their own mental and symbolic world that becomes an impenetrable screen. The subject is unable to relate to the world beyond because of the modern chasm between the knowing subject and the objective world. Postliberalism reinterpreted this chasm between subject and object, but did not overcome it (van den Toren 2011, pp. 69–77, 87–89; cf. Cornille 2008, p. 62f).

Given this understanding of the subject position, openness and commitment are indeed in competition. They relate to each other as two ends of a seesaw or two arms of a balance, at least as far as openness and commitment function at the same level: commitment to the truth and universal validity of one's own position on the one hand, and, on the other, openness to the truth claims of the other that may challenge mine. Both the commitment and openness are grounded in our human subjectivity. If one is committed to one's own truth, one has little reason to be open to exploring another's truth and doing so might even be dangerous for one's own convictions. If, to the contrary, one is truly open due to an awareness of the cultural particularity of one's own understanding, one is no longer able to claim universal validity for one's religious position. This will then lead to a range of intermediate positions which combine a certain degree of commitment with a degree of openness. However, if there is a gain in openness, this will mean a loss in commitment, and vice versa.

In this understanding of the epistemological *condition humaine,* openness and commitment function as two arms of a balance. At the psychological and sociological level, this corresponds with the persistent late-modern worries and warnings about the twin dangers of fundamentalism and relativism. If this is the only epistemological stance possible, these worries may indeed be justified, because then a courageous stance for truth only seems possible by closing oneself or the community off from other perspectives. Moreover, an open attitude to other perspectives seems to necessarily eat away the basis of one's commitment to even one's most fundamental convictions and values. The same understanding of this inverse relationship between commitment and openness, also leads to the fact that in this context those who make staunch truth claims, particularly of a religious nature, are easily labelled fundamentalists. For the same reason, those who plead for openness are easily labelled relativists. While different people and communities are more worried about one danger or its opposite, in this framing of the opposition they breathe the same cultural air.

Here, I may need to clarify myself. I am not trying to diminish either the importance of tradition and practice for understanding religions, or the importance of careful hermeneutics for interreligious encounter. In actuality, the issue is the postmodern and postliberal framework in which religions are *primarily* seen as symbolic systems and language games.

If religion is understood in this way, one will not be able to understand or do justice to other religious approaches to openness and commitment that are shaped by different presuppositions and by a different understanding of the subject position of the person of faith. If this postliberal approach to religious difference is taken as normative, there is a strong preference for engaging with other religious voices that share the same fundamental self-understanding of religion and religious language. This has the corresponding danger that interreligious dialogue with others that have strong and even absolute commitments may become virtually impossible. We already noted that this may include many, if not most, religious people.

As a Christian theologian myself, this understanding of commitment and openness is also problematic because the underlying understanding of the subject position does not do justice to the historical Christian understanding of the human relationship with God. This is not the place to develop or even give an outline of an alternative Christian religious epistemology, to which I have contributed elsewhere (van den Toren 2011, pp. 93–153). A mere indication will need to suffice in order to show that the subject position of the religious knower, as understood in the context of modernity and postmodernity, cannot be taken for granted. It cannot be accepted as the starting point for interreligious dialogue. Respect for the radical particularity of different religious perspectives will mean that the understanding of the subject position will itself need to be one of the themes of interreligious dialogue.

Of course, epistemology is a wide-ranging subject on which we can only touch briefly here. In more general terms, both the late-modern understanding that places the knowing subject over and against the world differs from the Jewish–Christian understanding of the human being. The epistemological challenge is not to overcome or accept a chasm between the knowing subject and the object world, in which the subject cannot move beyond the categories of the mind or culturally shaped language games or symbolic systems. Because the image of God is squarely part of the world, this means that we know the world as part of it, by indwelling it (van den Toren 2011, p. 127f; cf. Polanyi 1962). Therefore, human beings can only know if we begin with a basic attitude of trust in who we are and in the world in which God has placed us, as is expressed in the tradition of "common sense epistemology" developed in the line of the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–1796) (Reid 1975). Consequently, the human epistemological predicament is not how to overcome the chasm between subject and object, but working out which experiences, voices, and traditions can be trusted in a society of competing views that interpret experience in a variety of ways that are often incompatible.

In the more specialized area of religious knowledge, respect for the particularity of different religious traditions will lead us to question the idea of a universally applicable concept of religion (cf. Auffarth and Moher 2006). This also implies that we need to question the idea that there is a universal understanding of the nature of religious knowledge that can do justice to these varied traditions. Postliberals have rightly criticized modern approaches to religious pluralism for forcing all religions into a mold of what the essence of religion is supposed to be. Strangely enough, the reflections of Moyaert and Cornille are themselves formulated in general terms, with little reference to how particular religious traditions would understand the nature of religious language and interreligious dialogue, as well as the relationship between openness and commitment. Naturally, this would differ significantly depending on the traditions concerned, whether it be Primal, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, or another.

In the New Testament, religious knowledge is not primarily understood as an expression of a religious experience, nor as the language and practice of a community shaped by a particular religious tradition. Of course, the New Testament was rooted in an earlier Jewish tradition and was itself part of the initiation of a new tradition with its own distinct language game and set of practices that can be described and analyzed. Yet, this begs the question: how did this tradition come into being? What was its "genesis"? According to the New Testament, this tradition originates as the response of this community to what is experienced as the decisive gift of Jesus and his resurrection, and the gift of his Spirit.

The subject position that fits this relationship is one of trust and confidence, expressed by the term "pistis", meaning faith or trust (cf. Michel 1975). As Karl Barth has so forcefully argued, this tradition cannot be understood as an exemplification of a general human trait, but as the response to an utterly unique person and series of events (Barth 1975, paras. 25–26). The subject and community find itself in a relationship initiated by God. The chasm between the subject and object of knowledge is bridged from the side of this personal God who decisively reached out to humanity. The faith and theological reflection that this generates is shaped by the linguistic tools at hand that influence how this reality is first grasped. And yet, the reality may not fit these preconceptions. We see this in the New Testament, where the followers of Jesus continue to struggle to find language to do justice to the reality they encounter in Jesus of Nazareth and his cross and resurrection. This man did not fit into any of the available boxes and caused a revolution in their thinking about God and salvation. They discovered that he was more than a prophet. He was the one and only Son who revealed God in a unique manner that could not be surpassed before the consummation of history, which he himself inaugurated.

Certainly, this subject position of faith requires commitment. Yet, if faith is the fundamental position, we need to think of the relationship between openness and *dialogability* on the one hand, and commitment, loyalty, and steadfastness on the other, primarily as a relationship between *confidence* and openness. Without confidence, commitment is a relationship whose strength is primarily rooted in the subject. Confidence is also a relational term but is firstly a response to a reality outside oneself. If this is the subject position, confidence and openness are not a zero-sum relationship, constantly competing with each other. Instead, growth in confidence can lead to openness, and growth in openness can build confidence rather than undermining it.

Both Cornille and Moyaert make their arguments on the basis of a postmodern sensitivity for taking the particularity of religions more seriously than was conducted in earlier exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist approaches to religious plurality, and rightly so. Yet, they defend the particularity of religions on the basis of general linguistic and epistemological considerations. They pay little to no attention to the particularity of the Christian faith and what a Christian faith would demand in its understanding of the relationship between openness and commitment. In one of the few places where Moyaert (2011) considers the meaning of Christ for the interreligious encounter, she argues:

> [T]he incarnation does not remove the restlessness—to the contrary. The incarnation does not allow itself to be established and proven either. God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ does not remove this restlessness (John 14:8). The idea that the transcendent God, the creator of heaven and earth, became incarnate in the son of a Jewish carpenter, who died on the cross and rose on the third day, leans toward the absurd. Universality and particularity come together in Christianity, but how can both be made to square with each other? The incarnation is a mystery of faith. (p. 289)

I have the impression that this understanding of the incarnation is too colored by modern or postmodern concerns—or a combination of both.[4] In the New Testament, the incarnation is indeed a mystery, and one that cannot be proven according to the narrow modern criteria for what counts as proof. And yet, so much of the knowledge we live by does not fit this modern straitjacket. Yet, the New Testament believers and the Early Church proclaim with confidence that here they have encountered the God of all, who eschatologically, and therefore decisively, acted for the salvation of the whole world. Moyaert and Cornille's general considerations on the interreligious encounter, based on a renewed postmodern and postliberal sensitivity for the particularity of religious traditions, thus reflect the same problem identified by Sue Patterson (1999) in Lindbeck's cultural–linguistic understanding of theology and religion: "While aiming to be particular, the postliberal model becomes a general theory which then swallows up the particular Christian instance" (p. 44).

6. Concluding Reflections

With a Christian reflection on the subject position of the believer as its basis, and in contrast to a late-modern understanding of the subject position of the believer, I have argued that in the Christian tradition, openness and commitment should not be understood as two ends of a seesaw, with radical commitment and full openness as incompatible elements. This gives us reason to take more seriously the examples of New Testament believers and believers from other parts of the church worldwide who seem to be able to combine both. It invites us to explore new ways of Christian existence in a pluralist word, in which confidence and openness can grow together. This has important implications for how Christians can confidently share their faith in the finality of Christ amidst a plurality of worldviews, while still being open to dialogue with and learn from others. Additionally, this means that Christians will need to resist the late-modern tendency to oppose openness and commitment. In this context, we will also need to be critical of the tendency to automatically label anyone with a religious commitment and confidence as fundamentalist.[5]

From a late-modern perspective and its understanding of the religious subject, this Christian theological argument for understanding openness and commitment in a pluralist society as confidence and openness leads to a conundrum. How can I openly dialogue with a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, if I have already decided what openness and commitment means from my Christian perspective? The first part of the answer would be that we need to allow other religionists the same particularity in their understanding of openness and commitment as Christians ask for themselves. Different religious traditions also birth diverse theologies of religions. These theologies of religions and their related understandings of openness and commitment also need themselves to be part of interreligious dialogue and witness. This is one of the problems that arises when a particularistic or cultural–linguistic understanding of the theology of religions or any other overall theology of religions is proposed as an overall framework for interreligious dialogue. Of course, it can be argued that there are good reasons to embrace this late modern particularistic understanding of religious plurality. However, real dialogue demands that one lets a Muslim or Buddhist conversation partner present their own understanding of religious plurality and religious language. If they are not late-modern religionists from the North Atlantic world, this will probably not easily fit a particularistic model. Therefore, part of this interreligious encounter and dialogue will also be apologetic dialogue in which different conversation partners are asked to justify both their hope and the reasons for their commitment (cf. Griffiths 1988; van den Toren and Tan 2022). For Christians, that means that they should heed the exhortation in the first Epistle of Peter, and "[A]lways be ready to make [their] defence to anyone who demands from [them] an account of the hope that is in [them]" and confidence (1 Pet 3:15, NRSV). In 1 Peter, this hope is of course based on the resurrection of Christ, by which believers are given "a new birth into a living hope" (1 Pet 1:3, NRSV).

The second part of my answer to this conundrum would be that Christian confidence need not fear openness which recognizes the otherness of other religionists and people who live with different non-religious worldviews. In line with the subject position of the believer, Christian confidence is not based on a comparison of different religions and worldviews, after which one concludes that the Christian religion is the best and most truthful. Nor is it based on the believers' ability to answer all the questions that may come to them through the people they dialogue with. In the New Testament, confidence in Christ is based instead on the joyful and grateful recognition that in him we meet the God self who has inaugurated the eschaton by raising Christ as the firstborn of the dead and giving us the Spirit, both as first fruits of the world to come (1 Cor 15:20; Rom 8:23; cf. van den Toren 2011, pp. 204–8). Christians do not claim to fully understand the nature of this event, but merely believe that this person and these events have final significance and give us reason for complete confidence in this God. With this person and these events, the Christian faith stands or falls. From either a modern or a postmodern perspective, this is at the same time both crude parochialism and a decidedly shaky position (note the "or

falls"). If these understandings of the subject position are true, then rightly so. However, a Christian's self-understanding does not fit this perspective of the subject position, and thus their recognition of the God whom they have encountered in Christ gives them confidence that the late modern understanding of the subject is not the human predicament either.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, *because Christ Jesus has made me his own* (Phil 3:12, NRSV, italics from BvdT).

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Notes

[1] An initial exploration of this context was conducted in a recent master's thesis at the PThU defended by Tirtsa Liefting, who shows how Christians living as a religious minority in Malaysia combine commitment and openness to religious others (Liefting 2019).

[2] Two exceptions in this chapter are the expression "commitment to one's own religion" (Cornille 2008, p. 84) and the idea that commitment "involves assent to a certain worldview and body of teachings" (p. 86), but these do not change the general picture.

[3] In her chapter on commitment, Cornille (2008) only refers to Jesus in relation to other sources (pp. 69, 85f, 88), but not as part of her own argument.

[4] The same may be true of Cornille's (2008) appeal to the tradition of apophatic theology (pp. 40–42). More study will be needed, asking whether the broader use of this tradition in postmodern contexts as a defense for a significant degree of theological agnosticism does justice to this tradition. In the New Testament, at least, the awareness of the impossibility to comprehend God (1 Tim 6:16) in no way diminishes the reality that God came so overwhelmingly and decisively near in Christ (Jn 1:18).

[5] I am aware that this argument has hitherto been theological and epistemological. What is the value of the Christian understanding of the subject position of the believer, for a sociological and psychological understanding of how one can be confident and open in a pluralist society? But that is a question or cluster of questions for a different paper.

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On the Threshold of Mystery: Tomáš Halík on Cultural Witness in an Age of Uncertainty and Change

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Abstract: Tomáš Halík (born 1 June 1948) has established himself as one of the most thoughtful commentators on public cultural witness in a time of change and uncertainty, especially in central Europe. As an academic at Charles University (founded 1348) and a Catholic priest in the "Academic Parish of Prague", Halík played an important role during and following the collapse of Marxism in Czechoslovakia in the "Velvet Revolution" of November—December 1989, even being mentioned as a possible successor to Czech President Václav Havel, while at the same time offering reflections on religious engagement with a complex and changing secular culture. This article engages some leading themes of Halík's approach to cultural witness, focusing especially on cultural quests for false certainties, the need for churches to create liminal spaces enabling seekers to grasp what lies at the heart of the Christian faith, the dangers of romanticizing a lost past of faith which encourages disengagement with the present, and the need to understand faith in terms of a constant movement of thought rather than a fixed system of ideas. The article considers how these ideas can find wider application in engaging the challenges of cultural witness, particularly in a European context, and what can be learned from them.

Keywords: Academic Parish of Prague; atheism; Czech Republic; Tomáš Halík; liminality; Marxism; mystery; postsecularism; seekers; secularism; Charles Taylor

1. Introduction

The Czech Catholic priest and academic Tomáš Halík (born 1948) has established himself as a winsome and gracious religious voice in contemporary reflection on cultural witness, bringing together the virtues of intellectual excellence, cultural perceptiveness, and personal humility. He is a figure who is held in great esteem in my own university, the University of Oxford, which awarded him an honorary Doctorate in Divinity in 2016. He played a major role in the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989 (Vaněk and Mücke 2016) which ended Marxist rule in his native Czechoslovakia. Halík's most significant contribution to contemporary Christian thinking arguably lies in the domain of cultural witness—the complex, multifaceted, and critically important practice of exhibiting, embodying, and explaining the Christian faith in a cultural context that is weary of simplistic answers to complex questions and suspicious of appeals to past certainties. Although many studies of political and social change in Central and Eastern Europe reflect an outdated sociological universalism that treats this region as a politically and culturally undifferentiated whole, it is clear that there are certain distinctively Czech features of the "Velvet Revolution" which highlight the importance of local approaches to cultural engagement and witness (Marada 1997; Halík 2003). Halík's cautious correlation of political and theological themes in his Prague ministry helped secure a significant role for religion in the initial phase of the Velvet Revolution, even though this was not sustained subsequently.

This article explores a central concern that is engaged by Halík, namely developing forms of cultural witness that are relevant to societies that seem to be losing their connections with their Christian past, such as the Czech Republic. In engaging this question, an historicophilosophical methodology will be used to determine Halík's views from primary

sources, linked with an assessment of how these ideas developed in relation to his historical context, and the manner in which he applied them through his writing and his ministry in Prague. While this method is entirely appropriate for the specific purposes of this article, a more thorough investigation would need to use additional methods, such as determining the extent to which Halík is cited, both in Czech and other languages, and the specific aspects of his thought which are picked up and developed by his readers. Halík's basic question of concern for cultural witness is stated with admirable clarity as follows:

> What will be Christianity's future role in a society where 'secular culture' will have forced the ecclesiastical form of faith onto the fringes of society, among 'interest groups', and in which 'the pursuit of faith' will be regarded as a private free-time activity—as a private 'hobby'? (Halík 2015b, p. 58)

In what follows, we shall consider Halík's complex approach to this question, and how it might inform and stimulate the task of bearing cultural witness more widely in a European context.

2. Introducing Tomáš Halík

Tomáš Halík was born on 1 June 1948, four months after the post-war Marxist coup in Czechoslovakia. He studied sociology, philosophy, and psychology, and graduated with a doctorate from the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague (Halík 2019). At that time, Czechoslovakia was part of the Soviet Bloc, and severe restrictions were placed on the churches and clergy. Halík studied theology in secret and was ordained into the Catholic priesthood in Erfurt in 1978 in a private clandestine ceremony. For the next eleven years, he served as a priest in the "underground church", and became a close associate of Cardinal František Tomášek (1899–1992), Archbishop of Prague. The "Prague Spring" of 1968 created an appetite for social and political reform in Czechoslovakia and was a significant factor in leading to the eventual fall of Marxism in the bloodless "Velvet Revolution" of 1989 and the renewal of interest in Catholicism in the region. The re-emergence of Catholicism as a significant presence was reaffirmed through John Paul II's April 1990 visit to Czechoslovakia. In 1993, Czechoslovakia dissolved itself peacefully into the Czech and Slovak Republics in a process generally known as the "Velvet Divorce".

After the ending of Communist rule, Halík served as General Secretary to the Czechoslovakian Conference of Bishops (1990–1993) and lectured in pastoral psychology and sociology at the re-established Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague. In 1990, Halík became the parish priest of the "Academic Parish of Prague (Akademická farnost Praha)" based at the church of St Salvator in the Old Town of Prague [1]. He has retained this position since then, developing this institution as a center of cultural witness in the Czech capital city.

Halík's importance for the theme of "cultural witness" is best considered under three broad categories. First, his extensive period of ministry in the "Academic Parish of Prague" led to him developing ways of communicating the Christian faith in a shifting context, aiming to connect with a growing number of "seekers" drawn to the intellectual and spiritual vision of the Christian faith, yet uneasy about its institutionalized aspects or potential implications (Staněk 2008; Grün et al. 2019, pp. 72–84). Second, he was concerned about how the church related to a post-Marxist cultural situation, in which he believed it made some errors of judgment and failed to respond sensitively to a changing cultural mood. Third, Halík offered a theologically informed account of how churches might learn something from the shifting cultural mood, exploring this in works such as *Patience with God* and *Night of the Confessor*. We shall consider these three themes throughout this article, as we explore what might be learned from Halík's carefully considered insights on cultural witness.

3. The "Academic Parish of Prague": Halík on Ministering to "Seekers"

Over the last thirty years, the Academic Parish of Prague has provided both pastoral care and theological support to students, teachers, and employees of Prague universities.

Halík and his colleagues created "a platform, rather than a parish, where people, both believers and non-believers, could meet to receive spiritual support, support their social life, and cultivate their intellectual capacity" (Muchova 2021, p. 61). Many were drawn to Halík's distinctive form of institutionally embodied ministry, which is perhaps more that of a university professor than that of a regular parish priest. The preaching ministry of the parish was smented in the 2010s by the establishment of regular retreats at Kolín, a former Capuchin monastery (ibid., pp. 69–70).

