INTRODUCTION

Be still, my heart, these great trees are prayers.
Rabindranath Tagore

A study of the church done from a staunch ecclesiological standpoint is akin to a self-dissectional forensic investigation. This requires special inquest skills, for the clues that point to a dysfunction might be hidden in the body under examination. As the coroner's[1] investigations aid in the solving of the mystery of what plagues the body under examination, my inquiry will address the ecclesiological disputes that have assailed the church and are symptoms of its infirmities. It is a difficult task to dissect one's own flesh, as it reveals the entrails where diseases abide. The self-assured among coroners will insist that the procedure is a minor biopsy that reveals no malignity; others, however, will find evidence of terminal necrosis. Yet because the specimen on the autopsy table is not a cadaver but a body throbbing with life, whose vigor is precisely not being subjected to examination, the procedure misses the point: the living body. In other words, a discourse about the church, even such as this, is not a church event. Representing the church by ecclesiological discourse congeals in a given figure the fluidity of presence.

What has been penned in the leaves of this book, while demonstrating the inevitable ecclesiological predicament of representation, is also, and more importantly, an earnest search to detect, even if by *via negativa*, signs of the

1. The word *coroner* has its origin in England and comes from "keep the pleas of the Crown," or in Latin *custos placitorum coronas*, and implies a role where the coroner's inquisition and verdict play an important part in the carrying out of justice.

living church in the liminal and adjacent spaces where the church finds itself alive. Church is an event that takes place. This is certainly a counterintuitive assertion, for two reasons. First, it is so because what takes place leaves registered the evidence of its permanence; thus it is not an event that then fades into a background from which it will not be retrieved. Another analogy may be helpful. In the study of micro-atomic particles, the physicist Werner Heisenberg proposed what is called the uncertainty principle. According to this principle, in the observation of the behavior of these particles, the physicist can establish either the position in which a particle is detected or the momentum or velocity with which it is traveling, but never the two–position and momentum–simultaneously; the more precisely one is defined, the less certain the other is. A similar uncertainty principle is at work in the study of the church. We can either locate the church spatially (or represent this location) or detect its motions and trace the events by which it is defined, but the two–representable location and event–cannot be determined simultaneously even as both are ecclesial experiences inscribed in the life of the church. This is so because the spaces in which the church takes place are liminal spaces, defined only by the evanescent transit they register in connecting other and more stable spaces.

Second, the assertion that the church event takes place in liminal spaces is also strange because liminal spaces are spaces where danger lurks. Nonetheless, it is on this dangerous playground that freedom germinates and the church has its roots; and there and there alone, precisely in the adjacency of danger, it is at ease. John of Patmos vividly depicts this space: "And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God" (Rev. 15:2). But what requires a thorough examination are the mechanisms through which, in search for more solid ground, the church circumvents the spaces of adjacency and creates one or more representations of itself that are stable or at least aim at being stable. Representation works; it offers a stable image of unstable appearances. But in them the church discovers itself also in captivity.

This captivity is twofold, confining all conversation about church either to its inner institutional formation or to its integration into the politico-cultural order of the day, resulting in either an unapologetic exclusivism or an inclusivism that blurs distinctiveness. The various denominations–be it Roman Catholicism with its robust magisterium; Eastern Orthodoxy with its elaborate liturgy, the centrality of its episcopacy, and stout theological backing from the early Greek fathers; Pentecostalism with its charismatic spontaneity and its financial and organizational strength; or mainline Protestantism with its congregationalism, confessionalist verve, and ecumenical endeavors–all articulate their teachings about the church and its ministry based on what they regard as the unassailable

core of their tradition. These churches either ground these teachings in their own resources, thus being their own public, or else draw them from the surrounding public arena in which they find themselves immersed.

