SJT 66(4): 431–447 (2013)
doi:10.1017/S0036930613000239

Metaphor and Method in Concrete Ecclesiologies

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Abstract

The past twenty-five years have seen a widespread turn to the concrete in theology, and an increased awareness of the importance of practices, believing communities and material culture for both Christian faith itself, and theological engagement with it. In ecclesiology, this turn to the concrete has manifested itself in the rise of concrete approaches to ecclesiology. These have developed over the past fifteen years or so, as ecclesiologists have integrated theological and social-scientific perspectives on the church, to create both general methodological studies, and smaller scale 'ecclesiological ethnographies' of particular church communities.

This article critically explores some of the key methodological moves of the emerging discipline of concrete ecclesiology. In the first part of the article, I argue that concrete ecclesiologies display two characteristic methodological tendencies. First, they exhibit a tendency to define their approach as concrete and realistic in contrast to twentieth-century doctrinal approaches to ecclesiology, which they perceive as unhelpfully idealising and abstract. Second, they tend to express the task of ecclesiological ethnography as one of balancing the claims of two descriptive languages, theology and social science, with regard to a single object, the church. The underlying metaphor here is borrowed from christology: just as theological language about Christ's divine and human nature must be kept in balance, so doctrinal and social perspectives on the church must be kept in balance to avoid 'ecclesiological Nestorianism'.

In the second part of the article, I argue that these two methodological tendencies result in caricatured understandings of theology and ethnography as functional opposites. Theology tends to be regarded as an inherently abstracting and idealising influence in ecclesiology, while ethnography tends to be regarded as a means of straightforwardly accessing the 'real' church. This in turn creates a problematically thermostatic understanding of the relationship between theological and ethnographic insights in ecclesiology, casting them as mutually regulating and opposite influences. The article closes by proposing a potentially more fruitful alternative model for integrating theology and ethnography, by exploring the similarities between the ways in which the two disciplines understand and relate to their respective objects of study.

Keywords: concrete church, ecclesiology, ethnography, methodology.

Introduction

Theology over the last thirty years has seen a remarkable rise in talk about the church.[1] In works ranging from ethics to biblical studies, there has been a renewed sense of the importance of the living church which, among other things, is indicated as the source for theology's reflection, the norm for its usefulness and the justification for its existence. Alongside this general rise in rhetorical appeals to the church, it is now common to come across descriptive accounts of living communities, both of a more formally ethnographic kind and a more anecdotal tenor, in a wide range of theological writings. Both appeal to the concrete church as a historical, cultural entity, as a living community rather than as an ahistorical ideal type. The focus is on the church as a marked and marking social body: there is much talk of church practices, social distinctiveness and the church as God's story.

The effect on ecclesiology itself is an interesting one. Ecclesiology used to be a fairly discrete area of theology, concerned with church order, sacraments and the nature, origin, purpose and end of the church. Now, with the increased interest generally in communities and practices, ecclesiology has become like a rock pool around which the tide has risen: the discipline is either invisible or ubiquitous.[2] Accordingly, the discipline of ecclesiology itself has begun to shift and change, and the last fifteen years or so have seen the emergence in Europe and North America of 'concrete ecclesiologies'. Drawn from a diverse range of denominational and theological backgrounds, concrete ecclesiologists are united by a methodological common sense: that the concrete, historical, sinful church of our experience ought to be the primary focus of theological attention, that tools borrowed from qualitative social science can help theologians attend to it, and that ecclesiological reflection ought to be orientated to a practical end.[3] These convictions

[1] Nicholas M. Healy notes this general turn to the concrete in his essay 'Ecclesiology and Practical Theology', in James Sweeney, Gemma Simmonds and David Lonsdale (eds), *Keeping Faith in Practice: Catholic Perspectives on Practical and Pastoral Theology* (London: SCM, 2010), pp. 117–18.

[2] Mary McClintock Fulkerson describes the same change in a different way in her 'Theology and the Lure of the Practical: An Overview', *Religion Compass* 1/2 (2007), pp. 294–304.

[3] Healy states that ecclesiology's task is 'to aid the church in the performance of its two main tasks . . to witness to the Lord in the world and to help the individual Christian in her task of discipleship'. See Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 74 (hereafter *Church*). See also the introduction to Christian Scharen (ed.), *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), in which it is stated (p. 3) that 'The foundational aim of this work is to further turn scholarship to the task of strengthening pastoral leaders

have given birth in even more recent years – from 2000 onwards – to 'ecclesiological ethnography'. As the name suggests, this movement is the methodological pitface of concrete ecclesiology, actively exploring how ethnographic tools and theological insight can be integrated.

