Justifying the Unjustifiable:
Ecclesiology in a modern context
Justificando o injustificável:
Eclesiologia em contexto moderno

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Abstract

A good deal of opposition to critical theory in modern theology is founded upon a defensive shift against the erosion of authority, an allegiance to the tautological grounds of justifying what ultimately cannot be justified: why I belong here, in this particular community, and not over there in another one. By being more attentive to the nature of the 'necessary illusions' that community must adhere to, while also learning to listen more attentively to the marginalized voices within a given community, we might be able to move beyond the rigid dualisms that typically characterize ecclesial politics (e.g. conservative versus liberal) by reducing the complexity of our identities. By engaging a Pauline philosophy of selves divided against themselves, we can locate a more viable ecclesial model that challenges current and historical notions of belonging to a community.

Keywords: Ecclesiology; Community; Identity: Margins; Fundamentation.

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Resumo

O que constitui uma boa parte da oposição à teoria crítica na teologia moderna baseia-se numa mudança defensiva contra a erosão da autoridade, na fidelidade à tentativa tautológica de justificar o que, em última análise, não pode ser justificado: por que pertenço aqui, a esta comunidade particular, e não acolá, a uma outra. Estando mais atentos à natureza das «ilusões necessárias» às quais a comunidade deve aderir, ao mesmo tempo que aprendemos a ouvir mais atentamente as vozes marginalizadas dentro de uma determinada comunidade, seremos capazes de ir além dos dualismos rígidos que normalmente caracterizam a política eclesial (por exemplo, conservador *versus* liberal), reduzindo a complexidade das nossas identidades. Ao adotar uma filosofia paulina de um eu dividido contra si mesmo, podemos localizar um modelo eclesial mais viável que desafie as noções atuais e históricas de pertença à comunidade.

Palavras-chave: Eclesiologia; Comunidade; Identidade; Margens; Fundamentação.

Introduction

The Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas has frequently repeated his ecclesiology as one in which the priority for the church is simply *to be the church*. This tautological claim is imperative, he asserts, so that the church might remain faithful to its narrative, to its virtuous living and to its communal identity.[1] To be clear, this is more or less a robust, but also entirely self-referential ecclesiology, one that might emphasize communitarian principles a bit too strongly, but which is also necessarily stated, at some level, for any communal identity to maintain itself.

The problem with such formulations, if taken to be the only guiding mandate for group identity, is what is to be done when the church, as it inherently always does, produces an element that is, as Rosemary

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[1]   See, among other places, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

Radford Ruether once put it, against itself?[2] From minority positions crying out to be heard to oppressed persons living in fear of pronouncing their so-called 'deviant' or 'heretical' identity to the community, what is the church to do with those living outside of its normative boundaries, whether in the form of other religious traditions or as those living unseen and unheard *within* the community?

For decades, contextual theologians have been abundantly outspoken on such issues, reframing the nature of ecclesiology to the point that many now understand the church to fail to be the church when it is not attentive to the voices of those living at its own margins. The more recent efforts of queer theologians have even gone so far on occasion as to question the very concept of normativity, rendering Christ's foundational gestures of grace as themselves antinomian, in the sense of subverting whatever normative identity we might wish to ascribe to 'Christian' being.[3] But, then again, the communitarian might inquire, what is to become of the actually existing, institutionalized form of the church today, the one that, despite non-denominational efforts to meet in school buildings or community centers, often does have a building to maintain, tithes to collect, leadership to coordinate and those who attend its service and gatherings as 'Christians' to be watched over?

Despite Kierkegaard's protest nearly two centuries ago against being a member of Christendom by default because it caused one to bear the false moniker of 'Christian', theologians are less poised than ever to give up this most fundamental of religious identifications. The rest of our world, however, seems conversely to be more content than ever to relinquish any sense of being religious at all. The contrast between the orthodox and the heretical, for example, does not really concern many people today, both those internal and external to the church.

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[2]   Rosemary Radford Ruether, *The Church against Itself: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Historical Existence for the Eschatological Community* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967).

[3]   Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

The claim that one belonging to a particular religious community and not another one because an absolute truth is to be found only in their own backyard is one that is generally founded upon a tautological claim: I believe this community to be my access to truth because it shows me how to access the truth of my world. It is the same claim that is often made about divine revelation: I believe these claims to be divine in origin because the scriptures tell me that they are divine. What constitutes the 'Barthian revolt' in modern theology, as Gary Dorrien has phrased the modern theological, defensive shift against the erosion of authority, is little more than a staunch allegiance to the tautological grounds of the Word of God as the justification for what ultimately cannot be justified: why I belong here, in this particular community, and not over there in another one.[4]

1. Failing to be absolute

Because no community can exist as absolute, with an unquestionable authority, there must always be a contradiction at the heart of its own self-understanding. No matter how orthodox one tries to be in maintaining consistency in one's own self-perception, there will always be an internal element that serves to undermine one's claims to totality. Rather than grasp this dynamic as being itself foundational to our sense of identity on the whole, we rather exist as if the gap between the two opposing tensions were insurmountable. From political divisions between conservative and liberal to psychological dichotomies between the pleasure principle and the death drive, we are repeatedly faced with competing forces whose relationship we have yet to fully understand. In ecclesial terms, this tension is not only found in those who would support reform versus those who would deny it, it is also the constitutive tension between the Kingdom of God and the all-too-earthly church.[5]

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[4] Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).
[5] See Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church,* trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011).