For Halík, the need for cultural witness raises a fundamental ecclesiological question: "Should the Church function as a comfortable home for dwellers or should it *also* become an open space for seekers?" (Halík 2015b, p. 129, emphasis added). Halík points out the need to move away from "the traditional believers-nonbelievers paradigm to the new *seekers-dwellers paradigm*" (ibid., p. 127, italics in original). This way of thinking, originally developed by the American sociologist Robert Wuthnow and subsequently by the Canadian philosopher and social theorist Charles Taylor (Wuthnow 1998, pp. 3–9; Taylor 2012) has clear relevance for cultural witness in the Czech situation, while having a wider appeal. While simplifications are dangerous, many of those who attended these events at the Academic Parish of Prague are to be seen as "seekers", rather than those who have found a settled faith or feel that they "belong" within established Christian institutional structures.[2] So how can such "seekers" be addressed?

In his remarkable book *Patience with God*,[3] Halík emphasizes the importance of the "fringe"—the liminal zone at the interface between the church and the world, which prevents that church from becoming a sect, rather than a church in the proper sense of the word (Halík 2009, p. 77). The "fringe" is a "zone of questions and doubts" (ibid., p. 9), where a "seeking church" can encounter and engage seekers who are both curious and shy and prefer to remain on the margins of an institution they distrust. The maintenance of this fringe is thus essential to the continuing ministry of the church, not least in providing a space within which those whose original faith has been shaken can arrive at a deeper faith that is at home with paradox. Christians must thus be willing to be "seekers with those who seek and questioners with those who question" (ibid., p. 8; cf. Kočí 2014). Christians should "read scripture and live the faith also from the standpoint of our profound solidarity with people who are religiously seeking, and, if need be, with those who experience God's hiddenness and transcendence 'from the other side'" (ibid., pp. 18–19).

Halík suggests that the gospel narrative of the encounter between Zacchaeus and Christ (Lk 19: 1–10) opens up a way of envisaging the tasks and strategies of a church in this age of uncertainty. Zacchaeus is a paradigmatic "curious seeker" who dwells on the fringes of belief, watching from a distance and maintaining that distance. Like many seekers of today, Zacchaeus was neither "indifferent nor hostile" to faith. Though clearly drawn to Christ, Zacchaeus chose to stand at a safe distance from him as he reflected on his potential significance (ibid., p. 3). Many of those on the margins of the church are seekers who have *chosen* to remain within their own safe places. These seekers

> . . . are still on the journey, dusty and far from the goal. They are not yet 'ready' to display themselves to others in the full light of day, maybe because they find themselves in a blind alley on their life's journey. . . . And yet they sense the urgent moment when something of importance passes by them. It has a force of attraction, as it had for Zacchaeus, who longed to set eyes on Jesus. (ibid., p. 6)

For Halík, the gospel story of Zacchaeus helped him to frame his "own particular mission and vocation"—not as a missionary seeking to convert people, but as an understanding neighbor who could show and explain what faith was all about. This task demands patience and a willingness to respect a seeker's hesitations. "Let's not drag these seekers onto our side too hastily. Let us respect the rhythm of their journey. Let us respect their self-understanding and give them time and freedom to decide when—and if ever—they want to take the step of name change" (ibid., p. 103).

Yet Halík's approach is freighted with ecclesiological implications. Many churches that hold to an Augustinian "mixed-body" ecclesiology recognize the importance of the

"fringe", a liminal zone between the church and the world in which seekers can attend and explore without commitment. Many find that cathedrals offer a hospitable space for curious outsiders to attend anonymously without expectations, facilitating the kind of encounter that Halík seems to have in mind (Doležalová and Foletti 2019). Some churches, however, adopt a more Donatist ecclesiology, creating an expectation of explicit commitment on the part of those who attend that might deter seekers who prefer to stand on the fringes, watching and wondering. Halík's reflections on the need to engage the "zone of questions and doubts" clearly raise the question of how such a safe space on the threshold of the church might be created and deployed apologetically.

One model is provided by the "Alpha Course", a highly influential form of cultural engagement and outreach pioneered at a London church, Holy Trinity Brompton. This course involves the creation of a neutral exploratory space, in which life's great questions can be explored in a context that is tolerant of "questions and doubts" (Atherstone 2022). As has often been pointed out, although this course introduces what C. S. Lewis famously termed "mere Christianity" (McGrath 2013; Marsden 2016)—a basic, consensual Christian orthodoxy—this can be smented locally with doctrines and practices that are denominationally specific.

Yet perhaps the most authentic instantiation of Halík's approach is found in his own "Academic Parish of Prague", which both respects and engages the doubts and questions of a distinct audience of urban and educated people. In her important study of the work of this parish, Adela Muchova (2021) points out, drawing on the work of the Austrian Catholic theologian Paul Zulehner, that too many churches give answers to "questions that nobody is asking", while being "silent on questions which are important for people" (p. 61). The sociological specificity of the audience for Halík's homilies is thus to be seen as a strength, rather than a weakness. "The specific character of the parish, serving primarily to a community of people affiliated with institutions of higher education, emphasizes the speaker's responsibility to address this specific congregation no matter how non-appealing it might be for others" (ibid., pp. 66–68).

By engaging an audience that he knew, and whose concerns he understood, Halík ensured that a wider audience sharing those concerns would be drawn to hear him. Halík's homilies—which were typically 15 min long—were smented by the more detailed team-taught "Basics of Faith Course (*Kurz základů víry*)", which allowed more thorough engagement with questions of faith once individuals felt ready to explore these (ibid., pp. 66–68). These lectures were delivered by Halík, other parish team members, or guest speakers every Tuesday evening between 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. over a period of two academic years in the sacristy of St Salvator, the largest public space within the church.

Yet the institutional context is only part of this process; it is also important to note the distinctive voice of Halík himself as a "personal convinced doubter", more concerned to explore questions than offering "concrete and restrictive answers" (ibid., p. 62; cf. Kočí and Roubík 2015). Halík's essay "Befriending the Nonbeliever within" (Grün et al. 2019, pp. 123–38) sets out the apologetic strategy that lies behind this approach, helping us understand how Halík aims to step into the *persona* of an atheist or doubter and explore those concerns sympathetically as one who understands, and at times perhaps even shares, such concerns, and difficulties. "I sometimes feel closer with my Christian faith to the skeptics or to the atheist or agnostic critics of religion . . . However, I regard their interpretation of this feeling as too hasty, as an expression of impatience" (Halík 2009, p. ix).

4. Halík on Witnessing Amidst a Shifting Cultural Mood

During the period of Marxist rule in Czechoslovakia following the Second World War, many saw the church as offering a powerful and attractive moral vision in the face of an authoritarian government. The fall of Marxism might, therefore, have been expected to lead to a sustained resurgence in Christianity. Yet, as Halík noted, nothing of the sort happened.

> According to opinion polls the Church achieved immediately after the fall of communism in the eyes of the Czech public an authority that it had clearly never

enjoyed previously in modern history. However, the situation began to change sharply in the following years: according to current opinion polls, fewer people in the Czech Republic than in any other European country—with the possible exception of the former GDR—acknowledge membership of the Church or a faith articulated through the Church.[4] (Halík 2015a, p. 48)

So what went wrong? Halík's analysis is important for two reasons: first, in understanding the situation at this time in Czechoslovakia; and second, in explaining why he developed his own specific approach to cultural outreach.

Following the "Velvet Revolution", Halík argues, the Czech Catholic church seemed to many outsiders to become increasingly concerned with its internal structures and preoccupied with preserving its social influence as an institution. Those who were questing for an authentic spiritual experience found these developments puzzling and alienating. Why such inwardness and self-preoccupation? Why not be attentive to the sense of receptivity towards the spiritual in Czech culture? Since most Czechs can be seen as "seekers" of one sort or another, rather than as "dwellers", the church's perceived self-preoccupation since the "Velvet Revolution" quickly became a barrier to outreach and engagement.

Although many in the West now regard Czechs as generally atheist, more reliable research suggests a wide level of interest in non-materialist interpretations of reality and spiritualities (Hamplová 2013), linked with suspicion of religious institutions. They are seekers, who nevertheless keep their distance from an institution they distrust, and whose ideas they find difficult to understand and correlate with their own existential, moral, and emotional questions. Yet the Czech Catholic church seemed unwilling or unable to adapt to this changed cultural situation. As Halík pointed out, "instead of initiation to the mysteries of faith, memorizing the catechism was imposed" (Kočí and Roubík 2015, p. 100). Faith was framed in terms of assent to external norms, not in terms of internal appropriation and appreciation of a faith that led to a transformation of both life and thought.

As his preaching ministry at the Academic Parish of Prague makes clear, Halík believes that it is possible to respond to these developments. A central theme in his writings concerns the need to be attentive to the historical and cultural location of such "seekers", and to translate the Christian faith into categories and vocabularies that carry conviction for them. He thus highlights the extent to which what many consider to be "traditional" Christian views are actually quite recent and are shaped by cultural forces in ways that often represent diminishments or distortions of earlier and wiser formulations of faith.

For this reason, Halík commends a critical appropriation of the Christian past, which he considers to have the potential to engage today's challenges. "Conservative Christians are surprised when we show them how relatively modern and extremely limited is the form of Christianity that they wish to conserve, and what enormous intellectual and spiritual wealth resides in much older traditions of the church" (Halík 2017, p. 57). Halík's particular concern is that more recent forms of Christianity represent uninterrogated accommodations to the Enlightenment, which "marked the beginning of theology's inability to respond creatively to the changing picture of the world". As a result, it found itself trapped in a particular cultural framework, without the means to reform and revitalize itself.

In some ways, Halík's understanding of theology resembles the British public philosopher Mary Midgley's approach to philosophy, which she stated with particular clarity and force in her final book *What is Philosophy for?* Our philosophies, Midgley declared, can never be considered definitive or final; they are best seen as appropriate interim responses to a changing cultural context.

> Philosophizing, in fact, is not a matter of solving one fixed set of puzzles. Instead, it involves finding the many particular ways of thinking that will be the most helpful as we try to explore this constantly changing world. Because the world—including human life—does constantly change, philosophical thoughts are never final. Their aim is always to help us through the present difficulty. (Midgley 2018, p. 6; cf. McGrath 2020)

Halík holds that theological statements are not to be seen as fixed and definitive, but are rather stated in forms and ways that are appropriate for expressing and conveying the mystery of God in a range of cultural contexts. Every generation of Christian leaders has to articulate faith in terms that make sense to their cultural context, rather than merely mechanically repeat theological formulations of the past. Any formulation of faith which refuses to acknowledge its own cultural location will encounter difficulties in engaging a new cultural location.

Halík's analysis of how Christianity might respond to the cultural changes of recent decades is partly shaped by his analysis of how it came to find itself in this situation in the first place. Although he engages the nature of modernity at several points in his works, his most significant analysis is found in *I Want You to Be* (Halík 2017). The God who modernity found irrelevant is itself a modernist construction, one of many "inventions of the Enlightenment thinkers" that need to be challenged and reconsidered—not least through retrieving older and wiser insights. "It was not until Kierkegaard, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and 'death of God' theology that Christian theology came to realize that the death of God announced by Nietzsche and others was *the death of the banal god of modern times* and that that event could be liberating for Christian faith" (ibid., p. 59, italics in original).

By demanding an excessively objective account of faith, modernity severed the long-standing connections between an objective statement of faith and its subjective aspects, leading to a form of faith that is both deficient and discontinuous with a richer and older tradition of faith (cf. McGrath 2022). Halík's concern is that many Christians have mistakenly assumed that this specific and "historically conditioned form of Christianity" is normative for all times—despite its relatively recent historical origins and its clear emotional and imaginative deficiencies. "Theology in those early days of modernity adopted unthinkingly, inadvertently—and hence uncritically—modernity's division of reality into subject and object" (Halík 2017, p. 59).

Halík's concern is that modernism creates a false objective God, to be studied with scientific detachment, lacking any engagement with the interior world of human beings—and thus facilitating the rise of secularism. For Halík, secular humanism is the tragic and unintended consequence of Christian theology failing to respond empathetically or creatively to modernity. Secularism can thus be seen as the "prodigal son" or the "unwanted child" of Western Christianity. Halík argues that the banal and emaciated gods of modernity—whether secular or Christian—must be discarded and replaced with the living God of the mystics, who defies the neat rational categorizations of modernist philosophers and theologians.

Halík's concerns about forms of Christianity that have overaccommodated to modernity are borne out by many recent influential interventions in the world of natural and social science, which point to the human sciences and the natural sciences as two epistemically distinct enterprises, yielding different forms of knowledge (McGrath 2019). Karl Popper suggested that scientific knowledge is "knowledge without a knower" (Popper 1979, p. 109). In the same way, modernist approaches to God seem to offer an emotionally and imaginatively deficient account of God, which fails to do justice to the concerns, needs, and interests of the "knower". Similarly, Emile Durkheim suggests that the basic principle of the sociological method is that "social facts must be studied as things, that is, as realities external to the individual" (Durkheim 2002, p. xxxvi).

There are important parallels here between Halík and other European writers who have expressed misgivings about the existential dreariness and distance of modernist over-intellectualized notions of God. In his influential work *The Master and His Emissary*, Iain McGilchrist suggests that we can adopt two rather different approaches to reality (and God). One, drawing on the rationalism of the bygone "Age of Reason", represents the world in a way that is "fixed, static, isolated, decontextualised, explicit, disembodied . . . [and] ultimately lifeless" (McGilchrist 2019, p. 93). While this form of encounter with the world possesses the somewhat limited virtue of rational clarity, people (unsurprisingly) feel detached and disengaged from it. The other mode of engagement, however, offers a vision

of reality that is "interconnected, implicit, incarnate", which is "in the nature of things never fully graspable, always imperfectly known". This form of engagement, however, makes emotional sense of the world and is capable of connecting with humanity's deepest intuitions and aspirations.

5. Waiting at the Threshold of the Mystery of God

Halík insists that we need to recognize the limits of any attempt to conceptualize God, in that this runs the risk of reducing God to human categories or theories, and then treating these limiting categories and theories—rather than the inexhaustible actuality of the living God—as the basis of certainty and trust. For Halík, the "first and last sentence of any theology" should be the words "God is mystery" (Halík 2009, p. 46). Yet despite his emphasis on mystery, Halík believes that it is possible to speak positively of God in a culture that so clearly needs to rediscover the transcendent dimensions of life. The unlimited reality of God is such that our institutions, reflections, and actions can never capture the full reality of this mystery (ibid., p. 9); it is something that must be encountered, experienced, and—however inadequately—*expressed* and *embodied*.

Some have suggested that there seems to be an inconsistency here. How can Halík "make such an easy link between God and the meaningful order of reality and, at the same time, claim that God is an unknown mystery?" (Kočí and Roubík 2015, p. 123). In responding to this concern, we need to concede that there has always been a tension in Christian thought between recognizing that the gospel cannot be adequately framed and conveyed in human language on the one hand, and the more pragmatic insistence that we have to use human words in order to proclaim the realities that lie at the heart of faith on the other (Eilers 2011). This is a significant theme in the theology of Rowan Williams, who writes of the "*gratuitous mysteriousness* of what theology deals with, a sense of language trying unsuccessfully to keep up with a datum that is in excess of any foresight, any imagined comprehensive structure" (Williams 2000, p. xv; italics added). Christ is thus the basis of both a disruptive and critical theology challenging the adequacy of our accounts of God, and a celebrative theology that rejoices in what can be known of God in Christ.

In a similar manner, Halík emphasizes the unique capacity of Jesus Christ as the "fullest self-expression" of God, the "best real symbol and forceful sign of God's presence for us and among us". Perhaps most importantly of all, Christ is the "window through which we see God at work", the "face of the invisible and name of the unnameable" (Halík 2009, p. 137). Halík's reflections on the death and resurrection of Christ—too rich to summarize here—undergird his vision of the central role of Christ in disclosing a God who penetrates the dark spaces of human life.

Although Halík's concerns and approaches at this point can be understood on their own terms, it is helpful to remember that Halík was a student of the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (Kočí 2014, p. 51), who made some significant critiques of modernist accounts of God (Dodd 2018). Patočka argued that modernity, taking its cues from Descartes (Patočka 1996, pp. 83–84, 110), developed a new form of rationalism—a "rationalism of mastery". A core element of this rationalist remastering of God was the insistence on a univocal sense of God. "The univocalization of God is the first step of removing God's mystery. The problem of 'God in Question' might be restated as the struggle between *mastery* and *mystery*—the shift from *intellectus* (seeking an insight) to *ratio* (an instrument of clear and distinct knowledge)" (Kočí 2014, p. 55, italics in original).

The inevitable outcomes of this transition have been unhelpful theologically. In the first place, God comes to be seen as one of many things or objects in the world that are for that reason amenable to scientific analysis. In the second, God has been relocated from the realm of human *understanding* to the more intellectualized realm of *explanation*. As Dilthey famously remarked, "we *explain* nature, but we *understand* the life of the soul" (Dilthey 1961, p. 144, emphasis added; cf. Apel 1979; Taylor 1980). The philosopher Richard Swinburne, for example, treats God primarily as an "explanatory hypothesis" which aims to explain our experience of the world (Swinburne 2008, p. 16), rather than as enriching the life of

the soul. Halík argues that this reduces God to the level of the rational, and thus fails to grasp or express the conceptual immensity and existential inexhaustibility of God, which reason is unable to fully comprehend or master. "Understanding is not directed toward a discrete object, but involves seeing the relation of parts to other parts and perhaps even the relation of part to a whole" (Zagzebski 2001, p. 241). Understanding thus involves grasping coherence, seeing how things "fit" or "hang" together, and how we fit into this greater scheme of things (Greco 2021, p. 130).

In arguing for the recovery of understanding as a religiously significant category, Halík draws on an insight of the Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe, who was highly critical of those who believed that the idea of God was introduced simply to resolve the puzzles of the world. McCabe was emphatic: theology draws attention to a mystery—the mystery that stands at the heart of the Christian faith. McCabe thus emphasizes the importance of the category of mystery in challenging simplistic forms of faith, which lack the depth and richness of the living God of faith (McCabe 2010, p. 128). Mystery is something that is irreducible, defying the human yearning to conquer and master reality as an act of control or hegemony. We need to be receptive to mystery, to the "Depth of Being" that invites and excites us to ask questions that open up new ways of understanding our world, rather than merely explaining its functions.

Halík suggests that post-Marxist Czech culture wanted quick and easy answers to deep questions and thus found itself drawn to shallow ways of thinking which, "like cheap instant coffee, offer to slake the thirst for transcendence quickly and simply" (Grün et al. 2019, pp. 36–37). It lacked patience and a willingness to immerse and explore something deep and complex. A mystery cannot be mastered; in the end, it masters us, demanding that we adapt our apprehension of the world to accommodate it, rather than reducing it to what we can intellectually manage. Halík insists that a real mystery cannot be overcome or conquered. "One must wait patiently at its threshold and persevere in it—must carry it in one's heart—just as Jesus's mother did" (Halík 2009, p. x).

In making this important point, Halík draws on the French existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel's distinction between a "mystery" and a "problem" (Hernandez 2018). The world of problems is the domain of science, rational inquiry, and technical control. We live in a "broken world" which is resistant to a disinterested total comprehension. This "broken world" is "riddled with problems" on the one hand yet is "determined to allow no room for mystery" on the other (Marcel 1995, p. 12). A problem is something that can be viewed objectively, and for which we can find a possible solution. A mystery, however, is something that we cannot view objectively, precisely because we cannot separate ourselves from it (ibid., p. 117). While problems can give rise to universal or generalized solutions, mysteries simply do not admit such generalized solutions. Life, according to Marcel, is thus not a problem to be solved *theoretically* but a mystery to be lived out *existentially*.

Developing this point, Halík (2012) argues that, from a Christian perspective, faith is what draws us into "the Mystery that is called God" (p. 59). Faith is perhaps best seen as "a journey, a way of seeking, a way into the depths of meaning" (Halík 2015b, p. 128). It is about approaching a mystery that cannot be mastered epistemically or exhausted spiritually, something that helps us to understand and cope with the challenges and enigmas of life, but which cannot be reduced to the banality of an explanation or expressed with the confidence of the pseudo-certainties of cultural and religious fundamentalisms.