The purpose of this article is to offer some critical reflections on the emergence of these concrete ecclesiologies, and in particular on the more recent emergence of ecclesiological ethnographies. In the first part of the article, I will draw attention to two characteristics of concrete ecclesiologies: their tendency to articulate their project in distinction from twentieth-century ecclesiology, and their tendency to express their task as one of balancing the claims of two languages, theological and social scientific, with regard to a single object, the church. In the second part of the article, I will argue that these characteristics result in a series of working assumptions which are problematic for the whole enterprise of concrete ecclesiology and ecclesiological ethnography. In the third part of the article, I offer a brief set of pointers which might set concrete ecclesiologies on a more promising course as they seek to integrate the insights of ethnography and theology in service of a more grounded and ultimately more helpful kind of ecclesiology.

By using the plural, 'concrete ecclesiologies' and 'ecclesiological ethnographies', I have already drawn attention to the fact that these movements are diverse, encompassing practitioners and theorists from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and denominational allegiances, who engage in concrete ecclesiology for various different theological reasons. Articulating their methodological common sense necessarily involves making generalisations, but my aim in producing a generalised description of concrete ecclesiologies is not to flatten out the differences between them: it is simply to suggest that they share certain methodological tendencies and substantial aims. In the same way, my criticism of their flaws will also involve making generalisations, but my purpose in so doing is not to suggest that all concrete ecclesiologies make the same mistakes in the same ways. Rather, my intent is more therapeutic. In the critical work which follows, I am seeking to provide a general description of a set of troublesome symptoms. Where concrete ecclesiologists suffer from these symptoms, and to the extent that they do, the constructive treatment I suggest in the third part of the article may be of help.

and the congregations they serve as they seek to understand and effectively guide congregations for the sake of faithful witness and service in the world'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000239 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A Methodological Common Sense

We turn first to a description of concrete ecclesiologies' methodological common sense, paying particularly close attention to the way in which these ecclesiologies tend to articulate the origin and aims of their project.

The 'concrete church' to which concrete ecclesiologists refer is the church in its historical, sinful, cultural and embodied theological reality.[4] It is not merely the empirical church, nor simply the church as an institution: concrete ecclesiologies tend to reject the dichotomy between the church's theological and empirical identity, or visible and invisible aspects.[5] Concrete ecclesiologies' fundamental conviction is that the concrete church should be the starting point for theological reflection – the church as we know it, rather than what the church should ideally be like.[6] What is argued for is also assumed as common sense: that our thought about the church should begin with the church of our experience.[7]

The very common-sense nature of concrete ecclesiologies means that, despite plentiful discussion of how ethnographic and theological perspectives can be integrated, little time is spent justifying the turn to the concrete church, or arguing for the validity of social scientific perspectives. That the church is a social reality patient of social scientific description is assumed, rather than argued. Introducing the first volume of collected essays on ecclesiology and ethnography, Pete Ward simply states that:

> to understand the church, we should view it as being simultaneously theological and social/cultural . . . This means that to do ecclesiology we must embrace methods of research that are simultaneously theological and 'ethnographic'.[8]

[4] Healy distinguishes between the empirical church and the concrete church in *Church*, p. 4. For a distinction between the institutional church and the concrete church, see Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Postmodern Context* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 42.

[5] For arguments against distinguishing between the visible and invisible church, see Jinkins, *Church Faces Death*, p. 48, and Lewis Mudge, *Rethinking the Beloved Community: Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics and Social Theory* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), p. 9.

[6] Roger Haight e.g. argues that '[t]he principal object of ecclesiology consists in the empirical organization or collectivity or community called church'. See Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1, *Historical Ecclesiology* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 5.

[7] See e.g. Harald Hegstad's simple statement that 'the church is a social reality, accessible for empirical investigation' in his 'Ecclesiology and Empirical Research on the Church' in Scharen, *Explorations*, p. 41.

[8] Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 2.

There is no complicated argument for correlative method or a sort of liberation ecclesiology-from-below approach here, though both can be found within the wider canon of concrete ecclesiologies. Instead, there is just a claim, presented as straightforward and uncontroversial, that the church is a social reality as well as a theological one, and that ecclesiology should borrow tools from ethnography just as theologians borrow tools from philosophy and history.