Historically, so far, we have remained true to our mammalian trait of territoriality,[2] since, with few exceptions, almost all of church-talk has been a territorial dispute shifting from fighting over borders to signing truce treaties. This territorialization of the ecclesiological discourse is mitigated only by eschatological provisos, which are regularly claimed as a promise yet to be fulfilled, its verification remitted to the "second coming," an unending temporal deferred eschatology, which becomes the inaccessible verification of the territorial truth.[3] The creedal definition of the church as being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic is commonly dispatched to such an unattainable eschatological horizon. Yet such eschatological deferment functions only as a perfunctory gesture to account for deficits in the conceptual effort to ground the church's identity. The combination of territorialization with eschatological deferment has been the foundation and the relentless aim of apologetic ecclesiology. The eschatological proviso works as a veil for the defense of the territorial church. What we find is an inverse relation between the two: if the function of the church is to proclaim the kingdom until it comes, its coming means that the territorial church will be no more. This relation leads to the paradoxical affirmation that while the church "proclaims" the kingdom, it needs to claim its own institutional reality, protecting itself from this very coming.[4] If an institution is created to address and solve a problem, self-interest and base instinct of self-preservation dictate that its first function is to ensure that the problem is not solved.

H. Richard Niebuhr, in *Social Sources of Denominationalism*, denounced with prophetic incisiveness the situation in which the churches found themselves in his time, a situation that does not seem to have changed in any substantial way:

> Denominationalism in the Christian church is such an unacknowledged hypocrisy. . . . It represents the accommodation of Christianity to the caste-system of human society. . . . The division of the churches closely

---

2. Territoriality is a characteristic feature of mammals, the order to which human beings belong, where one's space or territory is guarded at all costs.

3. Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008), describes this deferment as the "logic of the One" that works within this eschatological horizon and asks rhetorically, "What will happen to the horizon of Christian thought if the One–even as an eschatological hope that disciplines the many in the now–is not one?" (89).

4. A parallel criticism that draws on the theologies of Karl Barth and Martin Luther can be found in Matthew Myers Bolton, *God against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology through Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

> follows the division of men into the castes of national, racial, and economic groups. It draws the color line in the church of God; . . . it seats the rich and poor apart at the table of the Lord, where the fortunate may enjoy the bounty they have provided while the other feed upon the crusts their poverty affords.[5]

Niebuhr decries the contradiction between the territorial principle of denominationalism and the values of the kingdom, even as the church under this condition "often regards itself as a Christian achievement and glorifies its martyrs as bearers of the Cross."[6]

Territories are demarcated by borders, institutions by the limits of their mandate and their resources, and societies by their margins, as bodies have their limits defined by their skin. These limits, margins, or borders are places delimited by their proximity to other places with which they are also bound by vicinity. While the church proclaims a kingdom that is not of this world, it is this border that appears as its antithesis, as a possible port of entry to this other reality. And it does not matter whether the kingdom comes from outside, invading the protective skin, or whether the church is thought to be the very kingdom in a state of germination. The result is the same: the incoming or the blossoming of the kingdom spells doom to the church frontier. It will bring the limit to an end and the church will be no more. And this end is at the same time the church's goal (*telos*) and its consummation (*eschaton*).

Territorial principles are deduced from the unsettling etymology of the word *territory*. It derives both from *earth* (*terra*) and from *terrere* (to frighten).[7] If in one sense it defines the space of belonging, it also simultaneously indicates that which frightens off the one who does not belong or is excluded. The book of Acts is regarded as the first book on the history of the Christian church. However, the word *church* (*ekklēsia*) appears only in chapter 5, where the story is told of two new members of the church, Ananias and Sapphira, who hid part of their resources to avoid sharing it with the whole congregation. By divine intervention they were struck dead. The word *church* is first registered in this verse that closes the pericope: "And great fear (*fobos megas*) seized the whole church (*holēn tēn ekklēsian*) and all who heard of these things" (Acts 5:11). The church is presented here as a threshold that offers an entrance to a community that is a reassuring home on unstable ground but is also a fatal exit for those who betray the solidarity it demands.

---

5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), 6. In his description of denominationalism, Niebuhr includes what today would be regarded as nondenominational churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church.
6. Ibid.
7. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 99–100.