At the core of Judaism, no less, we find a propensity for unification and normative order in those positions that might be characterized as legalistic and those who appear to house a complete disdain for law, which are marked by a certain prophetic character. This tension is never resolved within Jewish scripture, for example, though it is apparent that there is no way to reconcile the views of each. One cannot uphold the Torah while also denying its force upon the community.

Taking note of this unresolvable duality between the legalistic and the prophetic within Jewish identity, especially as laid out in Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil*, eventually led me to formulate a more philosophical terminology for the same coupling: the canonical and the messianic.[6] Why pick such exalted and mysterious terms to replace a more biblical sounding pair? Mainly because these were the precise terms already being used by various European philosophers to describe the same, or similar, dynamics at play within that precise biblical duality, and these more recent, philosophical terms were incredibly helpful to define what was really going on in a contemporary religious context, though no theologian seemed to be saying so directly. This is, of course, how dissertations often get written, to explain how one thing that is going on over here is *very nearly the same thing* as what is going on over there.

The canonical impulse, to put things simply, is manifested any time an individual or a community tries to put a definitive stamp of approval on something as 'the way it is', the way in fact things appear to have to be. Canonical forms therefore often run the risk of being accepted as part of nature. Religious scriptures are often this very thing as well: a closed canon of texts that claims divine status precisely through their being 'closed', not open to including any further revelations from on high. An 'open' canon, in contrast, would be like the classics of western literature, where Plato and Shakespeare have dominated for centuries,

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6   See my Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), as well as, Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967).

though, these days, we are saying things like 'why not Toni Morrison and James Baldwin too?', and we are correct for suggesting such things because an open canon is always in need of updating to include those who had, for whatever reason, previously been left out.

Whenever an identity, a community's sense of what it is to itself, a definition, an argument or the like, is definitively nailed down, you enter into a canonical framework that attempts to give a permanence or absoluteness to something that, most likely, cannot be made so permanent, or seemingly eternal. You attempt to provide the sheen of historical transcendence to something that is, in reality, far more dependent upon contingent circumstances.

Whenever a canon becomes too 'fixed', as it were, attempting to appear as eternal and unchanging (or as utterly 'natural', as some would opine), we can rest assured that someone will rise up from some quarter and begin the revolutionary process of calling the entire canon into question. These de-constructive forces are referred to as messianic because they will come like the Messiah was expected to come and so correct what had been blown far off its intended course. The fantasy that such a messianic corrective would be once and for all is what often prevents us from accepting the fact that the church, like its doctrine, can and does change over time, as John Henry Newman once soundly demonstrated. It is also the force that prompted the philosopher Jacques Derrida to make abundantly clear that his version of messianic forces would never be historically embodied in an actual messianic figure, for then justice would be complete, or more likely, a corrupted and impossible totalitarian gesture.[7]

The messianic is the still small voice, the marginalized or repressed force, that gathers itself within every canonical form, crying out to be heard and wanting desperately for each particular canon to be adjusted so that they no longer push certain elements to the periphery but

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[7]   Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

acknowledge them, recognize them even, as central to their own, ever-expanding identities. It might be simplest to say that, every time an identity becomes too rigid or too inflexible, certain messianic voices will appear on the horizon declaring that an injustice has been done in preventing their appearance. For this reason, violence becomes a major index of measuring just how fixed certain canonical norms are: are we willing to repress those who appear as different, divergent or even opposed to the governing norms of a society, or are we willing to embrace their criticisms of the normative order, adapt and change our ways so that we might evolve and grow into something new?

It should come as no surprise that those communities who feel threatened or resentful of having lost something are those most willing to enact violent measures in order to shore up a uniform identity for themselves and for many unwilling others. From fascist political regimes to religious fundamentalists, we have seen such tactics repeatedly on display throughout modern history. When we see Black Lives Matter protestors today, or anyone who attempts to speak on behalf of a community that has felt severely restrictive forces belaboring them in one form or another, we must be attentive to these larger processes that refuse to go away once and for all. Making the claim that a historically contingent Messiah has eradicated all need for this dynamic to be acknowledged and maintained is a recipe for politically totalitarian forms—something with which the church is sadly all-too-familiar. We are, all of us, caught somewhere in-between a fixed sense of ourselves and those isolated, repressed, traumatized or marginalized voices within us that are trying to poke their heads into the light of day.