(a) Contrastive self-definition

As already noted, concrete ecclesiologies are pragmatic by nature and do not expend a great deal of energy justifying their approach. Nevertheless, the ways in which they tend to express (and occasionally justify) their methodological common sense reveals an interesting tendency towards contrastive self-definition. Concrete approaches to ecclesiology often tend to express their project in opposition to perceived failings in modern and twentieth-century ecclesiologies. Two examples will have to suffice here, with further references given in the footnotes.

Nicholas M. Healy's *Church, World and the Christian Life* begins with the assertion that:

> in general ecclesiology in our period has been highly systematic and theoretical, focused more on discerning the right things to think about the church rather than oriented to the living, rather messy, confused and confusing body that the church actually is.[9]

Healy then goes on to describes five characterstics of modern ecclesiology:

> One is the attempt to encapsulate in a single word or phrase the most essential characteristic of the church; another is to construe the church as having a bipartite structure. These two elements are often combined, third, into a systematic and theoretical form of normative ecclesiology. A fourth element is a tendency to reflect upon the church in abstraction from its concrete identity. And one consequence of this is, fifth, a tendency to present idealised accounts of the church.[10]

[9] Healy, *Church*, p. 3.

[10] Ibid., p. 26. Healy contrasts such highly systematised modern accounts of church with pre-modern accounts of church from Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin, arguing that pre-modern ecclesiologies are more practically minded: 'Doctrines about the church are formulated to serve the tasks of the church rather than for theoretical purposes' (pp. 55–9).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000239 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Healy's aim in *Church, World and the Christian Life* is to sketch out an alternative vision of the object, method and purpose of ecclesiology. Where modern ecclesiologies concern themselves with the ideal church, he argues that ecclesiology's primary concern should be the historical, sinful, concrete church.[11] Healy criticises twentieth-century ecclesiology's penchant for debating the merits of various models and images of church for producing 'blueprint ecclesiologies': an abstract model is chosen, and then an account of the church's institutions and ministries is constructed from this 'blueprint'.[12] Instead, he argues, ecclesiology ought to begin with the concrete church in its local context and lived complexity. This criticism generates Healy's own proposal for what he calls 'practical-prophetic' ecclesiology, which begins with and is orientated towards the concrete life of the church as it negotiates particular challenges in its social and historical context. Healy concludes by suggesting that ecclesiologists borrow tools from other disciplines to develop genres like congregational history and ecclesiological ethnography, with the aim of producing more locally focused and practically helpful ecclesiology.[13]

In similarly contrastive mode, Michael Jinkins uses a critique of what he describes as problematically 'taxonomic' approaches to ecclesiology in order to articulate his own, more concrete approach to ecclesiology in *The Church Faces Death*.[14] Arguing that 'essential "churchness" is unworthy of our seeking while "church" is essential to our life of faith', Jinkins makes an impassioned plea for ecclesiology to attend to 'the church we know in actuality'.[15] This church of

[11] Roger Haight's articulation of the difference between ecclesiologies from above and ecclesiologies from below is perhaps the clearest example of a concrete ecclesiologist engaging in contrastive definition of his or her project. 'Against the background of an ecclesiology that is abstract, idealist, and a-historical,' he writes, 'an ecclesiology from below is concrete, realist and historically conscious.' See Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, pp. 4–5, and further pp. 17–56. While Haight makes clear that his distinctions are between ideal types, his description of ecclesiologies from above and his articulation of his own programme in distinction from them leaves little doubt that he has in mind a certain sort of magisterial ecclesiology. See also Roger Haight and James Nieman, 'On the Dynamic Relation between Ecclesiology and Congregational Studies', in Scharen, *Explorations*, pp. 11–13.

[12] Healy, *Church*, pp. 25–51.

[13] For theological histories see Healy, *Church*, pp. 161–4; for theological sociology ibid., pp. 164–7; for theological ethnography ibid., pp. 167–76.

[14] Jinkins, *Church Faces Death*, pp. 50–68. Jinkins recognises the usefulness of taxonomies (such as those of Avery Dulles and H. Richard Niebuhr), but also argues that they have serious weaknesses. For his critique of ecclesiological essentialism, see ibid., pp. 73–84 and 86–101.

[15] Ibid., pp. 80, 73.