This means that we cannot achieve certainty or fixity in our ideas, in that these are grounded in a dynamic and continuing engagement with the reality of God, as we confront new situations that demand a translation of our language about God. Faith changes us, as it causes us to grow in wisdom. Certainty is simply not an option in relation to what Karl Popper famously termed "ultimate questions"—such as the meaning of life, or the nature of the good. Only *shallow* truths or explanations can be proved to be correct—and such truths lack relational and existential traction.

Halík's analysis of mystery may be helpfully set against Jorge Luis Borges's playful critique of those who aspire to precision and exactitude in the human comprehension and

representation of complex realities. Borges invites us to imagine a map that corresponds precisely with the details of the territory it represented. To capture every aspect of this rich landscape, the map had to be expanded to the point where it became unusable. "The Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province" (Borges 1998). To map a mystery requires "a map on a scale of 1:1" (Peters 2008, pp. 10–15), a map of depth and vastness corresponding to what is being mapped. The best way of discovering this mystery is not through consulting a map, but by entering this territory and journeying through it, experiencing its immensity and struggling to express this in words. This brings us to consider Halík's critique of the quest for certainty in Western culture and its debilitating effects on religious faith.

6. The Search for False Certainties

"Faith does not mean to rely on pillars of certainty but to enter the clouds of mystery and accept faith as a challenge" (Grün et al. 2019, p. xvi). Halík's emphatic criticism of the shallow certainties of ideologies and worldviews counters a cultural trend that inevitably leads to fundamentalisms, whether religious or secular. In 2006, the movement now known as "New Atheism" captured the public imagination in parts of the West. Writers such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett set out what were asserted to be a set of simple rational certainties, backed up by the natural sciences, which made religion a cultural and intellectual irrelevance. The journalist Gary Wolf coined the term "New Atheism" in 2006 to refer to the messianic atheism of Dawkins and his colleagues and highlight the rhetorically aggressive means by which they asserted their beliefs (Wolf 2006). Wolf was struck by the trenchant certainties of this form of atheism, which many people found arrogant and improbable, amounting to a significant intellectual overreach on their part. "People see a contradiction in its tone of certainty. Contemptuous of the faith of others, its proponents never doubt their own belief. They are fundamentalists".

Paradoxically, Dawkins's public attacks on religion, particularly Christianity, actually generated a surge of interest in exploring religious faith. As the sociologist Tina Beattie remarked, shortly after the publication of Dawkins's work *The God Delusion*, it seemed that Dawkins had reawakened public interest in God "more effectively than any preacher could have done" (Beattie 2007, p. vii). However, more significantly, Dawkins's certainties turned out to be highly questionable, representing ephemeral cultural prejudices rather than scientifically demonstrable facts, at most leading to the uncertainties of agnosticism rather than the secure certainties that many in Western culture demanded.

As some within the "New Atheism" movement became increasingly aware of the intellectual vulnerability of its core beliefs, a new emphasis began to emerge on the asserted *infallibility* of its leading representatives. When Dawkins's ideas proved to be decidedly fallible, the "New Atheist" faithful refocused on the personal authority of Dawkins as a sage. Dawkins was presented as a figure of wisdom, who was to be trusted as a result of what Max Weber described as his "charismatic authority" (Joosse 2014). For the atheist apologist P. Z. Myers, a biologist at the University of Minnesota, a "cult of personality" now emerged within the "New Atheism", in which Dawkins and Hitchens were "turned into oracles whose dicta should not be questioned, and dissent would lead to being ostracized" (Myers 2019). Myers (2019) considered it to have been a serious error of judgment to allow Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens to assume a leadership role within the movement. Within a year, "New Atheism" seemed to have morphed into a new religious movement, with its infallible prophets and authoritative texts, above all Dawkins and his *God Delusion*.

Today, "New Atheism" is generally regarded as having imploded, increasingly (though perhaps unfairly) being seen as the crystallization of the gendered cultural prejudices of old white Western males. Many of its former members, disenchanted by its arrogance, prejudice, and superficiality, have distanced themselves from the movement and its leaders.[5] The cultural mood began to shift, as many who had initially embraced "New Atheism" found that it failed to deliver the secure knowledge that they longed for or a sustainable

vision of the "good life". New Atheism may have presented itself as an antidote to religious delusions; its critics argue that it merely propagated a somewhat different delusion about the omnicompetence of reason and science. Additionally, disillusioned by such spurious pseudo-certainties, many began to look for better answers, wondering if there were alternatives that might be more credible, attractive, and satisfying. As the extent of Dawkins's personal and intellectual overreach became increasingly clear, some chose to look again at alternative ways of engaging the world, more open to the problem of uncertainty in relation to "ultimate questions".

As many commentators have noted, there is a constant temptation in a time of cultural fragility to seek certainty in the present or to retreat to the asserted certainties of the past (McGrath 2021). Halík is an important voice in exploring how we might live meaningfully and hopefully with such uncertainty, arguing that one of the core challenges facing both culture and Christianity is a misguided cultural quest for false certainties, ultimately resting on the overstatements of modernity. "'Fundamentalism' is a disorder of a faith that tries to entrench itself within the shadows of the past against the disturbing complexity of life" (Halík 2012, p. 21). "The world we inhabit is profoundly ambivalent", allowing space for both atheist and Christian interpretations (ibid., p. 61). As Pascal pointed out in the seventeenth century, there is enough light for those who desire to see, and enough darkness for those who do not (Marion 1994).

Halík would find support here in the Oxford academic Isaiah Berlin, himself an émigré from Eastern Europe, who was scathing in his criticism of the pseudo-certainties of modernity. In his famous 1988 lecture "The Pursuit of the Ideal", Berlin (1991) offered a philosophical demolition of those who "have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt" (p. 14). Berlin considered this as an unjustified epistemic arrogance, which amounted to little more than wish-fulfillment: "I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human". Berlin shared many of Halík's insights into the human situation, and their potential implications for the rise of fundamentalist ideologies of both the Left and Right, as well as their religious alternatives. Yet, Halík observes, many today find it difficult to live with this lack of precision and certainty, which they mistakenly believe to be essential for authentic existence. Although Halík engages some significant cultural figures in his exploration of uncertainty, his most fundamental resources are biblical, grounded in individual believers wrestling with issues of doubt (Thomas 2013).

Halík suggests that tension between "believing and unbelieving" *within the same individual* has become characteristic of Western humanity as a whole, following the collapse of the false certainties of the past. Secular certainties have been eroded, replaced with uncertainty and hesitation. Many in Western culture are *seeking*—not necessarily knowing what they seek, but nevertheless sensing that there is something worth seeking that has not yet been found or grasped (Halík 2015b). Where many once sought refuge in the capacity of reason or science to establish certain foundations of faith, these supposedly firm foundations have turned out to be decidedly questionable. There are clear parallels between Halík and Kierkegaard on these points, including their mutual suspicion of institutional churches and recognition of the paradoxes of faith (Poettcker 2019).

What some might see as a crisis is thus seen by Halík as an opportunity. Many of the great theological and spiritual writers of the past found themselves facing times of transition, as an old order seemed to be giving way to an indeterminate and unpredictable future, in which the trusted certainties of the past might no longer be valid. We are called to move into these uncharted and unfamiliar territories, realizing that this might enable us to break free from past limiting notions of God or the gospel, which have led us to enclose the living God within "the confines of our notions, concepts, traditions, and creeds" (Halík 2009, p. 53).

In the secular world, Halík argues, "'fixed systems' of secure knowledge" arose in the form of ideologies, such as Marxism (Halík 2012, p. 71). These systems, so often treated as self-evident normative truths defining a cultural tribe (cf. Žižek 1989), are no longer possible; what now prevails is a "constant *movement of thought*", which cannot be crystallized or frozen at any particular moment of its development (Halík 2012, p. 71; italics original). "We prove our faithfulness, not by clinging to a specific tradition of the past, but, like Abraham, by entering new territory" (Halík 2009, p. 53). The Christian God is a "pilgrim God", resistant to being captured by our intellectual systems and traditions, who leads us out of our "homes and heartlands", even though we would prefer to remain there and fortify them.

The "seeking church", Halík suggests, should thus be characterized by patience and longing, recognizing the cultural suspicions about "organized religion", and waiting attentively and lovingly for those who are at a distance to choose to come near. That distance can be overcome by joining such seekers as they journey through life, accompanying them, and bringing them "to the heart of mystery, which is inexhaustible and bottomless" so that they may encounter this for themselves (ibid., p. 9). Those who are seeking, longing, and hoping can come to realize that God is "the foundation and fount of our seeking, our watchfulness, our openness, our self-transcendence" (ibid., p. 53)—and thus to encounter and embrace the one who is both the origin and goal of human longing and desire.

7. Conclusions

The philosopher of religion John Cottingham (2018) recently suggested that "understanding the world religiously is not an attempt to dissect and analyze and explain it in the manner of modern science" but is rather to be seen as "a mode of engagement, or connection, with reality as a whole" (p. 31). This bold statement marks a rejection of modernism's attempt to master God and reduce the divine to manageable and clear abstract objective concepts. Where some chose to adopt simplistic apologetic strategies of rationalist arguments for faith, Halík points towards the recognition of God as a "mystery", not in the sense of something that is irrational, but as something vast and inexhaustible that simply cannot be reduced to the banalities of human reason. A mystery cannot be mastered epistemically, nor exhausted spiritually. To rediscover the mystery of God is to retrieve wisdom from the pre-modern age that was prematurely and precipitately rejected by the "Age of Reason". It allows today's church and believers to encounter a vision of God that transcends the explanatory banalities of reason, and which, like a spring of fresh living water (Jn 4: 14), can meet our deep thirst for meaning and significance.

Halík's approach to cultural witness sets out a rich vision of the multiple elements of such an engagement. Three may be singled out for particular emphasis. First, the important role of appropriate institutions or agencies in creating safe spaces in which "seekers" can explore questions of faith in dialogue with Christian speakers who can empathize with their concerns, misgivings, and aspirations. There is a need for a "zone of questions and doubts" on the threshold of the church, in which seekers can explore questions without any presumed commitment on their part. Second, the importance of affirming the inevitability of uncertainty in relation to the big questions of life, and exploring how the Christian faith allows people to live authentically and hopefully in the midst of such uncertainties. Individuals need to be helped to wait patiently at the threshold of mystery, as they gradually discern its depths and wisdom. Third, Halík notes the importance of working with cultural "givens" rather than imposing an alien cultural framework in order to facilitate conversion. For Halík, the abject failure of "fundamentalist evangelical Christians from the United States brandishing a bible in one hand and a hamburger in the other" to convert Czechoslovakia following the collapse of Marxism (Halík 2020, p. 26) is a powerful reminder of the need for cultural *empathy* and *patience* as a prerequisite for effective cultural witness.

Although Halík's approach reflects and addresses the specific issues relating to cultural witness in the Czech situation following the downfall of communism (Kočí and Roubík 2015), his insights have much wider application. They speak powerfully to those who feel

the loss of religious presence and power and can see no way ahead of them. Many are distressed by the challenge of living with uncertainty and are constantly searching for new certainties on which they might base their lives more securely.

Halík commends a form of *ressourcement*—a theology of rediscovery and reappropriation (D'Ambrosio 1991), through which we can learn from the past without being burdened by its mistakes, and in which our journeys through an unfamiliar world force us to rediscover a living and inexhaustible God, rather than encouraging us to rely upon a fading cultural memory of God. As the Czech church—in common with so many others—transitions from being "the default church of the majority" to the "fragments of a diaspora" (Taylor 2012, p. 23), Halík's approach offers wisdom and encouragement to the enterprise of cultural witness across Europe in this changing context, as we seek to explore fresh forms of engagement and evangelism adapted to the new social realities of our age (Halík 2016).

While this study has aimed to identify the characteristic features and potential importance of Halík's form of cultural witness, more work needs to be done. In particular, further work needs to be carried out on the sociological aspects of the "Academic Parish of Prague", clarifying both the identity of this audience and what they found attractive and relevant about Halík's presentation of Christianity to their lives. There is also a need for a critical assessment of the precise extent to which Halík is cited by other writers, the specific aspects of his thought which are found helpful by his multiple audiences, and how they are being adapted to deal with new contexts and questions.

Yet, on the basis of the analysis presented in this study, it is clear that Halík's appeal to his audiences lies in his willingness to engage questions of cultural anxiety and epistemic uncertainty. Halík's framing of the concept of "mystery" as something which is inexhaustible (rather than merely something that resists definitive interpretation) emphasizes the limits of human understanding on the one hand and the richness of God on the other. This theme has considerable potential for religious preaching and pedagogy in an age of uncertainty and change, by encouraging exploration and experience of the depths of faith, rather than a superficial engagement with its creedal formulations.

For Halík, believers need to wrestle with "mystery", in that there is always more to discover and appreciate in the journey of faith, in which old answers can be given a new vitality and depth to meet the challenges of our complex cultural situation. The life of faith is not a passive reception of creedal statements, but an active engagement with the mystery that lies at the heart of faith. Rather than settle for predetermined verbal expressions of mystery, as these are found in the Creeds or Catechisms, we are invited to discover these for ourselves by wrestling with the mystery of God, appreciating both the wisdom of traditional doctrinal formulations and the theological depths of experience that lie behind them. Perhaps this may prove to be Halík's most significant contribution to the recovery of Christian faith in an increasingly post-Christian context.

Notes

[1]   The parish website can be viewed at: http://www.farnostsalvator.cz/akademicka-farnost-praha, 31 January 2023.

[2]   This is not to suggest that "seekers" and "dwellers" are mutually exclusive categories. Taylor's analysis suggests that "seekers" and "dwellers" function as "ideal types", so many people find themselves overlapping these categories (Taylor 2012, p. 21). Halík's approach connects with both these audiences.

[3]   The titles of the English, French, and German translations of this work (all of which are variants of "Patience with God") unfortunately failed to pick up the nuances of the original Czech title *Vzdáleným na blízku* ('To Stand by the Distant'). The Italian translation—"Vicino ai lontani"—is more faithful to the original.

4   The abbreviation "GDR" refers to the former "German Democratic Republic" or "East Germany", which became part of the Soviet Bloc in 1949, and collapsed in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

5   For a highly insightful critique, see Hamburger (2019).

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Article

Toward Integrity and Integration of the Church(es) Relating to the State in the Secularized Cultural Context of Estonian Society

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Abstract: Classical paradigms of the church-state relations may be reflected in how the church has tried to work and live out her integrity in different cultural-political contexts. The churches in Estonia have envisioned Christian integrity in relation to the state differently in different times and stages of societal and cultural development. One could distinguish the following four types of relationships: *the conflict, the harmony, the two kingdoms,* and *the social servanthood.* This article will focus on the characteristics of these relationship paradigms along with some personal, communal, and ecumenical examples in the sense of integrity of Estonian church-life from the last century to the present day when social servanthood seems to be most relevant.

Keywords: character ethics; church and culture; church and society; church and state; community of character; ecumenical relationships; integrity; religious freedom; virtue ethics

1. Introduction

"In the history of the Christian church, the issue of the relation between church and state surfaced with new urgency during the seismic political shifts", says an Estonian expert in patristics, Tarmo Toom (2020, p. 65). It seems so beyond the early church discussions in his concern (Funk 2006). Old questions come alive, again, in new contexts (Kovalenko 2022; Minarik 2020; Romocea 2011; Marsh and Zhong 2010). One could see it also in "the seismic political shifts" in Estonian society toward the end of the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st century. Classical paradigms of the church-state relations[1] may be reflected in how the church has tried to work and live out her integrity[2] in the best possible ways in different cultural–political contexts.[3] So the Christian church in Estonian historical-denominational appearances—denoted as church(es) below—envisioned Christian integrity in relation to the state differently in different times and stages of societal and cultural development (Kilp 2012). One could distinguish the following four types of relationships: *the conflict, the harmony, the two kingdoms,* and *the social servanthood.* This article will focus on the characteristics of these relationship paradigms along with some personal, communal, and ecumenical examples in the sense of integrity of Estonian church-life from the last century up to the present day.

2. Integrity in Conflict

I was born into an Estonian family of baptistic faith during the Soviet totalitarian atheistic occupation regime. We were considered dissidents by the logic of control of the KGB. Our phone calls were tapped and recorded. Our life was followed. My father, Aamo Remmel, had been expelled from Tartu University medical faculty because of his proclamation of faith. The KGB was concerned and reported about his sermons in different cities and towns and declared his religious convictions to be fanatical along with other believing students (Rahvusarhiiv (Estonian National Archives) n.d., p. 35). My mother, Viivi Remmel, was a typist who secretly printed Christian books at home—five copies at a time through copy paper. So I knew from childhood with my older brother and two

younger sisters how the truthful church(es) opposed the occupation regime of the Soviet state and its ideology in culture.

In my personal experience, this confrontation culminated in 1985 when I was forced to serve in the Soviet army near Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad), Russia. There I was interrogated for days and nights until the KGB officer pointed his revolver at my head and demanded renouncement of my faith. I never submitted. Instead, I argued for my integrity and religious freedom officially recognized in the Soviet Constitution. At the same time, the young man alone in the middle of Russia realized the irreconcilable contradiction between the Kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, the church and the state persecuting believers.

The Bible and its teachings from home and the children's Sunday school and youth work, officially forbidden but secretly organized by the church, had prepared us to resist and stand firm in the faith knowing "that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Pet 5:9, New International Version [NIV]). Jesus and his apostles along with the persecuted early church embodied the virtue–ethical examples to be followed by the 16th century radical Reformers as well as by ourselves toward the end of the 20th century in Estonia.[4] Our sense of integrity was developing and sharpening in a conflicting state as we practiced our personal and communal life of faith and virtue of character both in our primary and secondary theology.[5] We aimed to follow Jesus in his example and teaching: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven". (Matt 5:16, NIV).

The model of integrity following Jesus in such a context meant to be faithful and faith-full to the kingdom of light under the Lordship of Christ opposing the kingdom of darkness under the oppression of evil. It might well be reflected in the final conversation between my father in his young age and his academic dean in his age proposing him to keep his student status in the university if only promising publicly to withdraw from the church while privately still able to attend the church if wanted. My father responded: "I could never promise something I would never keep!" The dean concluded: "I am sorry for you leaving the university for such naive convictions . . . " (Remmel and Remmel 2007, p. 32).

So there was a disintegrity regime in the state suppressing and challenging the people of faith who were standing for their religious freedom and convictions concerning their communal character and ethics of integrity. The integrity for believers was measured up by the biblical narrative as the one and only authoritative text. And it was telling a promising story—as the tensional hope (Moltmann 1993, 2008; Meeks 2018)—that such a regime would not last forever. One just could not imagine "how long, O Lord . . . " (Rev 6:10, NIV). But the overall scene in the society changed suddenly in the late 1980s.[6]

3. Integrity in Harmony or Balance of the Two Kingdoms?

After the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, the Soviet system of lies began to shake and disintegrate while the Communist leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, tried to keep the empire in its integrity by so called *Glasnost* (meaning best "transparency") and *Perestroika* (meaning "re-building").[7] It opened a field to the Estonian environmentalist campaign, called the *Phosphorite War* (*Fosforiidisõda* in Estonian). It was raising up against the Soviet planned economy secrets to develop large and polluting phosphorite mines in Estonia, which led to the so-called *Estonian Heritage Protection Movement* (*Muinsuskaitse liikumine* in Estonian) and finally to the so-called *Singing Revolution* (*Laulev revolutsioon* in Estonian) (Laar 2004; Subrenat 2004). The churches were found, again, as the carriers of historical memory and heritage, and the integrity of the church(es) was recognized across Estonian society (Parman et al. 1995; Remmel 2001). The Bible and biblical stories reflected in the Western and Estonian art and music were introduced in public schools and media. I was personally involved, too, using my background and opportunity as a student from Tartu University going from school to school with the old Estonian version of *La Grande Bible de Tours* showing 226 wood-engravings by Gustave Doré and telling the biblical stories to the students (Jumala Püha Sõna. Suur Piibel 1938). The national–political revival movement

was in harmony with the churches and their leaders showing the way forward. Estonian national folk songs and spiritual folk songs were sung side by side by both church and secular choirs. The long-lasting Estonian song festival tradition, growing out of the church choral singing, prepared the way for singing out and envisioning the hope for a free nation on a free land. Estonian artist Heinz Valk, then, coined the term *Singing Revolution* and its slogan: "One day, no matter what, we will win!" (*Ükskord me võidame niikuinii* in Estonian) (Vogt 2005, pp. 20–36). In Estonian ears it sounded in harmony with the Baptist vision of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream!" (McClendon 1990, pp. 47–66). In a few years, the churches positioned themselves from conflict to harmony in their self-understanding, sense of integrity, and relationship to the wider society and its political ambitions. Two narratives, the national one and the biblical one, somehow joined together into one spiritual whole, at least so in our minds and hearts. And in the music. The Old Testament story of calling and sending the prophet Jonah became a symbolic national story. The oratory *Jonah's Mission*, created and presented by the Estonian composer, Rudolf Tobias, first in 1909 in Leipzig, Germany, and then re-created and re-presented in 1989 in Tallinn, Estonia, resonated with the cultural identity and society fighting against the foreign political dictation (Rumessen 2008).