Belonging and fear are the opposing poles that define the borders, limits, and margins of a territory; they define what is proper and what is alien. Those who inhabit margins, the marginalized, belong to them–insofar as they do not have another option–and also stand frightened on this infirm ground. Church happens here, and in the midst of danger there is an overwhelming experience of ease. Yet the shaky ground and the impossibility of holding to an assurance of permanence and security propel us to safer ground. This ground that lies in the vicinity of the church event and offers to it a tempting stability is attained by a process unfolded in two steps. First, a genealogy needs to be established that provides a sense of permanence and an identity. In construing this identity, one needs to define a given genealogy, a lineage, an ancestry that tells whether one belongs there or not. Second, these genealogies then need to be re-presented, transposed to the present since they belong to an elected past. An image that conveys this twofold process of according a sense of belonging is the identity card. One establishes one's identity by retelling stories, identifying sources, and evoking symbols and metaphors that will serve as emblems for such identity. While origins are fluid and the memory of them is always selective, the images we elect to stand for them easily harden, like a piece of pottery fired in the oven of history.

Such images are varied and plentiful, but some are more easily recognizable than others. Roman Catholicism, for example, appeals to Matthew 16, Peter's reception of the office of the keys for the administration of the household of God built upon the rock called Peter (vv. 18–19). The rock upon which a house is built and the keys that give access to heaven and earth are indeed a powerful image. Protestants in general and Eastern Orthodox Christians[8] as well gravitate toward the Pentecost account of Acts 2 to establish the genesis of the church, suggesting that from its inception it is constituted by a public meeting in which people of different nations, cultures, and languages are participatory members, able to communicate among themselves and with God through tongues of fire in a language that bridges human divisions. But the images pertaining to the church's genealogy in theological discourse precede those generated by the New Testament as the rock (*kephas* in Aramaic; *petra* in Greek) and the tongues of fire. I am interested in pursuing these other metaphors, not in order to provide an alternative, but for the sake of destabilizing an ecclesiological discourse that has been held captive by images of the church that reflect and reinforce modes of church representation tied to territorial allegiances. Other images and models of the church might eventually fall into place

8. See, e.g., Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 423: "[T]here is always a place in the world for the Holy Spirit's descent and presence. This place is the incarnate Son Himself, the world as the body of Christ, which, in the Pentecost, also becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit."

as well in the course of my perusal. But the reason for employing this modus operandi of alternating images is pertinent. I am seeking to avoid stabilization and reification within a single motif, for when that happens the medium, the image, becomes the message, in the apt expression of Marshall McLuhan. Representations work, and they work only too well; they hold us captive to and captivated by ideals! To use a Platonic notion in its reverse, the body of the church is imprisoned by its soul.[9]

To exemplify how this destabilizing works, consider two further images as alternative root metaphors that disturb the tranquil realm of domesticated representations we have of the church and how it liberates its body. One comes from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, where the church is an "old woman." The other is from Luther, who used the "tree" to stand for the church, placing it in a landscape in which church cannot be conceived on its own or conceptualized by itself apart from other dimensions of everyday life. Neither the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* nor Luther allowed the metaphor to exhaust the meaning or subsume it under the political and economic regime of the day.

HERMAS AND LUTHER

In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a very popular second-century book regarded in some areas as canonical even at a time when the canon was still in process of reception,[10] we have this description of a vision of the church:[11] Hermas is carried by the Spirit to a place in the countryside where an old woman appears to him. She is walking and reading a book. She approaches and gives the book to Hermas, asking him to pass it on to the "elect of God." Then a revelation is given to him. A young man appears to him and asks Hermas: "Who do you think that old woman is from whom you received the book?" Hermas responds that she is "The Sibyl," a legendary female seer and prophet from several cults of classical antiquity and even regarded by Celsus as the object of Christian belief and cult.[12] The young man says: "You are in a mistake, it is not the Sibyl." "Who is it, then?" asks Hermas. "It is the church," says the young man. Hermas, living in a time when the Christian church was barely coming into existence, asks the obvious question: "Why then is she an old woman?" And the response

---

9. Foucault describes this inversion of the Platonic formula as a feature of modernity in which "the soul is the prison of the body." Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (trans. Alan Sheridan; New York: Vintage, 1979), 30.