> endless committee meetings and dirty linen washed in public, this church *is* the church of which we speak and to which the Word of God is addressed, and through which the Word of God makes Godself known in and through and as human speech. This is the church God intends and loves and redeems. And so when we speak of church we cannot afford to lapse into ecclesiological essentialism. We must pay attention to this church and the speech of this church.[16]

Accordingly, Jinkins also proposes that ecclesiologists become participant observers and undertake 'what might be called theological ethnography'.[17]

There are questions to be raised here regarding the fairness of concrete ecclesiologists' criticisms of twentieth-century theology, and whether the ecclesiological approaches with which they contrast their own methodological strategies are straw men.[18] My chief concern here, however, is simply to note their tendency for contrastive self-definition, and their expression of their project in terms of its being real rather than ideal, concrete rather than abstract, local rather than universal, empirical rather than doctrinal and practical rather than systematic.[19] I will argue that, when this tendency interacts with concrete ecclesiologists' tendency to express their task as one of balancing talk about the church, significant difficulties result.

[16] Ibid., p.73.

[17] Ibid., p. 101. It is worth noting that Healy and Jinkins, despite making such strikingly similar moves within a year of one another, were completely unaware of one another's work: the emergence of this methodological common sense is quite remarkable.

[18] In articulating his project in contrast to modern/twentieth-century ecclesiologies, it is arguable that Healy underplays some of the ways in which these ecclesiologies are *also* responding to practical concerns. Haight argues that 'twentieth-century ecclesiology betrays a growing consciousness, appreciation, and organization of pluralism' and a sense that 'the ecumene, or whole world, both in geographical terms of the five continents and human terms of the secular sphere of human activity, progressively becomes the horizon for understanding the church'. It could be argued that, in trying to systematise and organise this pluralism, twentieth-century ecclesiology *is* responding to a practical concern. See Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 2, *Comparative Ecclesiology* (London: Continuum 2005), p. 368.

[19] For the empirical/doctrinal and from below/from above distinctions see Haight, *Christian Community*, vol. 1, pp. 18–35, 56–66. For an example of the real/ideal distinction, see Anglican theologian Martyn Percy: 'Sociology is an attempt at social realism; religion though, is about idealism'. See Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), p. 35.

(b) Balancing and the 'body' metaphor

Concrete ecclesiologists talk about using qualitative social science as a way of *balancing* talk about the church. The most interesting thing to note here is the way in which this need for balance is expressed in christological terms. Healy describes the dangers of an overly theological or idealist picture of the church in terms of 'ecclesiological Nestorianism' or 'ecclesiological Monophysitism'.[20] Jinkins makes the same point using a different heresy, by warning of the dangers of 'ecclesiological Docetism'.[21] Like christological language, ecclesiological language needs to be carefully balanced, to avoid the risk of over-emphasising one aspect of its reality at the expense of another. Christological language also illustrates how concrete ecclesiologies see the challenge of describing the church. Christ's humanity and divinity are not two separate realities existing side by side, which must be subsequently reconciled: they are two natures of a single person, a single subject both fully human *and* fully divine.[22] There is no competition between the divine and human natures of the Word made flesh; likewise, there ought to be no competition between empirical and transcendent in the Body of Christ. Concrete ecclesiologies' task is therefore akin to the christological task: we must be able to look at the concrete church and see there a subject both wholly empirical and wholly theological. Concrete ecclesiologies do not ask how the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of faith can be reconciled with the church of concrete experience, but how the former is present in and revealed by the latter.

Two things are noteworthy about the way concrete ecclesiologies call upon social science for balance in connection with the christological analogy. The first is that the analogy suggests that concrete ecclesiologies see their task as balancing two languages to describe an external, objective reality.[23] The

[20] Healy, *Church*, p. 75.

[21] Jinkins, *Church Faces Death*, p. 73.

[22] My wording here is indebted to Edward Schillebeeckx, who talks about 'pseudo-problems' building up in theology around the questions of human reality and the reality of grace. See his *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1990), p. 211. The christological theme is also evident in Jinkins, *Church Faces Death*, p. 92.

[23] While Johannes van der Ven does not use the christological analogy, he does draw on the idea of social science and theology as two languages describing a single object, for which see Johannes A. van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 87. The church's functions can be described in either exclusively social scientific (pp. 87–90) or exclusively religious language (pp. 91–2); the key is to balance them (p. 93). Van der Ven writes, '*ecclesiology should be developed proceeding from the coordination of the social and religious aspects of the functions of the church*' (p. 98, author's emphasis).