2. The complexity of heresy

It is somewhat of a truism to suggest that the main difference between the orthodox believer and their counterpart, the heretic, at least in historical terms, lies in who was able to successfully grasp power at a given time in history—that is, who was able to decide upon what was to be considered as 'orthodox' in the first place. History, as we well know,

is quite often written by the victors, those in positions of both power and privilege who are able to dictate the 'story' of a nation, a religion, a people or an event in ways that conform with their general worldview. This has been the case within a number of contexts, from communist countries to nations wishing to conceal past genocides. Indeed, as R.I. Moore has recently demonstrated in his survey of this division in his book *The War on Heresy*, most often throughout the centuries, people or groups were labeled as 'heretical' not because they simply deviated from a standard teaching or belief, but because a particular political and cultural authority had to be asserted and extended, and they were the people who stood in its way.[8]

It is true, of course, that many persons silenced as such by the 'official' narrative of history were often the oppressed group, and so, for that very reason, their stories often contained a good deal of truth about what was actually going on in matters of fact (e.g., slave narratives on oppression or Native American mistreatment). This is one of the reasons, moreover, that Howard Zinn's book *A People's History of the United States* has been so popular over the years, as he establishes the necessity for an 'alternate' account of US history in order to demonstrate how the version many of us received in school was not the only, or even best, version of events.[9] This is also the power we feel latent behind Clint Eastwood's film *Letters from Iwo Jima*, which dares to deliver to an American audience the Second World War in the Pacific from a Japanese perspective.

I mention such stories in order to make a point that needs to be made and then repeated: we often discuss things in easily comprehensible terms so that we can readily make sense of them, even when the reality we live in is far more complex and far more deserving of further nuance and inquiry. We simplify in order to represent when the events or people represented are actually impossible to represent in any accurate way. The only accurate representation we can give of something,

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[8]   Robert Ian Moore, *The War on Heresy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012).
[9]   Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 2015).

however, is to demonstrate our failure to project a perfect representation, not to actually create a truly, authentically 'accurate' portrait, as philosophers have noted.[10] In making our representations, however, we often also miss the fact that our imposed categories and definitions are capable of misrepresentation as well.

There are many times when we talk about faith or theology in broad metaphysical terms, for example, when we are really talking about politics, and the boundaries and borders we find useful and authoritative in *this* world. We do not like to imagine someone on the other side of the fence in this world ending up in the same place we are in an imagined afterlife, and so we divide people up into believers and nonbelievers, orthodox and heretic, the saved and the damned, as only a few such examples among the many that frequently shade our pictures of religious belief. The 'us' and 'them' mentality that defines political interaction therefore becomes easily applicable to religious teachings when we strive to see these borders extended into the afterlife.

It is a very sad commentary on our failure to think beyond our allegedly metaphysical context when we realize, as some have suggested, that there is a direct correlation between cultural perceptions of the 'necessary' punishments for sin and our inability to actually rehabilitate criminals within a given society. The heaven/hell dichotomy, one might say, is really about the pleasure one takes in maintaining an absolute justification, so as to have a 'clean conscience', for dealing out severe punishments, such as solitary confinement, cruel and torturous prison conditions and capital punishment. As Phil Zukerman has noted, this is why religious countries typically avoid talk about rehabilitation in favor of a pseudo-religious legitimation for punishing criminals as their God presumably would.[11]

Politics, like those that surround incarceration tactics in mainly religious countries, revels in simplistic representations that appear as

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[10]   Both Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben have repeatedly made this point.
[11]   Phil Zuckerman, *What It Means to Be Moral: Why Religion Is Not Necessary for Living an Ethical Life* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2020).

fundamental beliefs and that likewise suggest a sort of eternality to them, but are actually supposed to address the practical material under our very noses. Political parties talk in terms of absolute values when we are really in need of far more mundane decisions to be made in order to pass legislation designed to have practical outcomes. Shorn of the absoluteness of metaphysical foundations for our positions, we might actually be more open to alternative formulations that, in reality, work much better, more humanely and more reasonably.

I would only suggest that in matters of faith, historically speaking at least, we have also often formulated abstractions concerning the nature of the eternal (e.g., God as 'all-powerful', 'all-knowing', etc.), and have likewise overlooked the mundane in search of the absolute. The same questions we might put to politicians in this regard might also be put to people of faith: why must God be seen this way? To protect God's power? Or the power that humans often claim to have in relation to such a mighty deity?

Whether such abstract thoughts on the divine are the actual focus that religion should take is the main question, and one that contains significant implications for why a person is a member of a religious community at all. For, as many atheist positions have recently made clear, there is no way to justify one's belonging to a particular community over any other community, unless one feels that a given community somehow maintains an absolute claim upon oneself that another community cannot replicate; some certain and undeniable truth that undergirds one's fidelity to that community and to no other.