At the same time, as a young Christian student leader I found myself in the middle of leadership meetings of the Estonian Christian Society (*Eesti Kristlik Liit* in Estonian), established in 1988 and then divided into two different organizations in 1989: the Estonian Christian Democratic Union to become a political party led by some Lutheran pastors, and the Estonian Christian Association to become an apolitical socially active ecumenical organization. As I was proposed to join the political party, too (and later also by other political parties), I did not accept the offer. As a Baptist youth leader in the Estonian Lutheran cultural tradition, I leaned rather toward the teachings of Martin Luther himself (cf. Luther 1520, 1523; Nygren 2002; Beeke 2011).[8] His balancing approach between the two kingdoms—God's and human, Christ and culture, church(men) and state(men), heavenly and earthly citizens, prophetic and political in the mission—guided me along with the other priests and pastors and leaders of the Estonian churches to avoid direct involvement in politics. Yet, there were many pastors, again mainly from the Lutheran background, but also from the baptistic churches, who became involved both in the social and political life of Estonia, especially in the local level elections and governments. Most of them felt uncomfortable in politics later and withdrew themselves from political activity (or few from their service in the church) since Estonia regained its independence again in 1991, and the political life was expecting more and more professional expertise and full-time commitment (Remmel and Rohtmets 2021). According to the Constitution, Estonia was identified as "an independent and sovereign democratic republic" with a parliamentary democracy, and without a state church, just as it had been also before the Soviet occupation (Republic of Estonia 1992, §1, §40, §59–65; Altnurme 2009; Kiviorg 2001).

Now, the "timeless and inalienable" "independence and sovereignty of Estonia" was to "guarantee the preservation of the Estonian people, the Estonian language and the Estonian culture through the ages" (Republic of Estonia 1992, §1). Different churches were empowered to live and serve freely in the free society and organized themselves to "cooperate for the spiritual development of Estonian society based on Christian principles" (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu n.d.). On this vision the Estonian Council of Churches was formed in 1989. Since then, it has integrated ten major Christian denominations in ecumenical cooperation for serving Estonian society in different times, needs, and spheres of life.[9] In relation to the state, the Estonian Council of Churches has become a balancing dialogue partner to the government concerning religious and/or ethical questions as well as legislative initiatives in the Parliament or governmental ministries (Eesti Vabariigi Valitsuse ja Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu ühishuvide protokoll 2002; Reinsalu 2019). Here, the voice of the church(es) has not always been in harmony with the state and the developments in society. For instance, I have had to represent the Council in the Parliament commissions debating about some ethically dividing legislative initiatives in the society, such as a definition of

marriage, sexual partnership, or surrogate motherhood. A sense of integrity, shaped by the authoritative texts and historically extended practices of the church(es), has had to guide and tune the voice of the Christian community relating to different political agendas, parties, and governments.[10] The "two kingdoms" paradigm may be heard in different messages of the church(es) to the public society and policy makers in Estonia when the critical or positive proposals have been expressed with prophetic overtones for a better and sound Estonian society both from the human and godly perspective.[11]

4. Integrity in Social Servanthood

A few weeks before Estonia regained its independence in August 1991, I had become the pastor of the first Baptist church in Tallinn, established in 1884 and located in a poor area of the Estonian capital.[12] In just a few months, as soon as the "cold winter in Estonia from, 1991 to, 1992" had arrived, the freedom fighters' slogan that "we are willing to eat even potato skins, the main thing is that we are free" became a real life experience (Vadi 2018). Our people were suddenly in an urgent need for all sorts of humanitarian help. The Soviet Union, along with its economic ties, was gone. The newly developing free market economy was not working yet for the people either. Many did not have work, money, food, or energy to warm up their homes. Our church, just as any other church who received lorries bringing packages of food and clothing from the sister churches in Scandinavia and Western Europe, was integrated into the local community by providing humanitarian help to all in critical need.

In, 1992, when the war broke out between Georgia and Abkhazia, the Estonian Migration Board evacuated native Estonians from Abkhazia, whose ancestors had emigrated and established the Estonian villages there during the Russian Empire in the 1880s.[13] Since the newly emerged state and local governments lacked the resources to care for the refugees or to help them integrate into society, our church was integrated with the refugee work. In 1992, I also began to teach in Tallinn Medical School ethics and religions as well as crisis counseling and pastoral care. After the tragic ferry disaster on the Baltic Sea in 1994 when *MS Estonia* sank, claiming 852 lives from Estonia, Sweden and 15 other countries, our churches began to provide crisis counseling and pastoral care to those 137 survivors and the family members who had lost their relatives and intimate friends, and also support in grief and memorial services were organized in an ever-wounded Estonian society (Arnberg et al. 2013).

Ecumenical chaplaincy developed in cooperation with different denominations, beginning in the military and prisons, and later in the police, education, healthcare, and even sports (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2022b, pp. 51–78). Personal and organizational mentoring and coaching began to gain importance in and by our churches in the 21st century (Pilli et al. 2017). Meanwhile, together with other specialists, I was involved in the preparation and establishment of professional crisis pregnancy counselors in the Estonian healthcare system according to the agreements between the Estonian Council of Churches and the government and its institutions (Eesti Vabariigi Valitsuse ja Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu ühishuvide protokoll 2002). All those and other similar developments, such as taking care of the street kids in the city of Tallinn in the 1990s, providing shelter and practical help to the adults living on the streets, and establishing the rehabilitation centers for alcohol and drug addicts in the 2000s, made the churches and society in Estonia more and more aware of the need for providing practical and structural help in real loving actions beside the good news shared in oral and printed form about the Kingdom of Christ. In the middle of Estonian secularized society,[14] such Christ-like deeds made both news and more sense to the unchurched generations on the public scene with their skepticism toward institutional religion (Beilmann et al. 2016). So the role and mission of the church(es) was recognized both by the community of faith and the wider community of people in Estonian hypermodernizing culture (Lipovetsky 2005; Remmel 2016, 2017).

In place of the Soviet's times of conflict in the relationship between the church(es) and society, and instead of the *harmony* and the *two kingdoms* paradigms from "the seismic political shifts" in the 1980s–1990s, the 21st century church(es) in Estonia would tend to realize a servanthood calling in and for the society. The Christian sense of identity and integrity of the churches has caught fire and taken initiatives, for example, in the

environmental campaign "Let's Do It!" beginning in Estonia and then reaching out to the "World Clean-Up Day" (World Cleanup Day 2022). In an interesting way, again, collective creation care has built some meaningful bridges between the church(es) and the environmentalist, academic, political, and public people, and networks (Leinus 2020). So the church(es) in the highly secularized cultural context of Estonian society[15] might move toward integrity and integration in the servanthood spirit.

5. Integrity in Times of Crisis

Crisis is always challenging the ways people and communities have used to live. So it is also with the communities of faith and societies, religious or irreligious. The third decade of the 21st century began with the COVID-19 pandemic hitting the whole world glocally[16] and raising new questions both in and outside of church communities all around the world, including Estonia (Remmel and Remmel 2021; Remmel et al. 2021). A couple of years later, the Russian–Ukrainian war "updated" the glocal crisis and new questions concerning the relationship between the church(es) and its surrounding culture(s), society, and state. There are developing case studies shedding light on many different aspects of the very complex problem (Stückelberger 2020, pp. 561–97; Martin et al. 2020). As this article is mainly concerned with Christian integrity and integration in the relationships between the church(es) and the state in Estonian secularized society, the following focus is limited to some reflections on the examples of integrity challenges as far as my own free church background and ecumenical cooperation is concerned in the relationships between the church(es) and the state during the last few years.

In the beginning of March 2020 and March 2022, I was asked as the Vice President of the Estonian Council of Churches to draft two particular appeals on behalf of the Council to all Estonian churches and public society. The first one in 2020 was made public right before the COVID-19 lockdown was realized by the Estonian government (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2020a). Nobody knew, then, what exactly was coming over Estonian society along with other countries near and far, but the address appealed to the congregations and all the people of Estonia to pray and act for the ones suffering and/or working hard due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, and for the sustainability of common life. While expressing concerns about the safety of people and society as a whole, we asked the churches, as well as the general public, to follow the instructions and recommendations given by the Estonian government and relevant institutions along with the international organizations in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. At the same time, we asked for prayers for wisdom both for the doctors and scientists to treat and stop the virus, and for governments and international organizations around the world to fight against it.

Since the Council did not right away give instructions concerning church practices during the pandemic, there were some immediate reactions, including social media, about the appeal. Critics from one side were asking for some concrete guidelines from the Council[17] while nobody really knew the specifics about the virus and its prevention, at least not yet. From the other side there was a growing criticism against the restrictions altogether (Kiisler and Remmel 2021). In the following days, weeks, months, and years, the representatives of the Council and Estonian government had regular meetings to advise each other on the specifics on how to optimize and keep balance between the public safety and religious freedom in Estonia while the pandemic was rapidly spreading, including the issues concerning the vaccination.[18]

Now, looking back, one could conclude that the church(es) embodied relevant Christian integrity while cooperating with and balancing the government and its institutions concerning the regulations limiting both civil and religious freedoms during the pandemic (Remmel and Remmel 2021). The Christian church in Estonia was, after all, acting in servanthood for the whole society and its best possible well-being in the given conditions, not looking for a conflict or harmony per se with the government or rest of the society. While some might have identified the relationship between the church(es) and the state with the "two kingdoms" pattern in which both parties could realize their own role in

a dialectic tension with the other, the social servanthood paradigm might characterize the church–state relationship better.

The chaplaincy service in the healthcare system was introduced just before the lockdown in 2020, and it continued to grow, develop, and provide real service to the patients and medics both in the hospitals and nursing homes.[19] In connection with the outbreak of the coronavirus and the crisis situation, the healthcare chaplain service requested support from the state in order to provide public service around the clock to the people needing pastoral counseling on an open helpline.[20] At the same time, my own church, 3D Church, organized a quick hackathon in the beginning of April 2020 in order to develop in a few days and launch shortly thereafter (in the beginning a prototype and later a fully designed) an ecumenical web-platform, sinuabi.ee[21], for enabling public and free of charge access to Christian counselors and mental health professionals who would be available to provide help to the (younger) people who would visit the platform, read the forums, or contact the specialists with their personal needs.[22] As the ecumenical project had already reached up to a hundred specialists, governmental support was requested and received to upgrade and develop the platform for its operational sustainability (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2022b, pp. 110–11). Now, by the helpful available network of professionals from different churches, hundreds of people—believers and unbelievers—have open access to professional Christian counseling services for mental and spiritual health (SINUABI 2020). One might explore other examples, too, of how the churches in Estonia cooperated with each other and with the state or local governments in order to support ordinary people, healthcare workers and the society as a whole in the spirit of servanthood. The overall understanding was—from the Prime Minister[23] to the general public, including the media[24]—that the society in crisis was in a real need of mental and spiritual support, and the church(es) could serve the purpose. The government minister of the population, a believer herself, addressed and acknowledged the Estonian churches for their good cooperation with the state for the public good from the very beginning of the pandemic.[25] So a good paradigm and a number of best practices in social servanthood modeled how church(es) could relate to the Estonian society and state in times of crisis from 2020 to 2022.

In the beginning of March 2022, the crisis caused by the coronavirus was almost forgotten. The Russian aggression against Ukraine and a large number of war refugees reaching Estonia along with other countries forced the government to lift as quickly as possible most of the restrictions applied earlier in the society of Estonia, such as the mandatory obligation to wear a mask or show the vaccination certificate when entering public places. Now, the most urgent questions were around mobilizing the whole society, including as many churches as possible, for supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians reaching Estonia. Only a few hours after the first attacks from Russia against Ukraine in the morning of 24 February 2022, an ecumenical worship service was held in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, attended by the Estonian President and members of the government and parliament along with diplomatic and public guests, which was broadcast on national television since it was the national day of independence of Estonia. A public statement and prayer was made by the Estonian Council of Churches concerning the war and integrity of Ukraine and Estonia.[26] The Lutheran archbishop emeritus and the president of the Council, Andres Põder, who read aloud the statement during the worship service, published a personal commentary about it a couple of weeks later since some critical voices had appeared in the media, including social media, criticizing the churches and especially the Russian Orthodox Church leaders in Estonia, being part of the Council and its statements, expecting him to say more about the war polarizing the whole world, including the so-called "Russian world", *Russki mir*.[27] The issue has still not been settled.

As mentioned, I was asked by the Estonian Council of Churches in March 2022, again, to draft a statement on behalf of the Council how all ten member churches, including the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and its head representative, Metropolitan Eugene, living and ministering in Estonia as a Russian citizen, would relate

to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. It was not a big problem to draft a proposal. But it was more complicated to edit the exact wording in the negotiations between the member churches in a way all would accept and sign it.[28] It was finally completed after some behind the scenes talks at my last Council meeting in March 2022 as the Vice President before handing the role over to the next leadership. The Vice-Chancellor of the Ministry of Interior and his advisor on religious affairs awarded me with a letter of thanks for the years I worked on the ecumenical relationships between the churches in Estonia and for the partnership between Estonian churches with the Republic of Estonia for the public good. At the same time, they made a request to the Council to issue a long-awaited public statement against the Russian aggression against Ukraine, including the signature of the Estonian Russian Orthodox metropolitan. For some of the church leaders, it seemed odd how the representative of the state could make a statement to the churches in the civil society (which is to respect the religious freedom of the communities of faith in Estonia) about what the churches were supposed to do in order to support the state policy in the critical times of the war. Such appeals have appeared also in other contexts of the world divided by the war.[29]

Since the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow announced that any Russian soldier who dies in the war in Ukraine is forgiven for his sins (Patriarch of Moscow 2022), both the new President of the Estonian Council of Churches, Urmas Viilma, the Archbishop of Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Estonia, Lauri Läänemets, were provoked to take a public stand against such a politically motivated theological statement by the head of the Russian Orthodox believers who also have membership in the Estonian Council of Churches.[30] For Viilma, it appeared, first of all, to be a question of theological and moral integrity. For the government ministers, it was a critical political issue, forcing them to make an ultimatum to the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Eugene in Estonia to distance himself from Kirill's position (Vasli 2022; Siseministeerium: Eugeni elamisloa tühistamist ei saa välistada 2022; Uibo 2022; Länts 2022). Different opinions were expressed in the media, including by scholars and church leaders along with journalists and political commentators, whether a government minister could ever make an ultimatum to a minister of a church in Estonia which is known worldwide for its respect for religious liberty (Metropoliit Stefanus 2022; Rohtmets 2022a; Nõmmik 2022; Paas 2022; Jaagant 2022). Lutheran Archbishop Viilma expressed his hesitance concerning such a pressure from the government, arguing it to be encroachment on religious freedom (Viilma 2022; Hindre 2022). A similar statement was made by the Russian Orthodox Synod in Estonia (Õigeusu kiriku sinod: Kirik ei saa pidevalt poliitiliste avaldustega esineda 2022). Metropolitan Eugene himself calmed tensions down by responding to the ultimatum in time and with a satisfying statement for the ministers, stating that he does not share the position verbalized by Kirill (Metropoliit Eugeni 2022a). The case was closed, in a sense.[31] But a bigger question was still left in the air: what would integrity and integration look like for the church(es) relating to the state in the secularized cultural context of Estonian society? And how would it relate to the freedom of religion or belief in the warlike tensions? (Juhtkiri: Põhiseadusesse kirjutatud usuvabadusel on piirid 2022; Danilson-Järg 2022; Küüt 2022; Weidebaum 2022).

6. Integrity under Question

Now, maybe we are back to the main question: "What is integrity after all, and what is integrity expecting from us as church(es) in Estonia?"

Charles Dyer (1997, p. xiv) points out in his book *Integrity* that "integrity is an idea everyone embraces but few can define—an ideal all believe in but few achieve". Etymologically, it may refer to one who is entire, solid, authentic, or upright, says Charles Swindoll (Dyer 1997, p x).[32] "Biblically, the word integrity describes someone whose words and actions match God's written standards. A person of integrity is someone whose talk—and walk—resemble the character and conduct of Jesus Christ" (Dyer 1997, pp. xiv–xv). Followers of Jesus may envision integrity in his likeness as a virtue–ethical telos for human

development[33]—the image of God and humanity at its B/best is revealed in the person of Jesus according to the Scriptures.[34]

Alasdair MacIntyre has provided a virtue–ethical paradigm for interpreting integrity in the philosophical language for a better understanding of its development and relevancy in a particular historical tradition and its cultural narrative and social practices (MacIntyre 2007a, 2007b). It has been helpful also to me to reflect on how Estonians have historically narrated about Jesus as someone embodying their sense of virtue guiding them and their integrity in the midst of a disintegrated world of political powers coming and going over the people.[35] "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8, NIV), and so his image in its integrity might provide a virtue–ethical type for a people shaping their moral vision also in national storytelling and folk singing (Remmel 2000, pp. 20, 28, 34–35, 62–64). A sense of integrity in Jesus might "disciple" an *ethnic* group of people on Estonian soil with a virtue–ethical vision about the type of character or community of people being true to one's self and others before God.

According to Henry Cloud (2009), integrity is more than a moral course of life. It relates to the outcome of the course of life in its achievements as well as in its impact on other people (Cloud 2009, pp. 13–28). Many leaders of the world may become great in their use of power for achieving things while failing in their impact on the people around them since misusing their power. So integrity should mean a more holistic life story combining both achievements and impact for empowering others, whether insiders or outsiders of the community in its particularities. Cloud argues that the people of integrity create and maintain trust; are able to see and face reality; work in a way that brings results; embrace negative realities and solve them; cause growth and increase; and achieve transcendence and meaning in life (Cloud 2009, p. x). Research in neuroeconomics has shown how such integrity would grow trust as a symbolic capital along with the social and financial one (Zak 2012). If a community of character would grow toward such trustworthy integrity, the life of society would benefit, and the culture would begin to change. If the people of Estonia, however secularized, would realize the *telos* of church(es) being in integrity of the *teleion en Hristo* with a real servanthood and empowerment of the people, and not in the institutional power games or two-faced politics, the interaction between the church(es) and the wider society with its political government would make a difference.

Contemporary outsiders of the church(es) in Estonia may criticize the church[36]—just as they might criticize all who have or use some kind of power in a person-centered secular state and culture —for not living up to her integrity and/or for not using its power for empowering others in the achievements and influence.[37] The church or its leaders might argue with their critics. But the critics might not be after the verbal arguments at all. The secular society in a given state might not be even after the moral arguments of the church. The critique might be after some kind of embodied argument for a type of social life or culture the church would need to live out both for insiders and outsiders of the church, empowering the society for better in a given state. A true story and not a fake story of the church (PR[38]) is needed, and without a double agenda.