real church is 'out there', and it can be more or less well described. The reality of the church – the reality we experience – can be ignored, distorted, idealised and so on. Ethnography is used as a way of getting at that 'real' church and balancing our talk about it. The second point of note is that this use of christological ways of characterising the ecclesiological task occurs alongside an interest in the individual body, or moral agent, as an analogy for the church. We see this tacit analogy at work in the prevalence of language about the church as *agent*, or body-in-life.[24] Jonas Ideström's *Lokal Kyrklig Identitet* is a particularly clear example. His inquiry into the identity of the local church, focused on a church in suburban Stockholm, is founded on an analogy of the church as body.[25] In order to inquire about the church as *social* body, Ideström draws on the organisational theory of Niklas Luhmanns, who defines an organisation as a form of social system where communication is made up of decisions.[26] The initial analogy of 'body' goes hand-in-hand with a focus on agency. The 'body' with which the analogy is drawn is an individual, not a social body, an individual self whose identity is created by decisions, actions and impositions on the world.[27] The same quiet analogy of the church as body is also visible in some ecclesiologies which focus on the significance of practices for an account of the concrete church.[28] In these ecclesiologies we can see an operative analogy of the church as an individual

[24] Healy references Schleiermacher's characterisation of the church as a 'moral person with an individual life'. See Healy, 'Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God: An Interplay of Reality Descriptions', in Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, p. 198. The social body analogy is also characteristic of the contributors to Jonas Ideström (ed.), *For the Sake of the World: Swedish Ecclesiology in Dialogue with William T. Cavanaugh* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), e.g. Ola Sigurdson's comments in 'The Return of the Body: Re-imagining the Ecclesiology of Church of Sweden', pp. 125–45.

[25] Jonas Ideström, *Lokal Kyrklig Identitet: En Studie Av Implicit Ecklesiologi Med Exemplet Svenska Kyrkan I Flemingsberg* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma, 2009), pp. 36–40, 251–5.

[26] Ibid., p. 275.

[27] Though the analogy leans heavily on the side of the individual body as moral agent, some theologians have a sophisticated sense of the body as constructed by, and permeable to, societal influences. McClintock Fulkerson draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to make this move. See her '"We Don't See Colour Here": A Case Study in Ecclesial-Cultural Intervention', in Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner (eds), *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp. 140–57.

[28] Gerard Mannion's attempt to develop a 'virtue ecclesiology', despite its vocal criticisms of Hauerwas, stands in continuity with ecclesiologies influenced by the MacIntyrean return to virtue in modern ethics. See Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology in Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2007), pp. 192–215.

moral agent, whose identity is shaped by practices.[29] The same analogy with the embodied individual also underlies concrete ecclesiologies which focus, in a more Wittgensteinian way, on what communities 'say' in their social context.[30]

Problematic Symptoms

Thus far, we have seen how concrete ecclesiologies express their project in contrastive terms, as concrete rather than abstract, particular rather than general, and focused on the real church rather than the ideal church. We have also noted concrete ecclesiologies' tendency to think about the task of ecclesiology in christological terms, as a sort of balancing of the claims of two languages, theological and social scientific, with reference to the same object. Concrete ecclesiologists turn to social science to help them attend to both these things: the task of balancing, and the need to attend to the local, the real, the concrete, the particular and the practical. On one hand, concrete ecclesiologists use social science critically, to balance out idealist, abstract theological language, which is seen as having only limited purchase on the church's concrete life.[31] Social science is also used to puncture over-confident claims for the church's practices and social distinctiveness.[32] On the other, concrete ecclesiologies also use qualitative social science constructively to ground theological reflection in an accurate picture of what the church is really like.

So far, this sounds both common sense and promising. I want to suggest, however, that this idea of balancing two languages about one reality, in combination with concrete ecclesiologies' oppositional self-definition, causes significant theological and ethnographic difficulties. The problem is that the oppositional pairs concrete ecclesiologies often use to express their methodological project tend to become associated with one another: good ecclesiology is particular, concrete and real, and bad ecclesiology is general, overly doctrinal and abstract. Use of social science is associated

[29] Healy suggests that it is not unreasonable 'to describe the concrete church, at least initially, more in terms of agency than in terms of being'. See Healy, *Church*, p. 5.

[30] See Lewis Mudge, *The Sense of a People: Toward a Church for the Human Future* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), pp. 138–41, and Mudge, *Beloved Community*, p. 13.

[31] Haight and Nieman state that 'Congregational studies determines the credibility of a theological account of the church precisely by its concrete appeal to history, that is, by providing realism. Theology always tends towards the normative ... Theology's language frequently prescribes ideals and thus often seems at odds with what appears on the ground.' Haight and Nieman, 'Dynamic Relation', p. 17.