3. The violence of exclusion

Social order, a solid sense of one's self and one's identity, the functioning of memory, rationality and logic, the boundaries of any community—these are all built upon canonical acts of exclusion, though we rarely think of them that way. If we don't listen to the excluded others among us, living in nearly every corner of every society on this planet, we end up sacralizing, naturalizing and fetishizing the structures and

normative identities that shape our identities, that guide us and help us to communicate with each other, *but do not actually define us in any exhaustive sense*. We are capable of transcending any definition placed upon us by ourselves or by others, though we are also deeply indebted to the definitions of ourselves that we create. Human being, as many philosophers have noticed, has generally been defined as the only creature capable of recognizing itself *as* a human being.[12] Though this may turn out someday to not actually be true—who knows if dolphins or elephants can't do the same thing, albeit differently than we do—we do frequently insist on subordinating ourselves to the labels and categories that we construct.

This task we embrace of defining our uniqueness amongst the rest of the animal kingdom is really a reflection of the same methods we employ when entering into community with fellow humans. To be a part of a community means to know one's stories as separate from other stories, and thus to have boundaries and borders of some kind. To have an operational memory, we must forget things or be cursed to remember everything and so be paralyzed by the weight of a comprehensive history. To have any sense of order at all, one must eliminate, or at least marginalize, anything that seems 'chaotic' to the functioning of the system, even if, a while later, one is able to incorporate some of those so-called 'chaotic' elements into the normative dimensions of a given order. Though we would so often like to think that we can create a world free from all acts of exclusion, this is a utopian dream that would actually turn into a nightmare should it be realized.

For the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, to have a 'happy memory' means that one *must* forget things, though one must also be able to 'happily' recall whatever one has forgotten and so left in the past.[13] This means that any repressed, violent or traumatic memories must be addressed, perhaps

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[12]   This claim is studied in depth in Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
[13]   Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

even faced for the first time, so that an individual can work toward the cultivation of a happy memory and not maintain one that is stressed or otherwise unnaturally altered. Memory, just like the histories that permeate every culture, is an organic process that is neither perfect nor unnecessary. Though we would like to have photographic memories that could retain the finest detail of whatever it is we seek to recall, the truth is that such a memory, if lasting and fixed forever, would be a source of torment and the reason we would become incredibly inflexible, perhaps even unforgiving.

René Girard, one of the most intriguing of writers concerning the nature of exclusion, mythology and cultural memory, has cautioned us against sacralizing a particular narrative of exclusion because the odds are high that doing so means that we are concealing a violence that goes unnamed at the heart of our social relations. He defines mythology, in fact, as the act of covering up violent acts of exclusion, and he looks to the ways that scriptures from around the world work to uncover violence and denounce it.[14] This is not to suggest that we can simply do away with all forms of violence once and for all. Rather, Girard wanted humanity to become more aware of how violence permeates nearly every facet of our lives and that we could do better at lessening its hold over us.

4. Reassessing privilege

One of the greatest temptations that humanity has undergone in facing this particular dualistic tension between canonical norms and their messianic undoing is that we have often labelled and resisted the latter force as being nothing but a foreign element within an otherwise holy alliance of likeminded souls. So many heretics, deviants, so-called perverts and other differently-minded individuals or groups have been targeted as divergences that are simply too great for the system—any cohesive and coherent system really—to bear. Because there is a tendency in the messianic to call into question the entire canonical form, such 'weak' forces,

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[14] René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

as they are sometimes called, are often taken to be opposed to canonical forms altogether.[15] To label these forces as antinomian, or opposed to *all* law, as if they were calling for a nihilistic end to all recognized forms of representation (like language itself, for example) is to miss the point that every messianic force arises from *within* the canonical measure, as a part of it that cannot simply be effaced once and for all.

When Martin Luther, for instance, ushered in a new era of Christianity in Europe during the Reformation, he was seen by the Catholic hierarchy as an antinomian stalwart who refused every normative identity that the Church had been working tirelessly to uphold, from monarchy to priestly celibacy. Even his own followers mistook his challenge to the church's sense of order as being thoroughly antinomian, a charge that Luther himself had to refute in a series of arguments aimed at his own community.[16]

As in the modern period, where we see those who fear any challenge to the ruling order as a nihilistic assault on 'real' values and traditions that might lead to the inevitable decline of any sense of identity altogether, there is no way to actually live out an antinomian existence. As any student of psychology will tell you, we all need a solid sense of self in order to function at all in this world, even if our sense of self is an illusion that we use to prop up an insecure ego, leaving us in need of a major realignment to our sense of who we are to ourselves. We likewise need language to be able to communicate effectively with one another, even if the language we rely on needs to be updated so as to be less offensive to certain persons or groups.