Hereby is a good example of how the churches and their pastoral leaders have mobilized themselves for serving the Ukrainian war refugees arriving in Estonia and settling in different cities, towns, and villages. All the churches, regardless of denominational affiliation, including the Russian Orthodox community of faith in Estonia, have been involved in providing practical help, guidance, fellowship, pastoral care, and even shelter to the people in need. I have personally served Ukrainian refugees as a pastoral counselor since March 2022—being and sharing with them day by day and week after week. I have been humbled by listening to their stories, asking pastoral questions, and guiding their thoughts and prayers to trust God as the compassionate personal divine Love in the midst of existential personal and national crises. In many cases, one can do nothing else but be open-hearted and empathetic when people may feel thrown into a foreign land not knowing the language, culture, people, and for how long they should consider such a country as their home. The wider society and its non-profit organizations, state institutions such as the Social Insurance

Board, and political governments both on the local and national level, along with the ministries dealing with the refugees such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, have appreciated such pastoral and social services the churches have been able to provide. Nobody has raised a question about our sincerity, integrity, and (no-to-double) agenda as we have mutually supported each other and the people in need. So we have been able to serve together waves of refugees in and through our country numbering up to 10% of the Estonian population (Total of Ukraine Refugees with Estonian Temporary Protection May Double 2022).

Nigel Wright (2005), in his book *Free Church. Free State*,[39] describes how integrity and empowering relations seem to have been the two virtuous traits of character in the life of Jesus and his followers, achieving something for and/or having a real positive impact on the people and communities in their time and cultural context, whether following Jesus or not (Wright 2005, pp. 204–83). Jesus embodied and developed with his disciples a moral vision for a "touchable church"—the kind of "open access" messianic presence of the people in a given community looking for authentic change in real-life situations (compare Matt 14:34–6 and Jn 13:33–5, NIV). Such an accessive presence of the openly loving followers of Jesus would be needed also to serve in and for the contemporary secular context of Estonia. A *conflict* or *harmony* and even *the two kingdoms* type of relationship might not serve the purpose here. Christ-like servanthood might. "But this is an alternative political existence in which believers march to the beat of a different drum. Where this is lost sight of the church's potential as a transformative community is diminished" (Wright 2005, p. 234).

Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow, might live and speak out his own integrity, but following a beat of another gospel, a narrative of the "Russian world", the ideology of *Russki mir*, not the Gospel of Christ, the authoritative text for the people God who follow Jesus in and for the peaceable Kingdom (cf. Hauerwas 1991). Estonian churches, Orthodox or not, and people, believers or not, may discern such a demagogically theologizing ideological communication and falsify it altogether because they sense their integrity in "the beat of a different drum". This "beat" is coming from an alternative "metronome", and it is followed, for example, by the worldwide known Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. His community of faith is also Russian Orthodox, but his ecumenical faith is derived from the authoritative text which is not of "Russian world" or any other political worldview, but the worldview of the Holy Scriptures. He does not comment on politics, although he was banned during the Soviet occupation because of his Credo in faith and music.[40] In his prayerful spirituality, he continues to create music for the peace in the world.[41] Yet, in March 2022, after the Russian aggression in Ukraine, he was first to sign a petition to Kirill with an appeal to convey to the Russian leadership "our urgent supplication for an immediate end to bloodshed, and that Russian troops should be withdrawn from the territory of Ukraine" (Pärt et al. 2022). Such a man of faith and integrity has deserved the deep respect from everybody in Estonian society, including some vocal agnostics among our top politicians and cultural elite. As a living example of Estonian sense of integrity, Arvo Pärt points to a "better beat" for a nation of peaceable singing revolution. He acknowledges the fact that he lives in the highly secularized Nordic-Baltic cultural context of Europe. But his spirituality and music still hum and resonate with our folkways in which our B/best is measured up to Jesus and his integrity. His peaceable "beat" can be found and followed by the "notes of the music"—meaning the authoritative text, the biblical Scriptures telling about the integrity of the Messiah and his followers in the name of Jesus[42]—and by listening to other "drums beating" beside us—meaning the narratives of the other churches all around the world[43]—and following the "rhythms" and influences of those social practices which are "in sound" with our common sense of integrity and integration of the church and the country called to serve together in the best practices possible.

7. Toward Integrity and Integration

As Alasdair MacIntyre (1989) has explained, a living tradition is a historically extended and socially embodied argument which might face an epistemological crisis in her course

of development. The previous narratives and practices might be challenged in the newly realized contexts. Carrying a sense of virtue, the tradition needs to look for a renewed approach to its authoritative text(s) by which she has been formed and reformed, made sustainable and able to reflect upon and respond to the critics both inside and outside of the tradition. So the integrity of the tradition along with her narratives and practices is maintained and developed in the course of time (MacIntyre 1989, pp. 138–57).

The church and state relationships in Estonia have gone through several epistemological crises in the last decades and recent years during some "seismic political shifts" in society. So I have experienced and described four different ways the church(es) in Estonia could relate to the state in a given stage of societal and cultural development: *the conflict, the harmony, the two kingdoms,* and *the social servanthood*. The latter seems to be most relevant today. Estonian churches and their representatives in the midst of secular society, including myself, need to make sure that our integrity and its communication would be integrated with our best social practices, narratives, and virtues understandable to the wider society. In the midst of a glocally developing crisis and overskeptical culture, there is a long way to go, serving in the growing number of areas of life and working together for integrity and integration in and for the future of Estonia. Jesus said: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you!" (Jn, 20:21, NIV). So we must go.

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Notes

1. "This struggle has taken various forms in history", writes Richard S. Unruh (1976), "but, particularly during the medieval-Reformation era, alternative ways of conceptualizing church–state issues developed which have become the classical models for the Christian church. Roman Catholicism sought to include the political order within a comprehensive theological perspective, on the assumption that every aspect of reality should be seen as under the control of a creative, sovereign God. Lutheranism, Anabaptism, and Reformism, on the other hand, developed variations of the idea that church and state were separate orders, each justified in its own sphere of operation".

2. The concept of *integrity* in its philosophical, theological, and virtue–ethical connotations will be addressed toward the end of this article illustrating first the actual need for realization of integrity as such. "Ordinary discourse about integrity involves two fundamental intuitions: first, that integrity is primarily a formal relation one has to oneself, or between parts or aspects of one's self; and second, that integrity is connected in an important way to acting morally, in other words, there are some substantive or normative constraints on what it is to act with integrity", states Cox, La Caze and Levine in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Cox et al. 2021).

3. Estonian church leader and ethicist Robert Võsu, for example, wrote his virtue–ethical approach to evangelical ethics into a textbook first in Russian language for all the baptistic churches and church leaders in 1978 during the times of the former Soviet Union, and then adjusted it into Estonian language and context (Võsu 1996, pp. 7–8). Dealing with the relationship to culture and society he gives the following guidelines: "1. A believer should try to understand the right plans of the government and help from his/her side in the plans which are to increase the well-being of people. 2. Participate in public life, if needed and there is opportunity to do good for other people. 3. To do all what is possible for edifying justice, freedom and peace. 4. Constantly pray for the country, people and government. 5. Say your word out through love, but with full severity in cases of violations of rights and injustice. 6. Fulfill exemplarily and honestly all your duties before the state (Romans 13:6–7). 7. Live in peace, justice and love with other people, being an example to them (1 Peter 2:12). 8. Help to save people from the sinful life, and by that help edify the general moral life of the people" (Võsu 1996, p. 234).

4. See a virtue–ethical comparison between the Anabaptist and Estonian baptistic communities of faith in my doctoral dissertation (Remmel 2011).

5. "Primary theology is the church trying to think out its own convictions, and this gets expressed in sermons, prayers, hymns – the sources of its ongoing common life. Eventually, primary convictions by which it tries to live get written down in creeds and confessions of faith or expressed afresh in new hymns and new sermons or simply lived out in the lives of existing members of the community. Secondary theology, which is the main thing that universities are concerned with, is theology about theology. It tries to take a step back from primary theology and ask questions about justification, truth, legitimation, and the significance of primary theology" (McClendon and Smith 1975, pp. 191–92). See more on primary and secondary theology in (McClendon 2002, pp. 17–46;

McClendon 1994, pp. 21–62; and also on the "first-order" and "second-order" language of religion in Murphy 1994, pp. 245–70; Hauerwas 1994, pp. 143–62; Fiddes 2000, pp. 19–38.

[6] There are treatises written about the rapid changes in Estonia along with the final collapse of the Soviet Union, for instance: Lauristin et al. (1997). The role of Estonian churches and their moral vision in the process of change is reflected in the author's book: Remmel (2000).

[7] "When Gorbachev started loosening fear in the system, in the absence of a strong enough alternative to both ideology and fear as a means to exert influence upon society, nationalist movements filled the vacuum. It is interesting that this idea is also linked to Chernobyl, as the majority of the nationalist movements in the USSR originated from the early environmental movements. Since Glasnost allowed the expression of concerns about the level of pollution after the Chernobyl catastrophe and its effects on public health, a hope appeared amongst the nationalists that they could also have their freedom of speech" (Kurylo 2016, p. 65).

[8] "Luther drew a clear line between spiritual and temporal authority, and expressly emphasized that under no circumstances should these two realms be confused", explains Anders Nygren (2002). In the *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, Martin Luther (1520) reasoned: "Therefore, just as those who are now called 'spiritual'—priests, bishops or popes—are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities,—they bear sword and rod with which to punish the evil and to protect die good. A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another" (p. 3).

[9] "A beneficial development for the churches occurred on 17 October 2002, when the Government of the Republic and the Estonian Council of Churches, which was founded in 1989 and represented the majority of Estonian churches, signed a Protocol of Common Concerns. The document specified the areas of mutual interest of the churches and the state, and created possibilities for increased cooperation. The areas specified include, among others, religious education, youth work, chaplaincy services, heritage conservation, nursing and social care (deacony), and studies in sociology of religion. According to the Protocol, the partner of the state in this cooperation was the representative organization of the churches, not any individual church" (Altnurme 2009, pp. 230–31). Now, at the time of writing in October 2022, the Government of the Republic and the Estonian Council of Churches celebrated their 20 years of cooperation based on the Protocol of Common Concerns with a conference in Estonian Parliament (Raudvassar 2022; Konverents 2022). It was also appreciated by the Prime Minister on the reception in her office: "I am glad that, in cooperation between the government and the churches, we have been able to focus on the priorities that are relevant at the moment. For example, during the corona crisis, churches helped their congregations to do vaccination outreach, and when Russia brutally invaded Ukraine, they helped people fleeing the war. Difficult times lie ahead. It is important to ensure that the spiritual and psychological needs of our people are met. My thanks to the churches for always being there for people when they need you" (Kallas 2022).

[10] For example, the Estonian Council of Churches has verbalized and published its proposals to the political parties for shaping their programs and campaigns in the elections (Põder 2018; Viilma 2018).

[11] See, for instance, Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu (2021), pp. 17–192.

[12] "The district is now undergoing rapid gentrification with its houses and apartments in high demand by many, including the hipster generation. It is here that you'll find our church, the only one in Kalamaja", introduces Tallinn Kalju Baptistikogudus, the church for a visitor on the web (Tallinn Kalju Baptistikogudus 2022).

[13] "One hundred seventy Estonians and members of their families were brought from Abkhazia to Estonia using three airplanes (on 23–24 October, 29–31 October, and 21–23 November) in the course of the evacuation operation" (Jürgenson 2018).

[14] Compare secularization trends in Estonia reflected in the last population censuses on demographic and ethno-cultural characteristics of the population (Estonia Counts 2022).

[15] Population census trends show a developing secularization in Estonian society: "It turns out that the majority (58%) of people in Estonia do not have an affiliation to any religion. 13% were not willing to answer this question. 29% identify with a religion and this percentage has not changed in the last three censuses. However, the proportion of people who do not feel an affiliation to any religion has increased compared with that of previous censuses. While in 2011, the share of such persons was 54%, by 2021 it had risen to 58%. The increase has come mainly from among those who previously preferred not to answer this question. In 2011, the non-response rate was 14%, whereas this time it is 13%. (. . .) 29% of people aged 15 and over in Estonia feel affiliated with a religion. The most common religions are still Orthodoxy (16%) and Lutheranism (8%). People with other religious affiliations account for 5% of the total population. Compared with previous censuses, it is noteworthy that the share of Lutherans has continued to fall: they accounted for 14% in the 2000 census, 10% in 2011, and only 8% in last year's census. The proportion of Orthodox Christians, however, has increased slightly over the last two decades: from 14% in 2000 to 16% in both 2011 and 2021. The decline in the number and proportion of Lutherans, while the number of Orthodox Christians has increased, is affected by the ethnicity and age distribution of people who feel affiliation to these religions. Lutheranism continues to be the most widespread religion among Estonians and Orthodoxy among Russians and other Slavs. The share of other religions in the population has changed less since the previous census, mostly remaining the same or increasing slightly" (Estonia Counts 2022). In the beginning

of 2022, there were 1,331,796 people in Estonia: 919,693 native Estonians, 315,242 Russians, 90,149 other ethnic nationalities, and 6712 people with unknown ethnic nationality (Estonia Counts 2022).

[16] The word *glocal* is now used for the world being both global and local at the very same time. According to *Britannica,* glocalization is "the simultaneous occurrence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in contemporary social, political, and economic systems. The term, a linguistic hybrid of *globalization* and *localization,* was popularized by the sociologist Roland Robertson and coined, according to him, by Japanese economists to explain Japanese global marketing strategies" (Blatter 2022).

[17] Something like the guidelines produced later by the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (GEKE/CPCE 2021).

[18] Deriving from such dialogues the first guidelines were delivered to the churches in Estonia on 13 March 2020 (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2020c). The Council itself never obligated people on medical matters, including concerning vaccination, since such things would be personal issues of informed consent between the healthcare specialists and the particular patient (compare Sander 2021).

[19] Pastoral care was provided to people in healthcare (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2020d; Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2022b, pp. 68–77).

[20] The Estonian (and in other languages) helpline 116,123 answered to 12,859 phone calls from the beginning of the pandemic until the end of year, 2021 (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2022b, pp. 73–75).

[21] Explore the Christian platform for mental and spiritual help. '*Sinu abi*' in Estonian language means in English '*Your Help*' (SINUABI 2020).

[22] Such a new and needed portal made news both in the national TV news and public media (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2020e).

[23] See the Prime Minister's letter to Estonian churches on 19 March 2020 (Ratas 2020a) and the letter of appreciation to the Estonian Council of Churches for good cooperation on 11 June 2020 (Ratas 2020b).

[24] Sunday morning ecumenical devotionals were included in the national TV program when the public was not able to attend the worship services in churches, but only virtually (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2020b).

[25] "We have a crisis", said minister Riina Solman in her speech on 17 June 2020, "and that does not make sense to waste it. We can live in a different way—namely better. Here the church is the one who is called and set to act both directly and in the digital world, offering new values, new life, and the sense of being held. With our perception of the visible world, we cannot grasp all the gifts that churches and congregations offer: intercessory prayers and spiritual leadership, dealing with spiritual problems and daily work full of love. (. . .) Working together with our spiritual leaders has been an enriching journey, where understanding and patience prevail. God works with our hearts and minds. The fruits of this activity are not all visible here and now, but there is hardly any doubt about the necessity of this work. I am glad that we also managed to involve the state and the government in supporting this largely invisible work, because believers form a very large part of our civil society, communal approach, and the life of communities" (Solman 2020).

[26] The appeal to pray for the conflict resolution and peace was prepared and issued a few days earlier on 21 February 2022 (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2022b).

[27] See, for example, the critique by Estonian church historian Priit Rohtmets (Rohtmets 2022b). The President of the Estonian Council of Churches, Andres Põder, replied on the same national news channel ERR on 13 March 2022: "Just a few hours after the beginning of the aggression, I read the Estonian Council of Churches' prophetic address at the service held in the Tallinn Episcopal Cathedral on February 24 (which was also broadcast by Estonian TV), emphasizing that it specifically concerns the situation in Ukraine. In the address, the Council called on all people to pray for peace both in Europe and around the world: "Let us pray that the leaders of countries have the readiness to resolve conflicts through diplomatic means. Let us pray that where there are armed clashes, hostilities will end and peace will come". It is clear that an end is not asked for something that is approved, but still for something that is condemned. Thus, the address gave an assessment of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and called for action to end it quickly. He who prays also contributes. Care and love do not allow anything else. (. . .) This, the understanding expressed jointly by all the Council member churches, has subsequently been supplemented by several Council member churches with their own positions. The Bible recommends showing your faith not so much in words as in actions. It is gratifying how incredibly large and extensive our nation's support is for the victims of the conflict in Ukraine. The contribution of churches and individual Christians in alleviating people's suffering is also significant. Be it making financial donations (. . .), collecting humanitarian aid and delivering it to Ukraine, or accepting refugees" (Põder 2022).

[28] The Metropolitan Eugene, the head of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, revealed in his interview to the Estonian national media some of the details concerning the negotiations behind the scenes of the Estonian Council of Churches: "I would like to draw your attention to something that no one knows. The first version of this text talked about Putin and no one else. We were against it. We discussed it among ourselves and proposed to nominate other leaders or none at all. (. . .) Our proposal was as follows: "The leadership of the Russian Federation, as well as the leaders of other world powers, must realize their responsibility for the events taking place in Ukraine and must take energetic and intelligent steps to restore peace". This wording was not supported and a different draft was adopted" (Metropoliit Eugeni 2022b). The final text in this particular section was as it follows: "The UN General Assembly has condemned Russia's military activities in Ukraine. As the representatives of the member churches of the Estonian Council of Churches, we agree with this assessment" (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu 2022a).

[29] For instance, in August–September 2022 the Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) gathered in Germany, and was addressed by the hosting Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. In his speech to the WCC he condemned the collaboration

of the Russian Orthodox Church with imperialist Russia. At the same time the German leader was admonishing all the other churches gathered at the WCC to align with the Western countries (Steinmeier 2022). Balancing such an expectation from a Western world political figure to the Christian leaders of the world, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow praised the Russian President Vladimir Putin as a national leader "selflessly devoted to the Fatherland, sincerely loving the Motherland and giving her all your strength, abilities and talents". On Putin's 70th birthday, Kirill said: "The Lord placed you at the helm of power, so that you could perform a service of special importance and great responsibility for the fate of the country and the people entrusted to your care", listing what he argued are some of the most important achievements of Putin's reign. Among these, he said, are the "transformation of the image of Russia, strengthening of its sovereignty and defense capability, protection of national interests, progressive socio-economic development, and concern for the wellbeing of fellow citizens". Thanking Putin for his support for church initiatives, Kirill voiced hope that the "fruitful cooperation" between the Russian Orthodox Church and Putin's government would assist in the preservation of "the rich historical, spiritual and cultural heritage of Russia" (Allen 2022).

30 There are two Orthodox churches in Estonia both members of the Estonian Ecumenical Council: the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, which is an Orthodox church in Estonia under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Now, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has expressed his opinion on the issue, too, saying that it would be better for Patriarch Kirill to step down than to support the war: "What is still more painful to us is the fact that the Moscow Patriarchate has come to the level of submitting to the political ambitions of the Russian Federation, supporting and seemingly blessing this violent invasion and unjustified bloodshed. (. . .) We have repeatedly condemned aggression and violence, as we fervently and fraternally appealed to the Patriarch of Moscow to separate his position from political crimes, even if it means stepping down from his throne" (Ecumenical Patriarch: It Is better for Patriarch Kirill to Step Down than to Support the War 2022).

31 Later on, the Metropolitan Eugene commented on his statement in an interview to the Estonian national TV channel in Russian, saying that people may justify whatever, but the final judgment is ultimately God's (Митрополит Евгений об ультиматуме Ляэнеметса: немножко удивила форма постановки вопроса 2022). In another interview to Estonian national TV, Eugene made a critical comment concerning the way the Minister of Interior had forced him to distance himself from Kirill, intervening in the internal affairs of the church (Kuzmina and Kärmas 2022).