[32] See e.g. Healy, 'Misplaced Concreteness? Practices and the New Ecclesiology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5/3 (2003), pp. 287–308.

with the first group of pairs, the 'good' kind of ecclesiology: concrete ecclesiologies' use of social science is bound up in a turn to the local, particular and experiential. The result is that, even as concrete ecclesiologists strive to integrate theological and ethnographic perspectives in ecclesiology, oppositional thinking ends up structuring the relationship between theology and social science.

The key is the idea that both languages, theological and social scientific, address *one reality* and that, within that balancing act, ethnography is often being used – as Healy puts it – to *chasten* the church's doctrinal self-understanding.[33] This raises some interesting questions about the implied characteristics of ethnography and theology within the concrete ecclesiological scheme. Putting it simply, the idea that ethnography can 'chasten' the church's doctrinal understanding rests on an implied understanding of theology as idealising, generalising and abstract, and an implied understanding of ethnography as realistic, concrete and particular.[34] Both languages are being used to describe a single reality. Theology on its own has a tendency towards abstraction, idealisation and the general: social science is used to cool down theological rhetoric about the church when it is becoming overheated.[35] The implied relationship between theology and social science could be described as thermostatic. The major difficulty underlying the concrete ecclesiological project is this: when concrete ecclesiologies' christological understanding of their task meets their tendency to define themselves in opposition to modern ecclesiologies, theology and

[33] Healy, 'Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God', p. 183. Compare Haight and Nieman's observation about congregational studies in which 'broad doctrinal claims about the church are being tested by a realistic scrutiny of the concrete political and social dynamisms driving particular churches and the practices of actual congregations'. Roger Haight and James Nieman, 'Dynamic Relation', p. 9.

[34] Van der Ven notes this problem and attempts to break down the opposition between theology and social science. See van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context*, p. 101. Haight and Nieman speak of congregational studies as providing a 'credibility test' or 'reality check' for theology. See Haight and Nieman, 'Dynamic Relation', p. 30.

[35] Haight and Nieman provide a good example of this: 'If the marks of the church are not a theological sleight of hand, they must be brought down to earth and made to reflect the actual life of the congregations.' See 'Dynamic Relation', p. 20. See also Mulder and Smith's statement that 'we share Christian Scharen's conviction (echoing Milbank) that theology needs sociology to supply "judicious narratives" that keep ecclesiology floating off into the realm of the ideal'. Mark T. Mulder and James K. A. Smith, 'Understanding Religion Takes Practice: Anti-Urban Bias, Geographical Habits and Theological Influences', in Scharen, *Explorations*, p. 100.

ethnography become implicitly defined by the way in which they act as functional opposites in ecclesiology.

Looking at an example of this at work will help. Healy's 'Ecclesiology and Practical Theology' provides a good example of this thermostatic relationship between theology and social science in ecclesiology.[36] He argues that theology and social science should *both* be normative for ecclesiology (p. 123). Theology must ground empirical study (p. 125), because '[u]nless doctrine contributes from the very beginning of the enterprise, and does so in a way that critically informs and guides the analysis of the situation in some way while at the same time leaving the empirical critical disciplines unimpeded, then it is difficult to see how practical theology can be critical in a *theological* sense – as an exercise in theology' (pp. 122–3). Having established a doctrinal basis, theologians can then turn to empirical study: 'The kind of enquiry useful for practical ecclesiology is thus one that simply gives an account of what is going on in a congregation, using the members' own language(s), with minimal theorising and generalisation, and maximum attention to detail and complexity' (pp. 125–6). Healy then suggests that the function of practical ecclesiology is to 'negotiate, as it were, a more adequate understanding of the Church that is then tested by experimentation in church life, where further negotiations will occur concretely, to become known through subsequent empirical accounts and be brought into critical engagement with doctrines once again, and so on' (p. 126). Practical ecclesiology is an ongoing process, where theology and ethnography are opposing forces which mutually regulate one another, rather like a thermostat in a central heating system.

This tendency to view theology and ethnography as functional opposites creates significant difficulties. The two most fundamental problems are the resulting pictures of ethnography and theology. The rhetorical use of oppositional pairs casts ethnography as the 'real' opposite to theology's 'ideal', which leaves us with a problematically simplistic view of the way ethnography works, and the kind of 'real' it can give ecclesiology. Likewise, it produces a tendency to treat ethnography as though its primary function were flat description rather than explanation or analysis, and results in an insufficient awareness of the degree to which the ethnographer's (or theologian's) subjectivity is involved in the account of social reality which

[36] References in parentheses. While Healy's name crops up in critical tone frequently in this article, this should be taken only as a reflection of the fact that he is one of the most prolific writers in the field, and one of the most sophisticated and interesting with whom to engage.