I think here too of those political theorists today who call for more political representation, even voting rights through human representatives, for the natural world, including all animal and insect species, as

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[15] See the dialogue between René Girard and Gianni Vattimo as published by Pierpaolo Antonello, ed., *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[16] Martin Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations,* trans. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis, MN, Lutheran Press, 2008).

well as the water, air and earth.[17] Though the obvious first reaction of many might be to dismiss such possibilities as 'the end' of politics as we know it, usually based on the idea of human-only representation in our legislative bodies, the truth is that politics 'as we know it' would survive in some altered form should we adapt enough to allow those creatures we are endangering and rapidly obliviating to have some much needed political representation and its accompanying power.

What all of this means is basically that every time I hear an individual or some group of individuals crying out about how much injustice is being done to them because they have been ignored or pushed to the fringes of society, I listen because they might be the voice of the Messiah crying out for justice in the wilderness, so to speak, letting us all know that something is amiss and in need of correction. We need to start measuring the effectiveness of canonical measures, and the religions that often form and protect them by sacralizing what is otherwise contingent, by the violence they do to their marginalized elements rather than by their own internal claims to be divinely inspired. When someone objects to this suggestion by saying that there can be no objective, neutral standpoint from which to judge whether or not a particular canon is or is not violent, then I will continue to reassert the only criteria by which we *may* in fact judge them: how closely does one listen to *its own* internal, marginalized voices? If they do well at this, then I suspect the violence is less; if they do poorly, then we might consider them more willing to engage in violent actions aimed at maintaining systemic oppression.

And what about those who like the ruling order because they receive privileges and benefits from it? Do we simply let them wither up and die so that a new system of privileges might bestow its favor upon a new class of persons? Isn't someone always going to dominate over someone else? Why should anyone be willing to part with the benefits that have been given to them anyway?

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17   See, among others, the call for a 'parliament of things' in Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

If pressed for it, this is the fear many privileged persons harbor, whether they say it out loud or not. Seriously examining how these questions should be addressed, or even broached, within an ecclesial context is a very difficult thing for some to do. But this is also an easy way to ascertain the willingness of a given religious community to self-reflexively evaluate its propensity to silence internal dissent, often through various forms of intimidation and violence.

5. Necessary illusions

What I have begun to notice as I continue to read through so many mountains of books, both philosophical and theological, is that the majority of authors I study seem intent not on understanding the nature and function of such dualistic tensions themselves—and therefore learning to see beyond one's myopic and often ideological worldview—but on aligning a particular configuration of concepts on one side of the dualism only. Clearly this is done to shore up a specific view of one's own world, and it is often conducted with deep and lasting political, economic, communal, cultural and religious consequences.

When a theologian argues for a wholly transcendent deity who exists in immaterial form, is entirely autonomous and sovereign in its power, who dictates by necessity a particular predestined plan for everything that exists, who places clear borders and boundaries on all given identities, who defends a particular, moralistic vision of nature (or natural law) and who defends the traditions and values of a community because the status quo has so much worth preserving, I generally know that I am listening to a privileged individual, usually a man. The slightly distant and deistic vision of God that they champion is often little more than a mirroring of the detached father figure so many others lament as a presence lost to their lives.

When a theologian, on the contrary, argues for an immanent model of God who exists in the materiality and bodies of all that has been created, dwells as an interdependent being who shares with the suffering of others, who recognizes the contingency of existence, welcomes porous

boundaries and hybrid identities who seem to defy the laws of nature, but actually follow an evolution of natural processes, who does not proscribe moral norms but looks to the specific standpoint from which a person speaks and who respects the plurality of so many different communities that abound in our world, I generally know that I am hearing the voice of someone less privileged, probably a woman or a minority figure, someone more open to the differences that surround them and less inclined to promote a homogenous sense of sameness that governs the former's outlook on life. The pantheistic model of God they often work with is in direct tension with any transcendent-deistic depiction of divine being and maternal imagery begins to abound in their descriptions of divine-human interaction.

These sketches are obviously reductive regarding the fuller visions given by so many diverse voices out there, and yet a kernel of truth remains in their respective emphases. To be fair, both energies are needed at times to sustain the communities and identities that exist in so many varied forms on this planet: we need those who seek to preserve what is good and we need those to point out what we have overlooked that might be hurting someone typically unseen and unheard.

Yet it is comical, despite also being entirely tragic, how infrequently we stop to take note of the necessity for both voices to be heard. We often get caught up listening only to the extremists on either side, the concepts and worlds they create in order to then defend and so we do not spend enough time noting the core dynamics that motivate both sides. Respect for the processes of preservation and maintenance of a community's values is only matched by an equal respect for those voices crying out for more justice from among the marginalized elements within a given community. Every community will always have such elements, and so it is well beyond time that we learned how to deal more practically with their existence and integration into whatever society we are talking about at a given point in history, on whatever surface of this globe.

Because we have labored for far too long with only one side dominating the game—the masculine, sovereign, transcendent, autonomous

figure of power making absolute claims about divine and human existences—it is no surprise that many are loathe to relinquish the models of privilege and power that have constructed so many institutions and societal structures over the centuries. But the days of such supremacies are fading quickly, and for the better.