10. Irenaeus, *Against Heresy* 4.20.2., in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 488.

11. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 11–12 ("Second Vision"). All the quotations from the dialogue that follow are from this passage.

12. See Origen, *Against Celsus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 5, chap. 61.

is thus: "Because she was created first of all. On this account is she old. And for her sake was the world made."

This vision would not have surprised Luther. In his *Lectures on Genesis* he explains the establishment of the day of Sabbath as "intended for the worship of God. . . [in] which God speaks with us through His Word and we, in turn, speak with Him through prayer and faith." This is God's first instituted order. As in the vision of Hermas, the human, says Luther, "was specially created for the knowledge and worship of God. . . . This is the real purpose of the seventh day: that the Word of God be preached and heard."[13] And in addition, God built for Adam "as it were, a temple: . . . the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was Adam's church, altar and pulpit . . . somewhat like a chapel in which there were many trees of the same variety, namely, the trees of the knowledge of good and evil."[14] Following Hermas, in Luther's view also the "church was established first."[15] This is indeed a radically catholic view of the church; it includes all humans insofar as all are descendents of Adam, "who would have gathered on the Sabbath day"[16] in Eden, where trees were planted in large number.

Thus the Reformer articulated his interpretation that there were several trees of life and also several trees of the knowledge of good and evil. His insistence that this interpretation "does not appear at all preposterous"[17] is indeed intriguing and revealing. Henceforth I surmise that it is no more preposterous to imply that this multiplicity prefigures, in Luther's mind, the diversity of religions and their different forms of worship. This interpretation is at least consistent with Luther's and the Reformation's conception of the multicentered character of the church, if not the plurality of world religions. This is a unique view of the universality of the church. In this view every tree of life offers sustenance for different communities, and every tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a place of worship and discernment. To each tribe its scribe; to each tree its creed.

The epigraph to this introduction is an injunction from Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate poet and educator, from early-twentieth-century India: "Be still, my heart, these great trees are prayers." There is an amazing resonance between the poet's words from one hundred years ago and the Reformer's lectures from five hundred years past. In fact, all of nature is itself a lesson on law and gospel. The tree of good and evil is the place not only of worship but also of condemnation: "Not only in the churches, therefore, we hear ourselves charged

---

13. *Lectures on Genesis, LW* 1:80f.

14. Ibid., 94f.

15. Ibid., 104. Note that being *established* first is, for Luther, not being *created* first; a creation and a mandate are different things. This is a distinction that the *Shepherd of Hermas* does not make.

16. Ibid., 105. The Lutheran *simul* works here too. For him the trees of knowledge that condemn are also the trees of life that nourish and bring vigor (ibid., 92f.).

17. Ibid., 95.

with sin. All the fields, yes, almost the entire creation is full of such sermons."[18] We can trace the motif and go back a further two millennia and hear the hopeful verses of a prophet announcing the end of the Babylonian exile:

> . . . the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
> Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
> instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
> and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
> for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.
> (Isaiah 55:12-13)

Further exploring this metaphor of the tree, we find it used across cultures to represent symbolically that which connects us to nature and the divine. We encounter it in African traditional folklore as the tree that represents the space in which mediation and reconciliation can happen.[19] Or take the poem "Hope" by French poet Charles Péguy:

> I am says God, Lord of the Three Virtues.
> Faith [metonym for the church] is a great tree, an oak rooted in the heart of France
> And under the wings of that tree, Charity, my daughter Charity shelters all the woes of the world.
> And my little hope is nothing but a bud that little earnest of a bud which shows itself at the beginning of April.[20]

Finally, I need to mention the image of the tree evoked by the book of Revelation, which describes the New Jerusalem as being crossed by the river of life, and at the banks of the river is the tree of life "producing its fruits each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). The New Jerusalem has trees for nourishment and healing but has no temple (21:22), no institution that holds its center; it has only this living entity, a tree at the margins of the river of life.

This virtually universal, not to mention ecologically evocative, image of the church, the church of Adam and all of his descendants, stands in sharp contrast to another of Luther's major themes: his enraged words against his own church. After all, he was the pivot of the Protestant schism in Western

18. *LW* 1:209.