32 "The word is derived from the Latin *integritas*, which means "wholeness . . . completeness". The root term, *integer*, means "untouched, intact, entire". One with integrity is solid, authentic, upright. Interestingly, the Hebrew term usually translated "integrity" in the Old Testament (*tome*) means the same thing: "whole, complete, upright, ethically sound" (Dyer 1997, p. x).

33 Apostle Paul argues that Jesus Christ is the *telos* of human life for all the people—*teleion en Hristo*: "God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ" (Col 1:27–28, NIV).

34 "Now we are children of God", says the Bible (1 Jn 3:2–3, NIV), "and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure".

35 Uku Masing, one of the most well-known theological researchers in Estonian history, writing in 1938 about a particularly Estonian way of Christian faith and morality in his article *Estonian Christianity*, argued that Estonians with their primitive democracy have not been able to accept hierarchies. Even the Estonian word for the Lord—*Issand*—has historically lost its meaning (*isand* as a lord) in the Estonian mind and has uniquely become a name of the Person called *Issand*. The Estonian God, for Uku Masing, is not a Master over human beings, but as the Father, the Elder, the friendly Brother (Masing 1938, pp. 233–43).

36 In Summer 2021, for example, there were a series of articles and follow-up commentaries published in Estonian secular media concerning the political lobby on behalf of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and its Archbishop Urmas Viilma. See, for instance, the opening article by Eero Epner, Holger Roonemaa and Oliver Kund (Epner et al. 2021).

37 See, for example, criticism of the public opinions in an interesting academic project of documentary theater concerning the believers in Estonia by Laura Jaanhold (2022).

38 PR stands for public relations.

39 Nigel Wright sums up his vision for integrity in the relationship of a free church in a free society of a free state: "The biblical narrative gives evidence of many different configurations of the public and private in the relationships between God's people and the wider world. It is possible to be faithful to God in all of them. We may believe that a firm theological foundation better preserves those public virtues which make for the common good. But we do not need to possess the public realm to participate in it. Religious and spiritual truths are at their most potent when they are offered modestly as witness from below rather than requirement from above. But Christian faith can never forsake its public testimony or concerns. Participate we must in order to be true to our ultimate hopes and visions and so that, informed by an ultimate future which puts all things in context, we might seek the welfare of the earthly city in which we are in exile" (Wright 2005, pp. 278–79).

40 *Credo* (Latin for "I believe") is one of the most important and dramatic collage pieces in the earlier career of Arvo Pärt, premiered on 16 November 1968, in Tallinn, and banned shortly afterwards by the Soviet occupation regime. The underlying text for *Credo* is in fact itself a collage. Pärt has combined a phrase from the Christian Statement of Faith, "I Believe in Jesus Christ", with an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel according to Matthew, which defines the essence of Christianity: do not

respond to evil with more evil. As does the text, the music too brings together two conflicting worlds. "It was as though I had bought myself freedom, but at the cost of renouncing everything and being left completely naked. It was like turning the new page in my life. It was a decision, a conviction in something very significant", confessed Arvo Pärt later in his 70th jubilee radio series (Pärt 2005).

41 Arvo Pärt laments the lost peace in godly and human relationships in his *Adam's Lament*. Its world premiere took place in Turkey, the intersection of three monotheist religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The work was commissioned by the two Capitals of Culture, Istanbul, 2010, and Tallinn, 2011, and the event was a joint performance for these two cities. The premiere took place on 7 June 2010 in Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, formerly the world's biggest Christian cathedral, then a museum, and now a Moslem mosque. Arvo Pärt commented: "For the holy man Silouan of Mount Athos, the name Adam is like a collective term which comprises humankind in its entirety and each individual person alike, irrespective of time, epochs, social strata and confession. But who is this banished Adam? We could say that he is all of us who bear his legacy. And this 'Total Adam' has been suffering and lamenting for thousands of years on earth. Adam himself, our primal father, foresaw the human tragedy and experienced it as his personal guilt. He has suffered all human cataclysms, unto the depths of despair" (Arvo Pärt Centre 2022). As in Pärt's other compositions, here too the structure of the text has dictated the course of music down to the tiniest details. Punctuation marks, the number of syllables and word emphasis all play an important role in Pärt's *tintinnabuli*-composition (cf. Brauneiss 2017).

42 Jesus taught: "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, how quickly a little power goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for the many who are held hostage" (Matt, 20: 25–28, *The Message*).

43 The Revelation of Jesus repeats seven times to the churches to listen to what the Spirit might say also to the other churches: "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13,2 2, NIV).

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Article

Renewing Christian Witness in Europe—A Proposal

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Abstract: The transmission of the Christian faith is severely broken in many western European countries. This does not bode well for the future of Christianity in these regions. In the face of this situation, Christians might be tempted either to "retreat" from the world and foster sectarian communities or to more or less completely "merge" with contemporary society. Both of these options are erroneous and amount to a distortion of what a genuine Christian witness might look like in the coming decades. The present essay attempts to draw some of the contours of what such a Christian witness may look like.

Keywords: witness; Christianity; gospel; secularization; beauty; apologetics

1. Introduction

The decline of Christianity in western countries, especially in western Europe, is impressive in its breadth and rapidity. Ecclesial institutions that looked fairly solid or sturdy several decades ago are now in a fragile—or worse—situation. Surely, this process is not new—it is even possible to trace it over the past centuries—but it appears to have gone into overdrive in the past half century.[1] It is no wonder that many are asking themselves what to do about this. How should churches respond to this situation? Are various churches reflecting together (rather than each one in its own corner) about what is happening before our eyes? Some (regional) churches are so struck by the rapid societal change that they look like a headless chicken running around with no direction, while others are like deer staring with frozen bodies at a headlight that is blinding them. Meanwhile, theologians often go about their usual business, pursuing their exegetical, historical, systematic, ethical, and practical work. We need a wake-up call—urgently. No single person, no single church, will be able to come up with a not-too-inadequate answer to the current situation. *Now* is the time to embark on frank discussions across church traditions, to face the distinct, current challenges that are before us on our various continents or regions, including western Europe. One of the basic attitudes which will be required of us is one that does not shy away from acknowledging the various ways in which Christians themselves, as churches and as persons, have caused so many of our contemporaries to wish to leave Christianity behind as much as possible, as well as the ways in which Christianity itself, in its various instantiations, contains some of the seeds of our secular age.[2]

2. Two Unhelpful Reactions

What kind of reactions do we see so far in the face of these massive, indeed seismic, shifts? First, we see a reaction that is best described as . . . "reactionary." We see trends that French-speaking sociologists describe as "*repli identitaire*": a process of "circling the wagons" within the bounds of one's ecclesial "identity," often with an obvious rigidity and fixity and a certain lack of historical consciousness, which usually leads to a lack of awareness concerning the historical particularity of the kind of "identity" one has adopted.[3] In other words, in this way certain Protestants erect or elevate particular "markers" of Protestant identity and promulgate such markers as decisive aspects of being Protestant in the 21st century. In certain cases, these markers are not merely Protestant, but more specifically Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, Baptist, or Pentecostal. This throws us back to

the inner-Protestant debates and polemics of past centuries, i.e., in a time (especially in the 17th century) when many Lutherans thought it was better to be Roman Catholic than to be Reformed (or vice versa). This process of "circling the wagons" seems to be particularly visible among Roman Catholics: reactionary Catholics are easily spotted through their use of Latin in liturgies; special clothing for members of the clergy, as well as for the laity, such as mantillas; and also through their opposition of current societal trends, such as gay marriage. Outward signs of Catholic "identity" abound among them. The goal is to reclaim, as in the days of Christendom, a strong presence in contemporary society to maintain core ethical values, which are seen as immutable and indispensable for the cohesion and health of society.

At the other end of the spectrum, one finds pastors, theologians, and members of the faithful who tend to downplay some of the specifics, as well as some of the (political, social, and cultural) implications of Christian living and Christian faith, keeping it "private" so as not to make too many waves in cultures that are becoming rapidly more secular. Progressive Christians are obviously much more at risk of falling into the trap of this second trend than of the first one. Whereas the camp of "*repli identitaire*" (of "circling the wagons") does not hesitate to be heard—preferably loudly—and seen to be counter-cultural (since culture is seen as devilish), the second progressive camp is happy not to be noticed too much. Desires of conquest of secular society, on the one hand, or giving up on a clear Christian witness because of modern society's "conquest" over us, on the other, cannot be the two options at hand[4].

These two ways of handling rapid and radical change are, for different reasons, equally problematic. The first option is predicated upon fear of change and nostalgia for a (dreamed up) Christian past, an attitude that is forbidden to Christians or, better, that Christians ought to have left behind them for good once they have embraced the gospel, i.e., the work of reconciliation proclaimed and accomplished by Jesus Christ and entrusted to all his disciples gathered as his body, all the way up to our own time (2 Cor. 5-6).[5] Fear is a bad counselor, as the saying goes. Unless we wish to accelerate the dismantling of Christian churches in the West and elsewhere, it should go without saying that our vision for the church's witness today should not be grounded upon fear. The second option is not helpful either since it merely accommodates contemporary culture, embarking on a process of preemptive self-secularizing. The salt has lost its taste (Matt 5:13); in some cases, it has been transformed into something sweet. Proponents of the second option have little to say to our world as it is and little to embody within it since, for the most part, they have relinquished the very notion of a Christian "witness" in contemporary culture.

3. In Search of a Third Way

We urgently need to think hard about the possible contours of a third way that steers clear of both the ossifying and the diluting of Christian witness. Thankfully, a number of voices have arisen from various church traditions, searching in this direction. I rely on some of them in what follows.

Here are some of the key characteristics of the third way we might wish to pursue.

3.1. Centered on the Gospel—Not on the Crisis or the Breakdown of Transmission

Those who wish to witness to the gospel in today's world need to be enduringly concerned with and shaped by the gospel rather than, first and foremost, being concerned with its transmission and the difficulties of that transmission. We live in a world determined and fascinated to a significant extent by quantitative data and a quantitative drive. The mindset of "the more the better" is prevalent in many corners of our world, including within our churches, which are never immune to the world they inhabit (for better and for worse). It is very easy to (wholly or partly) fall into this quantitative trap, but this is a significant mistake, for this means putting the cart before the horse. Everything in this third way, even our (at times, legitimate) concerns with "growth" and "numbers" deserve to be subordinated to the gospel. Nothing should replace the gospel as the focus of it all.

Otherwise, we risk thinking about transmission while forgetting *what* it is we hope—or we believe we are called—to transmit, and our contemporary fascination and obsession with the quantitative aspects of (almost) everything is not confronted with a radical limit when, in fact, it urgently needs to be confronted again and again with such a limit.

My hypothesis is the following one: It is not those who primarily or—worse—exclusively focus on transmission who end up transmitting anything of enduring value. It is a somewhat counter-intuitive hypothesis, I admit, but I do stand by it. It is only those who center their attention, again and again, on the gospel who might—no one can guarantee that they "will" do so, but they "might"—transmit something that lasts, something that (hopefully) is intrinsically related to the gospel.

This point is crucial. Much hinges upon it. It is only if we are rooted in the gospel, as well as shaped by it, that we may reflect something of the radical humanity, the goodness, and the claim that both inhabits it and flows from it. However, being rooted in and shaped by the gospel is a difficult journey, certainly not an easy, superficial path. It means acknowledging and realizing "the breadth and length and height and depth" (Eph 3:18) of God's love for the world, as well as the judgment of the world that this love entails. It means living out of this treasure while remaining perfectly clear about ourselves and our Christian communities as clay jars (2 Cor 4:7).

One of the great risks of our churches' witness in the face of the current crisis is to be so concerned with their own survival that all they have to offer to the world is their worries about their future instead of the joy that comes from the gospel and that "is" the gospel. Churches cannot be communities "whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (Pope Francis 2013, §6).[6] This, of course, only accelerates and precipitates the decline we are seeing in many western (and perhaps not just western) countries. Such a decline, if it were to be accelerated in this way, would not be something worth lamenting for very long. For these dying churches would have ceased being what they were meant to be all along.

3.2. The Beauty of the Gospel

At the core of the gospel, there is a certain paradoxical beauty, which is like a core of pure energy waiting to irradiate the world. The beauty of Jesus' parables, of the kinds of gestures that are being placed front and center as images of genuine human living (e.g., some of the most celebrated parables in the gospels, such as the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son in Luke 10 and 15, respectively), are an illustration of this. There is an astonishing beauty in the way Jesus encounters people, especially "sinners." Do we ever overcome the shock of realizing that the people Jesus seeks contact with are not the elite, the well-to-do, or the scholars, but prostitutes, tax collectors, and lepers—people who are seen as despicable by the majority of society. All of this expresses the counter-intuitive and surprising but real beauty of the gospel. This beauty of the gospel, of Jesus' acts and words, is a witness to God's own beauty, as manifested in the gracious, prevenient embrace of a father to his estranged son who has returned (an embrace famously and beautifully rendered by Rembrandt) or in the gesture of compassion of the Samaritan to the wounded person on the side of the road.[7] It is a beauty, moreover, that finds paradoxical, scandalous expression in the figure of a crucified human being, i.e., under its contrary (*sub contrario*).

How can Christian churches today testify to this surprising beauty? How might they reflect even the smallest amount of it or somehow exemplify it? Churches with rich traditions of aestheticism in their worship services and liturgies might wish to remember the great simplicity to which the gospel calls us. We do not need to "overdo" it; we *should* not overdo it, even as differing sensibilities might lead to a variety of aesthetic options, some more baroque, others more austere and restrained. Other churches, who seemingly pay little attention to the beauty of the liturgy or of spaces in which worship occurs, should start paying attention without relinquishing simplicity if this is part of their tradition. Combining beauty with simplicity might be a fruitful way to move forward.

Rather than positing an intrinsic link between Christian apologetics and languages—as if we could single-handedly produce faith in others through our discourses—should we

not expand our way of thinking so that apologetics no longer is seen as a propositional affair? Returning to the two extraordinary parables in Luke's gospel, should we not realize that both the Samaritan and the father of the prodigal son do not make long, impressive speeches but, instead, simply show compassion through their acts and, thus, through their bodies to the one who is urgently in need of it.

Thinking on and considering the beauty of the gospel may help us gain a broader understanding of what is expected of us: not just words, not just homilies, even though these remain indispensable and require great attention, but the kind of life-changing human contact that Jesus practiced throughout his brief ministry. The best type of apologetics may occur through simple human gestures that manifest the kind of friendship and care that characterize God's own relationship to the world.

The gospel presents us with a beauty that is so astonishing, so powerful that we sense it does not quite come from a worldly source. The gospel's beauty, even as it encounters us, is transcendent. Should churches seek not to hopelessly capture, but to reflect some of that beauty? Should they seek, as best they can, to let this beauty radiate with the least artificiality possible? How may they begin doing this?

It seems to me that we need a sort of contest and most certainly an ongoing dialogue across churches as we try to answer these questions. Some of us have seen various models of witnessing to the beauty of the gospel. Without a doubt, some of these models impact our way of thinking about this. The danger of an agenda such as "renewing Christian witness" has to do with the refusal to envision a (selective) plurality of approaches that need to be allowed to unfold in order to be tested. At the same time, some approaches have been tested for several decades now and offer very important insights into the fecundity (or lack thereof) of these approaches. We have seen academic Christian theologies that seek to cancel or subordinate all others around them. This was a recurring feature of 20th-century Christian theology. Shall we repeat this error in the field of witnessing and imagine that there is one single way of witnessing to the gospel in our own time?

3.3. The Gospel as Both Gift and Claim

The beauty of the gospel is not merely aesthetic and leisurely "enjoyment": it calls us to the task of justice. Justice itself is part and parcel of the beauty of the gospel. One could say that the beauty (as well as the joy) of the gospel is found in relations that have been restored or revived. These relations may still bear the marks of the previous breakdown, but they are now healed.

A key dimension of the gospel is the co-inherence within it of gift and claim (the German language speaks of both "*Zuspruch*," the affirmation, and "*Anspruch*," the claim)—in that order. Encountering and receiving the gift, if the gift is indeed the gospel, cannot occur without sensing a claim that is directed at us: the claim to somehow live according to the gift as best as we humanly can. The fact that the gospel is not merely a gift but also a claim means that it is not simply given for our leisurely enjoyment. It is given so that we may live from it and so that we may "live it out" in our daily existence.

Some churches are very good at emphasizing the "gift" side of the gospel while being wary of mentioning the "claim" side. This is true especially of historical or mainline churches—those whose proclivity is to adjust quite a bit to society at large. Other churches are fond of stressing the "claim" part at the risk of downplaying the fundamental "gift" dimension. To them, being a Christian means quite specific things about how to dress, how to take part in the weekly life of the congregation, how to read and meditate on Scripture with regularity, and so forth. We are back to the two ways that I mentioned at the beginning, and we are, in fact, touching on a feature of the Scriptures themselves, which at times stress the promissory nature of God's intention for God's creation (cf. Gen 9 and the narrative of the covenant in that chapter) and that, elsewhere, make sure to express the obligations that God's gift of freedom entails for God's people (cf. Lev 26 for a stunning, even shocking, imprecation or warning addressed by God to the Israelites). Elsewhere still, we see a sort of

balance between God's covenantal declaration or promise, on the one hand, and the claim that falls upon the people of Israel as God's people.[8]

The search for a "third way" beyond the impasse must include a combination of both the "gift" side and the "claim" side of the gospel. It is because the gospel is a "gift" that it also includes a "claim" on us: not merely on us individually, but on us as a Christian community. What does this mean specifically or concretely? It is impossible to answer this question in a general manner. Rather, the point is to ponder, as congregations or church communities, the kinds of commitments that we may be called to take on in light of God's commitment to justice rather than chaos, God's commitment to service rather than domination or coercion.

In their witness to contemporary culture, churches should not proclaim a truncated gospel, either a word of affirmation or a word claiming people. They should testify and embody, as the clay jars that they are, the whole gospel.

3.4. The Surprise of the Gospel

Many people in western countries imagine they know Christianity. They assume that they are familiar with it. This is perhaps one of the great chances with regard to churches' "cultural witness" today—despite the fact that it is because people think they know Christianity that they look elsewhere for "meaning," especially religious meaning or meaning for their own lives. Why might this be a chance? Because so many people only have a very superficial view of Christianity. What they think they know is, in fact, often a caricature of Christianity. If they are led to discover the living core of Christianity, namely Jesus Christ, his message, his deeds, and his presence through memory and liturgical celebration, will they not be astonished—as we too are—by what they discover?

The problem is that churches' cultural witness often confirms the superficial prejudgments of so many people today. It too rarely calls these prejudgments into question. We need sharpness and acuity here, we need salt, and yet what is offered is all too often dullness and sweetness. How did we manage to transform the subversive force of the gospel into something so inoffensive and harmless, into something so boring and dumb? Why is the church's proclamation of the gospel, given the radical surprise that the gospel brings forth, so void of surprise(s)? I do not have a good answer to this question, except perhaps by returning to the "clay jar" metaphor, but one striking feature of church life as I know it where I live might help us understand why the situation is dire.

3.5. Leaving Theology Behind?

In his recent book, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age*, Andrew Root lucidly points out a characteristic of contemporary church life that finds a clear confirmation also in western Europe. He writes the following:

> Resources, not the Holy Spirit, have been imagined as the source of life. In this drive for resources, pastors and congregational leaders have been happy to shed dogmatic language, creedal commitments, and theological visions so they might be light enough to move fast, chasing down resources and therefore (presumably) life. As much as dogmatic statements have felt disconnected from the life of congregations, congregational leaders have been happy to throw off the concepts, commitments, and cumbersome vocabularies of the dogmatic in order to go fast in harvesting resources and assuring themselves of life. (Root 2002, p. 16)

This is a perceptive diagnosis. Christians themselves have, to a certain extent, given up on the very language that has been in use for centuries in order to proclaim the Christian message. Why did they do this? Probably because they started noticing that the traditional themes of Christian promulgation were falling on deaf ears. Indeed, some Christians have been and are still searching for a new language, one that does not repulse people who stand far away from Christianity and church life. On this question, there is a stark divide between various options, some that maintain traditional language (including the word "God"), and others that replace even key terms with others ("the Source of all that is").