Finding a balance between these dualistic impasses is that much more difficult because looking for 'very fine people on both sides' can often be a rallying cry for tolerating some extreme members on one-side and downplaying the cries of injustice on the other, as Donald Trump made abundantly clear in his remarks following the tragedy that took place at a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.

The impasses we often see, and exacerbate, between these two sides are not easy to discern in their core form. We often get caught up speaking in two different discourse registers, and so basically speaking two different languages to each other while missing the point of why certain positions that are taken up seem not only defensible but the only realistic option to those who hold them. We might take, for example, the tension between evolution and divine creation that continues to haunt theological debate in certain quarters, gets ignored in other settings altogether, but is generally misunderstood entirely.

I recall some years ago being shown a tattoo on a gentleman's arm that contained a biblical reference to God creating the world, what was for this particular person 'my little 'F' you to Darwin', as he so eloquently described it to me. The reason for such an objection to evolution was apparent in this individual's essential theological point of view. God, to be God, must be sovereign and autonomous, and therefore at the head of the family as much as the community. To be autonomous, for God, as for a nation-state, as for a man, means to have no one telling them what to do, as this would compromise one's ability to function independently and therefore to be in complete control of themselves and their world. Theologically, such efforts result in the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, or 'from nothing', a position that isn't actually in the Protestant Bible he reads, but which easily follows from subsequent

philosophical speculation on the sovereignty and autonomy of divine being.

If something else precedes you, as with one's parents who give birth to you, then you are dependent upon them. If something came before God, then God would be dependent on that something else. The only thing that can come before our world and its creation, then, must be God—otherwise God would be dependent on something else and we would have to then worship that something else as the even higher 'higher power'. Defending God's ability to create the world is an act intended to defend God's sovereignty, which is based on God's autonomy and independence.

What really transpires in such defenses, however, is a robust projection of the community's right to be itself autonomous. In truth, there is no possible justification for a community to exist instead of some other community. The borders and boundaries, symbols, myths and identities that make up the community are really no better, nor any worse, than any other community and we all vaguely know this to be the case. There is simply no legitimation of a particular community other than 'this is my community and I love it because I belong here'. And because our ability to defend our community is no stronger than our ability to defend our loyalty to a specific sports team, we rely upon preposterous defenses—what I'm going to call 'necessary illusions'—in order to feel settled and 'at home' in the place in which we choose to reside.

The kicker here is that these necessary illusions are in point of fact both illusions, because totally fabricated, *but also totally necessary*, because that's how our communal identity and allegiance works. We need to maintain an idealistic perception of where we feel most like we belong because that's part of being human. It's how falling in love works too, when we romanticize our beloved as the perfect human being even though they have faults aplenty. When we fall in love, however, it is as if nothing preceded our love, as if nothing could take precedence over this specific love in our lives, as if destiny itself brought us together, which is a myth, or a lie that we tell ourselves, and yet this is precisely what

we have to do in order to feel at home in the love that is being fostered between persons. As crazy as it sounds, I can know logically that there many other people out there whom I could've also fallen in love with, but once I find 'the one', I will retroactively view my relationship to them as if it were fated to happen in just the way it did.

On the other side of things, you have those wonderfully scientif-ic-minded individuals who simply look at the creationists and think they are staring straight at the most ignorant people they have ever seen. How in the world could these overly simplistic dupes ignore the facts of evolutionary theory and espouse such nonsense as that the world was created by a divine being in the sky, in complete defiance of biological, geological and anthropological evidence that our world just kind of contingently happened the way it happened, no master plan required?

The obvious and outstanding merit of this search for scientific fact is only matched by the often accompanying and typically stunning lack of understanding as to what really motivates a creationist's frustration with Darwin's suggestions about the origins of humanity. To respond to a creationist's rebuttals and 'evidence' with more scientific claims, as rock-solid and wonderfully accurate as they generally are, is to miss the entire point of the creationist's position. Presenting the fullness of evolutionary theory as a response to creationist claims is a woefully inadequate effort that does not actually take into account what is at stake in the conversation, despite the sheer scientific awesomeness that would flow from such a presentation (and which I would personally love to witness and marvel at the genius of to no end, insofar as I truly love scientific insights and discoveries).

6. Belonging to a community

Community, whether national, cultural, linguistic, family-oriented, political, religious, sports-based or, as it comes in basically any shape or size, is perhaps the best and most familiar way that we achieve a sense of identity. We exist in relation to other people and it is mostly in the ways in which others address us, teach us and guide us that we come to know

something of who we are. The moral life we live, with the virtues and values that we hold dear, derive from our placement within a collective grouping. Community is where we learn how to behave, essentially, how to live, and there is no substitute for the warm embrace that the sense of belonging can bring.