she produces.[37] Simultaneously, seeing theology as the 'ideal' opposite to ethnography's 'real' fails to undo the perceived problems of modern ecclesiologies, in favour of simply balancing or disrupting them with ethnography. The thermostatic cycle evident in Healy's work results from continuing to locate doctrinal reflection on the level of the general, universal and abstract. There is a sense here that the more doctrinal our reflections become, the further away we get from the concrete, which by implication is the local and particular. This results in the suppression of the doctrinal register in some concrete ecclesiologies. That is, while concrete ecclesiologies sometimes argue that abstract, doctrinal, metaphorical language floats free of reality, failing to address the actual reality of the church, what we see concrete ecclesiologies *doing* suggests the opposite. We see ethnography being used to call into question images, models and metanarratives which *do* have power despite their lack of fit, the concrete effects of which are precisely what concrete ecclesiologies are contesting.[38] At the same time as ethnographic description is being innocently invoked for its supposed lack of theological or institutional agenda, it is being used to do significant theological spadework.

Conclusion: A Way Forward

So far, I have sketched out the methodological common sense of concrete ecclesiologies and ecclesiological ethnographies, and drawn attention to two ways in which they articulate their project: as a corrective to abstract, ideal forms of ecclesiology, and as a rebalancing of language about the church. We have seen that concrete ecclesiologies' attempts to integrate theology and ethnography in reflecting on the church are currently constrained by the terms of their self-expression. By expressing their methodological common sense in dichotomies like ideal/real, abstract/concrete and doctrinal/empirical, concrete ecclesiologies sometimes end up working with impoverished understandings of ethnography and theology. I have shown how this oppositional way of thinking feeds into an understanding of

[37] For a thoroughly theological set of assumptions being brought to a fieldwork situation, see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: OUP, 2007). For a rather more subtle theological flavour in an ethnographic work, note the deeply Anglican thinking at work in Timothy Jenkins' discussion of religion and social flourishing in his *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999).

[38] Haight is not just using social science to argue against ecclesiology from above: he is using social science to argue against the *church* from above. Gerard Mannion has a good appreciation of this, and discusses Haight's work in the context of what he calls a growing climate of 'neo-exclusivism' in the Roman Catholic Church. See Mannion, *Ecclesiology in Postmodernity*, pp. 32–7.

the ecclesiological task as one of balancing the claims of two languages, theological and social scientific, about a single object, the church. Even as concrete ecclesiologies make promising attempts to break down the traditional impasse between theological and social scientific perspectives on the church, their view of theology and ethnography as functionally opposite and mutually regulating influences undermines their efforts, with the result that caricatured understandings of both disciplines go unchallenged.

While concrete ecclesiologies continue to define themselves in opposition to modern ecclesiologies and understand theology and ethnography as functional opposites, they will remain theologically underdeveloped. Their theological development will hang on two things. First, the concrete ecclesiological project needs to be developed and articulated in *positive* terms – focusing on what it *is* doing, rather than what it is not. The publications emerging from the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Research Network over the next few years will doubtless begin to articulate the concrete ecclesiological project in more constructive and positive terms. Second – and perhaps more difficult – concrete ecclesiologies need to find ways of expressing how theology and ethnography relate which do not trade on a tacit understanding of the two disciplines as functional opposites.

Both tasks require more time and wisdom than I have to work with, and so my concluding reparative suggestions in this article will be brief. I will focus on the second task facing concrete ecclesiologies: moving beyond the picture of theology and ethnography as functional opposites in ecclesiology. The key here, I suggest, will be to drop the quietly influential analogy between the task of ecclesiology and the task of christology. Instead of looking at how the two disciplines, theology and ethnography, relate to the single object of the church, concrete ecclesiologists might profit from taking a much closer look at how each discipline understands and relates to its own object of study. Such an undertaking might reveal some fruitful similarities between the theological and ethnographic enterprises. In the short space that remains, I want to offer a very brief account of three such similarities.

First, ethnography is a profoundly relational and involving discipline. The ethnographer does not simply sacrifice subjectivity in order to gain the pearl of knowledge: the condition of knowing the reality of social life is engaging in it, experiencing its force.[39] As Tim Jenkins puts it, 'the anthropologist is committed in the body – almost unlike any other

[39] Kirsten Hastrup, *Passage to Anthropology: Between Experience and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 22.

form of research – to an encounter with another form of social life'.[40] The anthropologist describes social life not from some vantage point above it, but from within, by experiencing its forces, constraints and assumptions, and constructing from these particular encounters a picture of the social dynamics at work. The distinctive way that anthropological knowledge is gained is what characterises and constrains anthropological knowledge and language. The process of piecing an account of the social real together from particular places within it means that anthropologists have constantly to adjust and readjust their analytical and descriptive categories: 'getting it right' involves a kind of constant *adequatio mentis ad rem*.