We see lurking here the situation with which I opened above: on the one hand, we see people who tend to continue to use, more or less massively, the "traditional" language of Christianity. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are working hard to avoid using this language for the sake of new formulations that, far from rebutting people, may help them see what is vital in Christianity.

Regardless of what we choose (and it could well be that both of these options, as I am presenting them, are problematic), leaving theology behind is a terrible mistake. I am not thinking here of the kind of academic theology—which is a good chunk of it, and a legitimate one at that—that thrives on erudition and that is mostly concerned with speaking to its peers. I am thinking, rather, of the kind of academic theology that is interested above all in interpreting what is vital about the Christian message, its real "treasure." Theology in the 21st century, as in past centuries, is an indispensable ally in the work of realizing what kind of treasure the gospel is, as well as what kinds of surprises and challenges it contains. Conversely, Christian theologians should be exploring among themselves the possible contours of Christianity and the church in the coming decades, i.e., in an age in which all things institutional, especially with regard to religion (but also with regard to politics), are often viewed with suspicion.

3.6. A Culture of Listening—And Then Acting

What seems to not work at all, at least in today's western culture, is the kind of crude proselytism most of us have encountered in our life. It is not merely by publicly preaching a watered-down version of the message on a street corner that people become Christians—although that may happen, of course. Nor is it by seeking "a slavish and unholy submission to earthly power" that Christians render witness to God's reconciliation (Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate 2020, "For the Life of the World", §13).

Anyone interested in the renewal of Christian witness may need to consider the importance of *listening* rather than proclaiming or talking. In a marvelous little book that is as accessible as it is deep, Rowan Williams (2014, p. 21) suggested that the Christian life is "a listening life." The difficulty here lies in part in what or whom we should listen to. Certainly, the Christian life entails listening to God's Word. I would say this is the first allegiance, as well as the one enduring allegiance, for Christians. However, listening, if it is a genuinely Christian act, must be twofold: it must also include a listening to the world as it is. Not only that, but the two kinds of listening must stand in close correlation. This is the real challenge: maintaining these two acts of listening together, letting the one permeate the other and vice versa, without losing sight of the ultimate criterion or normativity we find in God's Word over the world.

If we consider again the first two types of "presence" to contemporary society that I alluded to at the beginning, we see a first type that is so focused on listening to God's Word (or to a certain understanding of God's Word) that it stands in direct opposition to the contemporary world, which is seen as the enemy. Listening to God's Word implies a "no" to the world, purely and simply. We then see a second type of "presence," one that is so interested in what the world looks like today that the ways in which the gospel shed its own light on this world no longer are a real concern.[9] In other words, it does not suffice to "listen" *either* to God's Word *or* to the contemporary world. The two must be articulated, without forfeiting the normativity of God's Word over the views that abound and dominate in this world. A genuine Christian witness to the gospel in our contemporary situation might need to rely on the kind of twin-listening act I am suggesting.

What, then, about "acting"? Does it come as an addition to the listening part? In some cases, probably—even though listening clearly already is an act. It seems to me that the most significant acting may, in some important cases, resemble the listening dimension in its twofold attention (vs. God *and* the world). What I mean is this: Christian "acting" is at times particularly "significant" (i.e., etymologically speaking, pointing toward something) when it is visibly connected to a liturgical setting. Here, the "acting" is not merely a possible implication of the double act of "listening": it is part and parcel of that act. The Christian

community, as it celebrates its liturgy, is at once a community seeking to listen to God, as well as, at some other level, to the world, and thus seeking to act in a certain way—acting not just during the liturgy, but also on its way out from the liturgy into daily life (of which the liturgy is a part, such as other moments we set apart in our lives). All of this to say that the kind of Christian speaking that we see, especially in western churches, is usually *not* compelling to people of our time who know Christianity culturally. People know what to expect, and they (unfortunately) usually receive what they expect . . . People know that Christians make speeches and proclaim a particular message. Can Christians surprise these people by not talking to them but by listening in front of them (to God's Word, as well as to the world), by praying but by singing also?

3.7. A Christian "Style"

Christians should pursue a distinct style or—better—a distinct set of styles, away from morosity, away from artificial or forced (inauthentic) joy (such as the one we see in pictures of certain televangelists or pastors . . .). Without mimicking Jesus of Nazareth, but instead by being shaped by his Word, their calling is to be open to encounters with others, including with "very different" others, on behalf of their Lord.

The church itself should be a gathering of people who are very different from one another and, yet, who know they are gathered by a message and a Lord who binds them together.[10]

Bonhoeffer's (1998, pp. 281–82) insights remain important:

If we now ask about where faith 'experiences the church' most purely, then the answer is that this certainly does not happen in communities that are based on romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits. It rather takes place where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists within the church [kirchliche Gemeinschaft]; where Jew and Greek, pietist and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord's Table, and intercede for one another in prayer. It is precisely in the context of everyday life that church is believed and experienced. The reality of the church is understood not in moments of spiritual exaltation, but within the routine and pains of daily life, and within the context of ordinary worship. Everything else merely obscures the actual state of affairs. [. . .] Our age is not short on experiences, but on *faith*.[11]

Bonhoeffer's words are striking and sobering in a context in which, especially among anglophone Protestants, as well as in many other corners of worldwide Christianity, "spiritual exaltation" has become an end in itself. Elsewhere in his dissertation (written at the tender age of 21!), Bonhoeffer denounces churches that spend much of their energy "lament[ing] about the world's indifference" (ibid., p. 252).[12]

The set of styles that Christians may wish (or may be called) to adopt might well be centered on the coming of God. The Christian life is indeed "a listening life," but it is also—and this is certainly related to the "listening" part—an expectant life. Not in the sense that it "expects" certain things, as if these things were merited or guaranteed to come, but rather in the sense that the Christian community awaits her Lord and, with him, justice and peace for all creation ("your kingdom *come*!"). It is because the Christian community awaits the Lord who brings justice and peace that it is dedicated, already now, in the face of deep rifts and conflicts among human beings, as well as between human beings and creation, to the quest of justice and peace. The vision of what is to come determines not only the kind of hope that Christians harbor, but also the kinds of actions that they enact and promote.

Certainly, Christians have repeatedly pursued certain styles of life that directly contradict this vision. To this day, we see Christians, including some with major ecclesial responsibilities, betraying the picture we find in the Beatitudes, for instance, concerning the "peacemakers." The history of Christianity is filled with betrayals, big and small, of the gospel. There are some good reasons why much of the west has turned its back on

Christianity and its institutions in these past two or three centuries. It is important to say this, for it may help us steer clear of any nostalgia.

What we need today is not particularly heroic individual figures, i.e., figures who tend to make us forget the "clay jars" that they too are, but communities who are aware of having been gathered by Jesus Christ, not for the sake of feeling good among themselves (even though that is permitted), but for the sake of living according to God's Word and, in this way, witnessing together to God's life-transforming message. How exactly is this message life-transforming? In what ways and in which directions does it transform human existence? This should become clear to people who come into contact with these communities, despite these communities' intrinsic weaknesses and frailty. The gospel's *humanizing* force should become more readily visible as people look at Christian communities. Unfortunately, it is too often the opposite that people see.

4. Final Remarks

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with a clear calling. The contours, as well as the depths, of the Christian calling are always worth pondering anew. First of all, there is a "good news" that wakes up those who hear it and place their trust in it ("Sleeper, awake!" one reads in Eph 5:14). How can the good news be presented in such a way that, even (and, I would say, preferably) without too many spoken words, it effects this "waking up"? Our liturgies much too often put people to sleep rather than wake them up! They offer cheap, superficial, "automated" consolation rather than a real word of forgiveness that also challenges us for the days ahead.

How are we going to "jump start" the transmission of the faith, a transmission that is utterly broken in many western European countries? I actually doubt that it is possible to "jump start" it. The crisis is very deep indeed. What then can we do? The only answer I see is this: we need to foster communities of faith, even small ones, that know how to draw their main resources from the gospel and that center on the meditation on and the study of God's Word, on fellowship, and on communal prayer with persevering fervor and a joyful earnestness, without severing themselves from society but looking for ways to be in close contact with today's world. Far from grandiose plans, let us begin locally, and let us share experiences from various local communities that are trying to live from the wellsprings of the Christian faith without leaving civil society behind. The aim of these communities may not primarily be the *transmission* of the faith; it may instead be the actual *living* of the faith in deep humility. It may be these communities that, eventually, become places where the joyful, communal attempt to live the Christian faith leads others to be attracted by it.[13]

In his book on the Sabbath, Abraham Heschel (1951, p. 96) wrote these words:

> The historian [Leopold von] Ranke claimed that every age is equally near to God. Yet Jewish tradition claims that there is a hierarchy of moments within time, that all ages are not alike. Man may pray to God equally at all places, but God does not speak to man equally at all times. At a certain moment, for example, the spirit of prophecy departed from Israel.

Has "the spirit of prophecy departed" from contemporary Christianity? Certainly not, if one looks at the situation, even within western Europe, although some important theological voices have claimed during this past half century that, indeed, God has ceased speaking to the world and that it is the duty of Christians to forcefully voice their protest to God in order to compel God to speak again (Ellul 1973).[14] I am not convinced by this thesis. Be that as it may, ecclesial institutions, especially in western Europe, are at pains to embody the "spirit of prophecy." I suspect the situation will become more difficult in these coming years before it "gets better" (if at all). The present paper argues that "retreat" from the world in order to foster an "antagonistic" counter-model is just as unhelpful as the kind of diluting of Christian identities and self-censorship that we see among more liberal Christians (here, some cleaning before our own doors is in order within modern Christian theology).

Christians have "talked" a lot, throughout their history, often on the basis of a deep listening of God's Word. It could be that their "talking" should become briefer, more concentrated on what is most vital and essential about the gospel, and always grounded in not just a personal but a communal listening to God's Word. This should not preclude the kind of "boldness" of speech that is recommended in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 4:13 and 4:31; 2 Cor 3:12), but let us remember that Jesus too was a man of relatively few words during his ministry. Let us search together for creative, surprising ways to render witness to the joy-filled, life-giving message of God in our contemporary world!

Notes

1   The literature on this global and complex phenomenon is vast. Among the best studies, taking the long view and avoiding superficial interpretations, is Charles Taylor's (2007). I cannot engage the literature on this topic in the present article.

2   See, in this regard, Friedrich Gogarten's study (Gogarten 1953). For a recent analysis, see Volker Leppin, "Friedrich Gogarten's Theology of Secularization," in Stievermann and Zachman (2018).

3   See, e.g., Pouliot and Fortin (2013), as well as the works of French sociologist Danielle Hervieu-Léger (Hervieu-Léger 1993).

4   David Novak (2005, p. 195), the well-known North American Jewish scholar and rabbi, raises the "question of how faithful Jews and faithful Christians can enter into civil society and survive there intact, let alone flourish, without, however, either conquering civil society or being conquered by it." For a recent sociological account of contemporary evangelical desires (and plans) for the conquest of power, see (Gonzalez 2014). One of the key documents from the June 2016 (nearly Pan-)Orthodox Council of Crete explicitly rejected these kinds of compromissions of the church in service of the State. See "For the Life of the World" (Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate 2020), § 13: "It is, in fact, very much in the interest of the Church that the institutional association of Christianity with the interests of the state be as tenuous as possible, not because the Church seeks to withdraw from society at large, but because it is called to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to serve God in all things, uncompromised by alliance with worldly ambitions. The Orthodox Church, then, should be thankful that God has providentially allowed for the reduction of the Church's political enfranchisement in most of the lands of ancient Christendom, so that it may more faithfully conduct and promote her mission to all nations and persons." It is a huge catastrophe for our common Christian witness (not just for Orthodox Christians worldwide) to see Patriarch Kirill's blind endorsement of Vladimir Putin's foolish war of aggression.

5   For the theme of "reconciliation" as the "sum" of the gospel and the heart of the Christian faith, see Karl Barth's (1956), as well as, more recently and on the basis of insights from Dietrich Bonhoeffer among others, de Gruchy (2002).

6   Pope Francis (2013, §10) later states: "[. . .] an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!".

7   Among the most interesting studies on beauty in relation to theology, see this book: Zeindler (1993).

8   For a concise and detailed study of the three types of covenant formulas (1. "I will be your God"; 2. "you will be my people"; 3. "I will be your God, and your will be my people") that are present in the Hebrew Bible and their interpretation, see (Rendtorff 1998).

9   Or, to put it like Pope Francis (2013, §79): "many pastoral workers [. . .] conceal their Christian identity and convictions." This is quite pervasive in my own region (French-speaking Switzerland), where Roman Catholic hospital chaplains, for instance, prefer not to show their identity as priests (in certain cases) and prefer to be referred to as "spiritual care" specialists ("*accompagnants spirituels*") rather than as "chaplains."

10   Among recent voices who have emphasized Jesus' practice of radical hospitality (his "*sainteté hospitalière*") as an important element of theology today, see (Theobald 2007, especially I:59–69, 101–2, 104) (for the expression "*sainteté hospitalière*").

11   Bonhoeffer's emphasis. The original German version is as follows: (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 192).

12   In the German edition, p. 173.

13   There is a well-known Christian community in western Europe that has defied all odds, as far as I can see, with regard to the transmission of the Christian faith. This place is the Taizé community in Burgundy (France). The entire present article is informed by a friendship with this community, whose pastoral work since the 1950s and, especially, since the 1960s has been simply extraordinary, without any intention during the first decades of its existence (since the mid-1940s) to become such an important "lighthouse" for so many people all around the world. Have theologians and other people interested in the transmission of the faith paid sufficient attention to the ways in which the faith is "presented" and lived out in Taizé? I am convinced theologians have not yet performed this work in any adequate manner.

[14] The original French title is as follows: (Ellul 1973). Ellul's bold thesis was criticized by another distinguished French Protestant theologian, André Dumas, who wondered how Ellul could speak in such a way about God's silence. Cf. Elisabetta Ribet's (2018) unpublished PhD dissertation.

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The Artist as the Church's Mouthpiece: The Cultural Witness of Church Art and Its Patronage

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Abstract: This article explores how art installed within a church space contributes to the church's cultural witness, drawing from the contemporary example of Alison Watt's *Still*, installed in Old Saint Paul's Episcopal Church in Edinburgh, Scotland. While the object's capacity to proclaim is present, this case study extends the exploration of art's cultural witness to include imaginative participation in the Gospel narrative as well as its transformation of the space in which it is installed. Focus then turns to the Church's patronage of the visual arts, arguing that this is another example of cultural witness. In this case, one finds a relationship between church and artist that is marked by trust, collaboration, and protection.

Keywords: church arts patronage; theology and the arts; cultural witness

1. Introduction

As the Church considers its cultural witness in the twenty-first century (Church of England 2022; Volf and Croasmun 2019), a fruitful starting point for exploration is the role that Christian clergy, intellectuals, and artists played during the Second World War and immediately thereafter to describe and cultivate a Christian vision for post-war Britain (Jacobs 2018). As the modern myth of human progress crumbled around the horrific devastation and acts of war, "it seemed to at least some Christians that the whole social, economic and religious life of the nation was open for reconstruction from the very foundations" (Webster 2017, p. 121).

A surprising locus for this reconstruction, and the focus of this article, is found in an activity that the Protestant church had largely abandoned at the time of the Reformation: church patronage of the visual arts. While there were outliers to this abandonment, such as the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth century, Anglican clergy in the interwar period began speaking of a "gulf between the Church and the artist" that was partly due to a "lack of vision on the part of churchmen" (Bell 1942, p. 81). To rectify this, in 1944, Bishop George Bell gathered artists such as T.S. Eliot, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Henry Moore to discuss how to increase the presence of modern art in the church (Jasper 1967, pp. 129–30). At the gathering, it was agreed "that the Church should use the artists fearlessly" and the church–artist patronage relationship was given particular form, described by Bell as: "The Church should dictate the subject-matter and the artist the style, while 'artistic tact' should be employed in matching the form of modern art to what congregations would accept and approve" (ibid., p. 130). For Bell, "Unless the Church is to be sterile in the fostering of creative art, it must be prepared to trust its chosen artists to begin their work and carry it through to the end" (ibid., p. 133).

Bell offers a vision for a church arts patronage marked by trust in and collaboration with the artist, a view not only important for the propagation of church art but also believed significant for the renewal of post-war society (Bell 1942, p. 81). The artist Hans Feibusch (1946), commissioned by Bell, elaborates: "The men who came home from the war, and all the rest of us, have seen too much horror and evil; when we close our eyes terrible sights haunt us; the world is seething with bestiality; and it is all man's doing. Only the

most profound, tragic, moving, Sublime vision can redeem us. The voice of the Church should be heard above the thunderstorm; and the artist should be her mouthpiece" (p. 92). According to Peter Webster (2017), art was closely tied to the Church's post-war mission, giving the Church an alternative language to speak into society (p. 9). Put another way, art emerged as an act of contemporary cultural witness and, for those who advocated for this, church arts patronage became a necessary pursuit.

This sentiment led to a small resurgence within the Church of England of the patronage of high-profile contemporary artists for work in parish and cathedral spaces. For example, as Dean of Chichester Cathedral, Walter Hussey, also concerned by the loss to society of a broken relationship between the artist and the Church, commissioned permanent works of art by Marc Chagall, John Piper, and Graham Sutherland. However, he is best known for his earlier patronage while vicar at St Matthew's Northampton, specifically the patronage of Henry Moore's *Madonna and Child* sculpture and Graham Sutherland's *Crucifixion,* well documented in Hussey's memoir, *Patron of Art* (Hussey 1985; Turner 1992).

This mid-twentieth-century vision of art and its patronage as an act of cultural witness has, to an extent, become realized in the twenty-first century: across traditions, there is evidence of the Church in the United Kingdom re-engaging as patron to the arts, a resurgence identified by a number of sources, both Christian and secular. While Art + Christianity has observed "over the last 20 years . . . something of a renaissance of commissioned art for churches and cathedrals in this country" with "many important artists . . . once again creating art for church spaces" (Moffat and Daly 2010, pp. 7, 9), the international press has also noticed and reported on the phenomenon. In 2010, *The Times* [UK] reported on the recent "flurry of contemporary art commissions in churches" (Campbell-Johnston 2010), while the *New York Times*, in a 2007 article, asked, "Do all these new installations herald a renaissance in religious art?" (Gladstone 2007). This "renaissance" is demonstrated by the installation of work by internationally renowned artists in English cathedrals, such as Tracey Emin's *For You* (Liverpool Cathedral), Bill Viola's *Martyrs* (St Paul's Cathedral), and Antony Gormley's *Sound II* (Winchester Cathedral). While cathedrals are a unique historical and cultural venue (Jones and Howes 2005), there is also increased interest at the parish level.[1] In 2010, the Church of England published *Commissioning New Art for Churches: A Guide for Parishes and Artists* (Church of England 2010), offering a £10,000 prize to the parish church that demonstrated best implementation of the guidelines (Church of England 2012).

Art as an Act of Cultural Witness

As an act of cultural witness, present-day church patronage of art, especially when created by well-known artists, not only raises the profile of the Church but also increases the number of visitors who enter a particular church space. As visitors step into these places designed for and saturated with the regular worship of God's people, Christian witness remains a possibility for those who dare to step in and explore this "foreign land". However, in addition to the space being a site for cultural witness, there is also the possibility for the object to commend the Gospel. Art has the potential to convey deep and rich theological truths and ask challenging questions to the one who stands in its presence in a church space (Viladesau 2000, chp. 3). While this potential lies within the work itself, when installed in a church, the place bears on the interpretation of the work and the meaning it mediates. Take, for example, Tracey Emin's work, *For You*, in Liverpool Cathedral. *For You* is an installation of Emin's handwriting sculpted in neon pink lights, sited above the west doors.[2] The words read: "I felt you and I knew you loved me." In light of Emin's wider oeuvre, had this been installed on a gallery wall, interpretation would likely move in a direction in line with her other works, such as *Unmade Bed* or *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*. However, in a cathedral space, these words take on an entirely different meaning. Because the work is sited within a place of Christian tradition and worship, it can be read through the life and activity of the church. When this happens, the work can become a witness to the presence

of God's love in that place for all people: viewers can feel with the artist the unconditional love of God for them.