When you find yourself immersed in a foreign context, not quite 'at home' in the world, it usually has to do with the fact that you have entered into an uncomfortable place of unfamiliarity with the community around you. There is an awkwardness that accompanies having to locate yourself among people you are less familiar with and who might, by their very presence, challenge the way in which you orient yourself in the world. To be among those who practice different customs, speak a different language, hold different traditions and beliefs or who simply look very different than you do, is to be forced *to see oneself as the foreign element*, as that which does not quite fit in. Unless one has a strong sense of self that can weather such storms, one can be more inclined to flee such scenes rather than face, or even realign, their identity to reflect the community around them. But, of course, this is what every community essential asks you to do when you enter into it: to conform to its way of being or to go to another community and see if they accept you as you might, in turn, accept them. Unless there are obvious markers such as the violence a community tolerates that should not be tolerated, there's usually no solid way to legitimate your belonging to one community over any other one.

Of course, it can also be the case that you feel like you don't fit in even with your home community. The problem with having a strong communal identity, in fact, is that there often arises a difficulty when such a strong sense of self has to confront those who are within the same community but who don't hold or adhere to that same sense of self. From 'fair weather fans' of a sports team to 'real Americans' to 'cafeteria Catholics', so many defenders of a strong communal identity have come up with many ways to label and dismiss the 'heretics' within their bubble. The 'black sheep' of many families are all-too-well acquainted with

the micro-aggressions that communal identities can manifest when they fear their values are being ignored, disrespected or dismissed altogether.

It's nice to think that a person who disagrees with a particular community's way of being in the world—with the values it holds, its history, its traditions or its habits—can just simply pick up and join a new one, like all those liberals who threaten to move to Canada when the wrong candidate in the United States wins a national election. And, certainly, there is a truth to this fantasy: you can leave a community and join up with another, becoming their adopted child. But there will be costs, of course, and losses to bear. It is also true that we are often much more invested in our communities than we realize, so that when we attempt to leave, we find it so much more difficult to actually leave than we had ever expected.

A person can be very tempted to align themselves with a strong sense of communal identity because it allows them to feel like they belong, to know exactly who they are and to abandon those nagging doubts about all the ways in which they might not fit in as well as they would like to. A community can also channel our resentments and our anger, our grievances and our joys. A collective sense of well-being can place the guardrails firmly in place and prevent violence from spiraling out of control in many cases too.

It is clear that you can seek strong communities to be a part of and reinforce your sense of self blindly, with no regard for minorities within your own community, and this can lead to fascist political forms in the extreme. But it can also be awesome to just feel part of the community. Every community throughout history has its unhappy minorities who feel (and are) unrecognized and unheard to a greater or lesser degree. This is the uncomfortable reality of community life.

It can be terribly difficult, in fact, to face the reality that every community will displace, marginalize or downplay certain voices. A healthy, functional community is one that is open to hearing its minority voices, whereas an unhealthy, repressive one closes itself off from such marginalized figures. But every community has marginal elements, and so it can

be very easy for someone to get swept up in the feeling of belonging and miss out on the ways that a particular minority of persons isn't heard as clearly as they should be. Too many liberals miss this very point, which angers so many people who are trying to conserve their community's traditions and values.

I often wonder, though, if there is another way to belong to a community that might defy this dualistic impasse between the left and the right. And this 'third way' is what I find when I look to Paul's writings on communal identity, something I can easily imagine being translated into a secular framework.

7. Rethinking identity in Pauline terms

Pauline philosophy dictates that you need neither strongly identify with your communal identity nor oppose or abandon it. It is not a problem, of course, to love your community and its roots. Paul was himself quite capable of taking pride in his own Jewish heritage. But, as his life choices dictated, he also had little problem with subverting the typical identity formations associated with a given community, though without leaving them behind altogether either. He introduced a strange logic that we are still trying to get our heads around, one that may appear to many to be some form of relativism, but which allowed him to demonstrate a particular communal identity while also being willing to hold it lightly in his hands.

Paul's claim was that his newfound freedom in Christ meant that he could subvert the strong claims of communal identity while at the same time outwardly appearing to adhere to them. He contended that he could be a Jew with other Jews and a Gentile with other Gentiles, though, to be clear, this logic would've entailed breaking a number of very important social rules and taboos associated with each group (e.g. think of his eating non-kosher foods, but then keeping a kosher diet when with the Jews, like passing for a vegetarian with the vegetarians, but then eating meat when you aren't with them, which might incur the ire of the vegetarians at some point).

Shouldn't one criticize Paul precisely because he seems to not take the identity of the community seriously? Indeed, what exactly was the community supposed to be if being a follower of Christ essentially meant being able to move so deftly between different, already existing communities? Could such a follower of Christ comparably today act like a Christian when with Christians, a Muslim when with Muslims and an atheist when with atheists?