19. See Thomas G. Christensen, "The Gbaya Naming of Jesus: An Inquiry into the Contextualization of Soteriological Themes among the Gbaya of Cameroon" (Ph.D. diss., Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1984).

20. Charles Péguy, "Hope," in *Men and Saints* (New York: Pantheon, 1944), 237.

Christianity, calling the church nothing less than the *magna peccatrix*, the great sinner or whore. As corrupted as the churches may be, they remain as places in which the law that condemns is pronounced, even against the church itself, and the word of salvation and liberation is proclaimed.

The tree or trees metaphor of the church on which Luther dwells extensively in his *Lectures on Genesis* is exceedingly rich in its imagery. However, we can understand its role in Luther's theology and the suggestive plays with the metaphor only by looking at the way he places it in relation to two other institutions mandated by God, which flank the church. Being the first institution established by divine mandate, the church stands in proximity to the household, which for Luther's medieval mind encompassed all that pertained to the *oeconomia*, the rule of the house, from biological reproduction to the production of the means for the sustenance of life (i.e., labor), the economy in the modern sense of the word. The other institution is politics (*politia*), including everything from the state administration to courts, guilds, and associations (*societatis*) that would roughly correspond to what we would call the state and civil society. The church, or to stay with the symbolic image of Luther, the tree in the garden, is what provides a place of respite where people can sojourn while moving in between the two distinct spaces–the space of the house where nourishment is produced and provided but life is regimented by hierarchy, and the public space of the city where the practice of governance is exercised but demands a constant struggle to fence a space for oneself. To use another set of metaphors (which for Luther are in fact metonymies), the church's location is the space between the house and the street. This was his challenge, to find images for the church that convey not only its marginal existence, but its centrality to the life of those who inhabit these margins, this space between spaces, where economic efficiency comes to a halt and political strategies are subverted.

The theological reflection I present in the following pages develops its argument in two parts. The first section (chaps. 1–5) presents the parameters for the formation, inception, and construal of the ecclesiological disputes locating the basic issues at stake both in the multifaceted ecclesiological debates throughout history and in the global presence of communities that pledge allegiance to the message of Jesus Christ. The second part (chaps. 6–10) offers a language for reconstructing the debate without falling into some of the linguistic traps of the past disputes that are clarified in the first part. The problem of church and eschatology is the guiding thread throughout the whole book. It is thus an essay on the church and its end, in the double sense of limit (or termination), and of goal. The unraveling of what church *representation* means offers the key to open

deadlocks of historical disputes and will be elaborated in the first part, while the second part is construed around the notion of *adjacency*, being at ease in the frightening borders of the representations of church that hold it captive.

The argument I propose is succinct: The ecclesiological problem is situated within the tension of two forms of institutional representation. Each of these has its merit and internal consistency but is only marginally related to what constitutes the church as such. Hence the question is not framed by the polarities as in mystical communion versus institution, charism versus power, dogmatic pontifications versus sociological analysis, *kairos* versus *topos*. The problem is to locate the church as it delineates different institutional claims, distinct justifications of its power, divergent social formations, and the spaces it claims to regiment. The situation is similar to the performance of a play: although the play cannot happen without the dexterity of the actors, the text of the play, or the building of the stage, the performance itself is nonetheless sui generis. The performance is not reducible or accounted for even if all the previous components are added up. Whatever form of representation ecclesial communities choose to reenact, that choice will always be a given ground, a presupposed infrastructure, but will never induce the blossoming of the church as such. To use a more blunt but fitting image, the living church is to the forms of its self-representation what a parasite is to its host; the orchid[21] that blooms would not have a "presence" but for the tree that hosts it, yet it does not blossom because of the tree. In theological jargon, the host is the law, but the bud and its blossoming are the gospel.

21. The orchid is an epiphyte, a plant parasite that grows on another plant, usually a tree. Orchids anchor themselves to the host plant so as to expose themselves to light, air, and moisture. Most orchids derive only support and not nourishment from their host.