In recent years, the potential for art to be an agent of cultural witness has gained momentum in church traditions (particularly the evangelical tradition) that have been historically suspicious of the visual. Led by Reformed theologians such as Hans Rookmaaker (1978) and Francis Schaeffer (1973), the latter part of the mid-twentieth century saw a softening of evangelicals towards the visual arts. In addition to offering a biblical rationale for the arts that justified engagement to those concerned about art's faithfulness in the Christian life (Schaeffer 1973), a close link has also been made in this tradition between art and witness. For example, the 2010 Lausanne Conference singled art out as particularly efficacious to this end, stating in *The Cape Town Commitment* (Lausanne Movement 2011):

> Artists at their best are truth-tellers and so the arts constitute one important way in which we can speak the truth of the gospel. Drama, dance, story, music and visual image can be expressions both of the reality of our brokenness, and of the hope that is centred in the gospel that all things will be made new. In the world of mission, the arts are an untapped resource. We actively encourage greater Christian involvement in the arts.

In this assertion, as seen in post-war Britain, art remains an alternative language for a world where the words of the Gospel now fall on deaf ears, justifying "greater Christian involvement". It is the contention of this article that involvement must include church arts patronage. However, as will be seen in the case below, how this happens is important for it has potential effect on the work's witness to a particular community. Further, Bell's vision of a church–artist relationship marked by trust and collaboration is present in contemporary church activity. In this case, one can argue it is this dynamic that allows the Church to embody fully their role as patron.

Two cautions must be offered before proceeding. The first caution pertains to the idea that art can "speak the truth of the gospel". While this is a possibility, one must be careful in one's expectation about how fully art can speak the whole of the Gospel to every person at every time. It is true that part of art's power lies in its potential to be a sign that points beyond itself, and good art will hold multiple layers of meaning. The latter is what allows a viewer to come back time and again to the same work of art and receive something different or see something that one has not seen before. However, while this is art's strength, it is also its weakness, for the same work of art can also be an anti-sign, pointing in the opposite direction of what the artist intended (Viladesau 2000, pp. 162–64). As an anti-sign, its ability to signify can, for example, fall at the feet of an unreceptive viewer. Further, as cultural contexts change, art that has been a sign in the past can become an anti-sign in the present or future. The critique of the "White Jesus" found in English churches is a good example of this (McDonald 2020). Finally, if the emphasis is put on the art object as a means of proclamation, one must be attentive to when this slips into art-as-propaganda. According to Schaeffer (1973), art as an "embodiment of a message, a vehicle for the propagation of a particular message about the world or the artist or man or whatever . . . reduces art to an intellectual statement and the work of art as a work of art disappears" (pp. 36–37). If art is justified by the extent to which it consistently communicates a particular "message," the risk is a stripping not only of art's depth but also of its very essence.

The second caution regards the expectations on the artist. While there is no doubt that art has the potential to tell the truth and reveal brokenness and hope, one must be careful of laying a burden of responsibility onto artists as "truth-tellers". Of course, this is possible, but theologically speaking, artists, as fellow humans, also look through a glass darkly this side of the new creation, meaning they are fallen in their sight of what is true. However, rather than using this as a rationale for abandoning the arts, this reality necessitates a thoughtful and considered patronage relationship between the Church and the artist.

To explore this in depth, attention now turns to an act of exemplary contemporary church arts patronage within the United Kingdom. In the case of Old St Paul's Edinburgh and the installation of Alison Watt's *Still*, one finds a work of art and its patronage in

a symbiotic act of cultural witness. As will be seen, the art object witnesses by inviting imaginative participation in the Gospel narrative while also transforming the space where it is sited. The efficacy of this witness was enhanced by the patronage act. Rather than capitulating to the modern assumption of the artist working in isolation (Hart 2014, pp. 21–22), this case witnesses to a relationship of collaboration and trust, marked by protection.

2. Contemporary Church Arts Patronage: Old St Paul's Edinburgh and Alison Watt's *Still*

Old Saint Paul's (OSP) is a Scottish Episcopal church located in the center of Edinburgh, near to the historic Old Town. Considered the oldest Episcopal congregation in the city (Ingram 1907), OSP has a deep and rich historyis, rooted in the very history of Scotland itself. The congregation formed in 1689 at the time of William of Orange's dis-establishment of the Episcopal Church. Bishop Alexander Rose of St Giles Cathedral, refusing to acknowledge William as the "rightful king of Scotland," chose to leave St Giles and take his congregation to worship in a building in nearby Carrubbers Close. After having been a space of worship for nearly 200 years, the building was condemned in 1873 and demolished in 1880. It was decided to rebuild on the old site, and the current church building was finished in 1883 (Clark 1983, pp. 4–5). Just after the completion of the building, Rev Reginald Mitchell-Innes became rector and during his tenure introduced the "Catholic worship of the Oxford Movement" (Clark 1983, pp. 4–6). The present-day church continues to identify with the Anglo-Catholic worshiping tradition.[3]

To the left of the high altar is the Memorial Chapel, built after the First World War in honor of those from the parish who went to France and the canon of the church who followed them to the trenches to act as their chaplain. Many were subsequently killed in action with a great proportional loss for the church: 140 men and 1 woman. This loss was compounded when the survivors returned to Edinburgh with its overcrowding, unemployment, and depression. About this period of time, the rector (2012) at the time of the research commented in an interview: "the question was around, 'Did all these people die for nothing?' And I think that was the sense of loss—that maybe it was all just a terrible waste, [a] ghastly, blasphemous waste of human life. And I think it was in that spirit that they built the [Memorial] Chapel. And almost probably without them knowing it, it infused the place with a sort of desperate cry of the heart."[4] It was into this Memorial Chapel space that Alison Watt OBE installed her work, *Still* (Wiggins and Paterson 2008).[5]

The inspiration that led to the work's creation is best described by the artist. Watt writes:

> It was a very beautiful day during the Festival. It was very hot and I was in the High Street with all the noise and bustle there is at that time. To escape, I came down Carrubers [sic] Close and I remember opening the door and stepping into the church and the door closing behind me.

> Suddenly the noise stopped and the light was dim and it was cool. I remember seeing shafts of sunlight streaming in through the windows, catching the flecks of dust. I remember the faint smell of incense. It took me a few moments to become acclimatized to the space and then I found the Memorial Chapel . . .

> I remember stepping in to the Memorial Chapel and reading all the names and thinking about their lives and who they were—and what they might have become. It brought to mind not only the men who had died in the two World Wars but all the victims of war . . . That space is extraordinary. It is so vertical. You are forced to look up . . .

> . . . I have always been inspired by work which provokes an emotional response in me. When I first walked into Old Saint Paul's I was aware of a similar feeling. I was profoundly affected. I had never before been so moved to make a piece of work. 'STILL' is my own homage to a space which inspires aw [sic] and devotion. (Holloway 2005, pp. 18–19)

Still is a large, four-paneled work that depicts draped fabric. It is painted in muted neutral hues that blend into the stone of the chapel, and its relationship to the physical location is further emphasized by the way the work is naturally lit by the windows in the chapel. The four panels have been hung so that they appear to be suspended in mid-air above the altar. The negative space between the panels creates a dark cross shape, which contrasts strongly with the light tones of the painted fabric. The cross shape was an intentional decision made by Watt as she wanted the painting to provide a cross above the altar where it hangs (Wiggins et al. 2008).

While Watt does not want to lay explicit meaning onto her work, in light of the cross that emerges in the negative space and its placement in a chapel above an altar, theological readings of this abstract work easily flow when we view the work. As the "back-drop" to where the Eucharist is celebrated and received, the work aids contemplation upon and remembrance of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. If one considers the work through this lens, the folds of painted fabric "speak the truth of the Gospel" and witness to the new life found in Christ. As with Emin's work in Liverpool Cathedral, this theological interpretation is only possible because of where the work is installed. To the end, Colin Wiggins of the National Gallery, London argues that the work "takes on a Christian symbolism . . . that would not happen if the painting were exhibited in a more neutral gallery space . . . the white fabric becomes evocative of a burial shroud. The overwhelming sense of whiteness, with its traditional association of purity and specifically of the Virgin Mary, also conveys a powerful sense of a sacred presence that is inevitably informed by the context" (Wiggins and Paterson 2008, pp. 16–17).

While the intelligibility of Christianity is given visual form, the work goes further and engages human experience. This is seen in quotations gathered from congregants about their response to the work (Old Saint Paul's Episcopal Church 2005):

> As soon as I saw it I thought of the story of the woman who touched Jesus' cloak—it invites you to stretch up and reach for him. (ibid., p. 11)

> The flowing curves of 'STILL' suggest to me a space, the sleeve of someone praying which invites us to participate. (ibid.)

> I'm drawn to it like the woman drawn to touch the hem of Jesus' robe (ibid.).

> 'STILL' also makes me feel as if I'm standing up close to Christ with my head bared, unable to look at his face. (ibid., p. 23)

While the experiences described above require some knowledge of the Gospel story, what is interesting is the way engagement with this largely abstract work of art compels imaginative participation in the Gospel story. Whether one is "unable to look at his face" or "drawn to touch the hem of Jesus' robe," the work seems not only to invite reflection on one's own human state but also locate that experience in the life of Christ. Further, in these quotations, there is an expectancy that this imaginative participation leads somewhere. For example, like the faith and hope demonstrated by the bleeding woman who touched Jesus' hem, a similar hope is intimated by the viewer's comment above. The work invites the viewer to put oneself in the place of the woman healed,[6] creating the possibility for the Gospel to continue in its witness to its transformative power.

Contra to work created for the white wall of the gallery, *Still* is a work of art created for a particular place, which bears on its creation, reception, and interpretation. Reflecting on the context during his interview, the rector (2012) comments:

> The painting is not just a work of art on its own. It's a work of art in a context. And it's part of a greater work of art, a larger work of art, which is the whole chapel. Which is itself a part of a greater work of art, which is the way we human beings, within the love of God, cope with loss and what is the theological context for desperate human loss. And the painting seems to have completed the aesthetic. In a sense, it's put resurrection into the place of loss.

The particularity means that *Still* is not meant to act on its own but is experienced and interpreted through its surroundings. In addition to the theological interpretation that the church building lays on the work, the work is also experienced within the loss of life and history that the Memorial Chapel honors. However, what one sees in the quotation above is the work's active participation in redeeming and healing the trauma in the church's history with the result being a transformation of the space itself. In the rector's words, the work has "put resurrection into the place of loss," a transformation also experienced by those interviewed:

> It was always a kind of melancholy place—well, obviously it is because it's a Memorial Chapel, but somehow or the other, it always seemed a bit just a—I don't know, not like the rest of the church. And I think the general feeling now is that it's made it special.[7]

> Alison's painting has transformed the place . . . it was absolutely natural that we began to have, in fact, daily services in that chapel after the painting was put there.[8]

It is worth pausing to draw out the significance found in the final quotation, specifically the "natural" decision to have "daily services in that chapel". What is indicated is that the transformation of the space, aided by the installation of *Still*, has made the chapel *more fitting* for worship—more fitting for that which is *meant* to happen in the space. Further, the institution of daily services in the chapel after the painting's installation introduces the possibility that the space will continue to be transformed and infused with the sacrality of worship over time. While there is much to mine in the witness of this art object, behind the creation, installation, and reception of *Still* is an act of collaborative church arts patronage that also deserves exploration in light of cultural witness.

It is clear that the artist's inspiration is important as the initiator of *Still*; however, the gift of her inspiration had to be received in order to be fully realized. Thus, the rector-as-patron's supportive reception of Watt's inspiration was just as important in seeing the work come to completion for, without it, the work could have died at the point of inspiration or, if created, remained in Watt's gallery. The patron's reception turned to collaboration not only in his encouragement of her ideas but also by entering into the creative process with her. It was this action that ultimately led to the creation of a work that fits the space it was created to inhabit. As collaborator, the patron, through entering into dialogue with the artist, was able to help Watt reflect upon and understand the context into which she was creating. About this, the rector (2012) comments:

> [W]hat she wanted to get from me, I think, was a sense of what the chapel was about. The space that she had experienced. This sense of loss. What was the chapel about? How would it be used? What do people who are members of the church think about it? And I wanted to get from her a sense of: how was she responding to that? How might the work she was doing accompany that? Or contradict it? Or illuminate it?

This conversation is significant because while the artist is sympathetic to Christianity (Jeffrey 2004), she is not a worshipping member of this church. Thus, the rector's collaboration involved explaining to her what happened in the space liturgically as well as its theological significance for the worshipping community who gathered there. While letting the artist develop the work according to her inspiration and artistic gifting, the rector-as-patron also participated in the work as a theological guide. This was particularly necessary because of where the work was to be sited, above the altar and facing those coming forward to receive.

The rector-as-patron not only collaborated with the artist but also acted as advocate for Watt's work to the congregation. Through the spoken and written word, the rector-as-patron shaped the congregation towards a larger definition of what was fitting for the space. One congregant commented in his interview:

When someone does something that is really original like *Still*, I couldn't have imagined anything like that . . . So if you'd said to me, 'Well you're going to have this great big white painting of folded fabric,' I'd have said, 'What?!?'[9]

With the help of the patron, the congregation was prepared to receive the work, a reception that gave the work space and time to contribute to and participate in the worship, evidenced by the interpretations of the work offered above.

While this advocacy was important for the work's initial reception, for the work to continue to witness faithfully, ongoing advocacy is needed, especially as the rector at the time of *Still's* creation has moved on. Current OSP members have inherited a gift from an artist. While the collaboration between artist and patron is no longer focused in the act of creation, it continues in the cultivation of the imagination of the present-day congregation so they are able to see the witness of *Still.* This might include making historic interpretations of the work available for present and future congregations to aid their own interpretations as they draw out the yet undiscovered ways this work will witness to culture.

3. Conclusions

What we find in the case of Old St Paul's is an act of exemplary patronage practice. An artistically inclined patron connects with a spiritually sensitive artist: from conversation and collaboration comes a work of art that beautifully fits the worshipping space and serves the community that worships in its presence. This case also indicates markers of best practice in church arts patronage as the Church turns to the arts in its cultural witness. First, this case study demonstrates that the practice of the Church bears on art and its patronage by creating a "boundary" within which the artist and patron must work. While the nature or shape of this boundary is determined by a church's theology, it nevertheless informs the creation, interpretation, and reception of art for the church space. While some resist the notion of criteria in relation to art in the church (Koestlé-Cate 2012), because the telos of the worshipping space is distinct from "art-world" spaces, the recognition of a boundary is inevitable, meaning the articulation of where it lies is a prerequisite for flourishing arts patronage practice.

This requirement correspondingly makes the church-as-patron necessary for it is here that one finds the role of the patron. Specifically, the patron contributes by helping to make this boundary visible to the artist rather than assuming the artist can "see" and interpret this boundary on his or her own. The patron "sees" the boundary that bears on how the artwork will be interpreted and received because, ideally, the patron knows the tradition the work will sit within and be interpreted by as well as the congregation for whom the work is created. While the patron might not know how the individual viewer will respond, he or she can help the artist to understand the collective posture of a particular congregation.

Awareness of the particular role the patron plays means the patron can also know the limitations of their contribution. Even if artistically inclined, the patron is not the artist. While the patron works with the artist, he does not work over the artist (O'Connor 1969, p. 163). This type of collaborative relationship is only possible if there is an environment of trust between artist and patron, and it seems that key to trust is this question: Is visual art theologically believed to be faithful within the particular church tradition? If art is believed to be able to serve the purposes of the Church, as it is in the tradition of Old Saint Paul's, it correspondingly creates an environment of trust not only for the artist but also in the object's potential to witness. This trust allows true collaboration as both artist and patron can meaningfully contribute. Thus, for traditions where art has been regarded with suspicion (or distrust), trust might need to be rebuilt (and forgiveness offered and received) as latent suspicions come to the fore as a result of practice.

However, for a foundation of trust to be cultivated, trust must be extended in both directions: the artist trusting the church-as-patron and the church-as-patron trusting the artist. For the artist, this means coming to a work aware of what he or she does not know that the patron can strengthen and thus contribute. From the patron to artist, trust is not indicated by a patron who lets the artist "get on with it" with no involvement. Rather,

robust engagement between artist and patron indicates the importance or gravitas of the practice.

When the act of patronage is marked by this collaboration and trust, the Church can fully inhabit the role of patron, specifically that of protector. Etymologically, patron stems from the Latin, "patronus," meaning "protector of clients," "advocate or defender". In English, the word connotes "one who takes under his favor and protection, or lends his influential support to advance the interests of, some person, cause, institution, art, or undertaking" (Garber 2008, p. 2). Patron-as-protector also finds biblical support in God's commissioning of Bezalel in Exodus 31. The name "Bezalel" means "in the shadow [or protection] of God" (Gaebelein 1985, p. 64). When God commissioned Bezalel for work in the tabernacle, He offered both His Spirit and His protection for the work that was to be done.

When we think about the relationship between the artist and the Church in this way, the patron becomes the one who protects, preserves, and enables the artist to create. Patron-as-protector also presumes the relational framework advocated. To protect, one must risk the possibility of sacrifice. To be protected, one must acknowledge vulnerability and need. In practice, one of the ways the patron protects the artist is in the way he or she advocates on behalf of the artist to the congregation, something already seen in the way the rector at Old St Paul's helped to encourage the congregation towards a larger definition of fittingness. One could argue that this form of protection sets the work of art free to witness, for the congregation is enabled to enter into the fullness of the theological capacity embedded in the work of art. Further, preparing a congregation to receive a work also protects the artist as they create on behalf of the other, making themselves vulnerable in their offering of their gift.

Seen in this case, *Still* is an object of cultural witness within Old St Paul's. At the time of its installation, the work witnessed to the Gospel by inviting viewers to participate imaginatively in the life of Jesus. It also transformed the church space, putting "resurrection into the place of loss," thus making the space more fitting for Christian worship and efficacious for witness into the future. While the object is a powerful site of cultural witness, what one must take seriously is the collaborative patron-artist relationship marked by trust and protection that lay at the foundation of this work. As a model for future practice, this case demonstrates what Hans Feibusch advocated in 1946. For artists to be the "mouthpieces" of the church into a broken society,

> [A] bold policy is needed . . . the artists are more than ready . . . [i]t is for the leaders of the Church to take initiative, to commission the best artists . . . to give them intelligent guidance in a sphere new to them, and to have sufficient confidence in their artistic and human quality to give them free play. The artist on his side, it will be found, is always glad to have the collaboration of the patron. He does not want to be offered a vacuum to fill as he pleases, he likes to be given the material; but he must be permitted to use it in his own way. (Feibusch 1946, p. 92)

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Notes

[1]   For a comprehensive list of churches that have installed works of art, see Art+Christianity, "Ecclesiart". Available online: https://artandchristianity.org/ecclesiart (accessed on 7 November 2022).

[2]   Art + Christianity, "Tracey Emin: For You". Available onine: https://artandchristianity.org/ecclesiart-listings/tracey-emin-for-you?rq=tracey%20emin (accessed on 7 November 2022).

[3]   Old Saint Paul's Scottish Episcopal Church, "Liturgical Tradition". Available online: https://www.osp.org.uk/worship/liturgy-and-music/ (accessed on 7 November 2022).

[4]   OSP—Rector, interview by author, 30 May 2012, Edinburgh. Since this research was undertaken, a new rector has been installed. Any references to the rector in this article refers to the one at the time of interview.

[5]   To view an image of the work, please see: ArtWay, "Easter—Still by Alison Watt". Available online: https://artway.eu/content.php?id=1876&lang=en&action=show (accessed on 6 December 2022).

[6]   See Matthew 9, Mark 5, and Luke 8.

[7]   OSP—Director of Music, interview by author, 12 June 2012, Edinburgh.

[8]   OSP—Rector, interview by author.

[9]   OSP—Director of Music, interview by author.

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