What Paul basically did was to locate a weakness within the strong identity that is actually a new type of strength, as it allowed him to move between communities and share their values when with them. He was able to do this because he recognized that one's spirit and one's flesh don't fully coincide. A gap remains between them that makes possible the oscillations we recognize as those representations we give of ourselves and which are prone to numerous changes throughout our lifetime. Admitting that they don't entirely coincide is what allows for the recognition that our identity can be undone. Trying to say that one's flesh and spirit do coincide, fully, without remainder, is actually something closer to becoming a totalizing or totalitarian gesture. It is only in something like a fascist context that one would claim to fully identify with the community's representations of itself.

Likewise, as with flesh and spirit, grace and law don't fully coincide either, and so we return to this fundamental theological problem again and again: the prophetic versus the legalistic, freedom versus determination, contingency versus necessity, peace versus violence, and so on. Each of these tensions is really one between language (as law) and experience (as grace). We are bound by forces that constrain us, but which also give us the power to communicate with one another, to be in community with each other. We will always transcend language, experiencing things that we just can't put into words, and yet we will always return to language because we need to use it to establish any semblance of order and mutual understanding.[18]

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[18]   This commentary on Pauline thought is indebted to the one offered by Giorgio Agamben, *The Time*

When we cease simply trying to adhere to one side in a dualistic impasse, we might be able to note that learning to respond to both sides as a necessary ebb and flow of human life means that it will always appear as if there is an excessive quality to whatever existence we are living. Because we must always find a way to take up both claims at the same time, though each side seeks to attend to the representations and discourses that comprise only one, partial perspective on reality. Hence, our world always appears—in whatever reductive form we view it—as if there were more to reality than we can see, as if reality itself were 'not all' there was to reality.[19]

It is easy to see why those communities that seek to ground what is ultimately without a ground end up making abstract and absolute metaphysical claims about their own foundations. This is the domain of the religious and it is the main way that we have historically come to imagine our sense of belonging to a particular religious community.

The riches of our imaginations are, however, left to wander and roam throughout the gaps that exist between our experiences and the limits of representation that we constantly encounter, whether in language, art, music, our politically creative solutions, and so forth. Though we might be tempted to locate divine being within the infinite play that takes place between our finite representations, it is really our inability to suture the split between the spirit and the flesh, the rich interplay of metaphor not metaphysics, that constantly re-determines our perceptions of reality.

From time to time, we grow impatient and frustrated with the limitations that language and community impose upon us, and so we seek out totalitarian or utopian solutions that strive to completely eradicate the disjunction, only to realize that these fantasies are ultimately unsustainable or even horrifically violent. Learning to see the reality of the

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that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[19]   There is an obvious affinity here with the ontology offered routinely by Slavoj Žižek, such as in his *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013).

dualistic impasses themselves means learning to see the reality of our social formations themselves anew.

Conclusions

So when we want to discern more clearly what a proper ecclesiology is or could be, what theory of community seems best to legitimate what ultimately can never be legitimated, we must begin to ask more fundamental questions about why we are seeking to develop such theories in the first place, what power and privileges we are seeking to maintain.

Some years ago, I stumbled across a fascinating thesis on the nature of fetishism in the modern period: that our theories about the fetish, which are abundant and often in contradiction with one another, are really a proxy conversation about our fetish for theory.[20] In the absence of one universal and absolute position on the nature of our material embodiment, such as provided mainly by premodern religious views, we moderns create and cling to multiple competing theories on the immanent transcendence of materiality itself in order to address what really cannot be addressed: the uncertainty and uncomfortability of our having the wholly immanent bodies that we nonetheless constantly long to transcend.

As Eric Santner has recently shown, we take great pleasure in our ability to theorize because this is where we locate something of the absoluteness that religion once demanded from itself, but which has mainly vacated our collective world.[21] It is no wonder that ecclesiology is a distinctively modern project for this is the time period in which the crisis of authority has taken place, and in which we feel an increasing desperation to defend the indefensible. If premodern theologies were more concerned about finding enjoyable theories regarding God's existence in order to legitimate miserable human existences, it makes sense that

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[20]   Hartmut Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity*, trans. Anna Galt (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).

[21]   Eric L. Santner, *Untying Things Together: Philosophy, Literature, and a Life in Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

modern theological inquiries, facing an onslaught of plurality, multiple-belongers and hybrid identities, would focus on what makes belonging to this community more distinct than belonging to any other.

Perhaps it will eventually be shown to be the case that defending a utopian vision of the Kingdom of God in tension with the political realities of the Church will be a suitable, even beneficial model for an ecclesial community to thrive. In the face of utopian thought, which is necessary to imagine for any real change to take place in our world, it will also, no doubt, be a laboratory for new political forms of association and representation that we have yet to conceive. Even bolder still, perhaps we simply need to recognize that we are all of us—those within the church and those outside of it—caught within the same unending dynamics and needing to admit as much in order to move forward together.

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