This understanding of the ethnographic task resonates with and informs a certain understanding of the theological (and ecclesiological task). Theology, too, is profoundly relational and involving. Theology may be faith seeking understanding: it is also, as Sebastian Moore puts it, the story of a soul in toils with its God.[41] Moreover, theologians also find themselves describing the dynamics of God's ways with the world not from some vantage point outside creation, but from their place within those dynamics. This is what characterises and constrains theological language. It is human, partial, sinful and needs to be constantly engaged in breaking and reshaping its descriptive categories in order to do justice to the living realities it seeks to address.

The second point of similarity I want to draw between ethnography and theology is between their language: ethnographic language can bear marked resemblance to theological language. One of the difficulties with ethnographic descriptions is their performative or creative character: they do not just describe social worlds, but *create* a picture not usually visible either to onlookers or participants in that world.[42] This, together with the fact that ethnography describes social worlds from within, means that assessing the accuracy and adequacy of ethnographic descriptions is not straightforward: there is a sense in which there exists no accessible objective, external 'real' against which the adequacy (or otherwise) of any given description can be measured.

[40] Timothy Jenkins, 'Fieldwork and the Perception of Everyday Life', *Man* 29 (1994), p. 451.

[41] Sebastian Moore, 'Four Steps towards Making Sense of Theology', *Downside Review* 382 (1993), pp. 87–8.

[42] For the 'fictive' character of anthropology, see e.g. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1973), p. 15; Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 62. For comments on ethnography's performative nature, see Hastrup, *Passage to Anthropology*, pp. 123–45.

The inadequacy of theological language, too, is only known 'from within' in this way. Denys Turner's description of how apophatic discourse functions could easily have been written about ethnography's relationship to its object of study, the social real. He argues that the position of the theologian is:

> like that of the person who, when lost for a word, can only say what it is not, with absolutely no prospect of ever finding the right one, the word which will do full justice to the thought. She may very well be able to judge some candidates to be more adequate than others, but this cannot be because she knows the *mot juste* as a standard of comparison. We can only know the inadequacy of our language from within it.[43]

This same feature of ethnographic and theological language means that we cannot contest their claims by holding them up to an external reality, but by negating their claims with other allegories and other metaphors: we say Samoa is not as Margaret Mead describes by holding it up to Derek Freeman's account; we say that God is not a rock because God is a bird.[44] If all language about God is 'tainted by ultimate failure', perhaps ecclesiology needs to reacquaint itself with the brokenness of all its language about the church, whether theological or social scientific.[45]

Last, ethnography and theology's language is characterised and constrained in the way just described because both deal with living realities which will always remain beyond their descriptive and analytical grasp.[46] This means, as I have already said, that both involve a kind of constant *adequatio mentis ad rem*. It also means that theology's task bears marked similarities to the task of ethnography. The ethnographic task involves constantly breaking and reshaping categories, examining all that goes unsaid and is taken for granted – not just in the social group being studied, but in the categories

[43] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 39.

[44] Ibid., p. 37. The debate over the accuracy of Margaret Mead's portrayal of Samoa and the accuracy of Derek Freeman's critique is well-known. See Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Study of Adolescence and Sex in Primitive Societies* (London: Penguin, 1928) and Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[45] See Denys Turner, 'Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason', in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds) *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 16.

[46] Christopher Brittain makes a similar point, suggesting that 'There is often an elusiveness to the object of study in ethnography, and this can be one of its principal contributions to ecclesiology'. See Brittain, 'Ethnography as Ecclesial Attentiveness and Critical Reflexivity: Fieldwork and the Dispute over Homosexuality in the Episcopal Church', in Scharen, *Explorations*, p. 135.

ethnography brings to it. The challenge is to keep the living social realities of which one speaks alive in one's description.

Theology, too, faces living realities which will always elude any final description and analysis. Given the fact that our theological knowledge is always in-the-middle, and our language always inadequate and fragmented, theology too must constantly break and reshape its categories. We know our tendency to repeat well-worn formulae, and part of the task of theology is to work against the flow of habit and ossification, returning over and over to Christian faith and practice in order to break and renew our language about God, so that the Gospel might be spoken again and new faith might appear.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000239 Published online by Cambridge University Press