

**Zeitschrift:** Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie  
**Band:** 91 (2001)  
**Heft:** 1  
  
**Artikel:** The unity of the Church and the unity of the Bible : an analogy  
**Autor:** Williams, Rowan  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-404925>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.04.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

---

## The Unity of the Church and the Unity of the Bible: An Analogy

Rowan Williams

In 1970, Cornelius Ernst contributed to Karl Rahner's theological encyclopaedia, "Sacramentum Mundi," an article on theological methodology<sup>1</sup>. Like all Ernst's work, it is densely packed, allusive, covering immense tracts of material in a few sentences and providing food for decades of thought. In the conclusion, four paragraphs even more compressed than the rest of the article, Ernst asks what sense we are to make of the variety of theological styles and structures across the Christian centuries; and he proposes in response that we need to have a "metatheology", a discourse in which theology becomes aware of its own character and understands that the utterances made in historic dogmatic mode do not of themselves stand as an exhaustive account of what God and humanity mean for each other; they are refinements within the logic of religious utterance, necessary and truthful as far as they went, but they don't address the underlying question of the *kind* of language theology is. How do we then address that? We look, Ernst suggests, at the sheer fact of theological development and diversity. We have already the actual and substantive answer to the question of what God and humanity mean for each other, how God communicates with us and we with God: Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God's eternal self-sharing and self-emptying wisdom. But because Jesus is word and image and mystery, because his truth is inseparable form involvement in the life of faith, the way we articulate this meaning is always shifting somewhat and never appears as a total system. Once you recognise this, you may no longer want to write a *Summa theologiae*<sup>2</sup>.

How do you express the *unity* of such a vision, though? Isn't there a danger of resting content with disconnected insights, theology transforming itself into a series of aphorisms and parables and no more? Ernst's

---

<sup>1</sup> "Sacramentum Mundi" was published in Britain by Burns and Oates in 1970; the article was reprinted in the posthumous collection of *Ernst's* writings: *Multiple Echo. Explorations in Theology*, ed. Fergus Kerr / Timothy Radcliffe, London: DLT, 1979, pp. 76–86.

<sup>2</sup> See particularly pp. 85 f.

answer is a tantalising one. The unity of the Christian vision could only be visible in the form of a universal Christian “culture,” a lived unity in which people across the human family experienced in themselves and recognised in each other the realities of conversion and holiness. Of course this needs criteria, and a simple all-inclusiveness is not what is in view; the processes of recognition take time and work. But the unity that emerges from this work, from the recognition of a common agenda of some sort, is no trivial thing. And – to quote what must be one of Ernst’s most memorable phrases – “The cultural ‘structure’ of such a metatheology is as much or as little a *logical* unity as a song or a smile.”<sup>3</sup>

Much of this essay will be about the different things we often mean by unity. Ernst’s formulation reminds us movingly of such differences, prompting the question of how and why we recognise unity at all in the sort of cases he names. A smile? Well, I suspect here an echo of Wittgenstein<sup>4</sup>, so important to Ernst: what’s going on when we learn how to recognise an expression on a face? What makes us speak of *a* smile or *a* frown? We observe a set of physical modifications, by no means the same in all human faces, and, because we have learned to “read” these modifications as showing a recognisable and directed emotion, we think of them as a unity. And a song? We learn to recognise echoes of the same pattern of sounds, clusters within the general regular alternation of stress and slack in this sort of utterance; we observe repetitions and elaborations of a pattern, we are reassured by the reappearance of a theme that we are still hearing the same song. But in both cases we can only speak of unity in terms of a large and sometimes imprecise repertoire of skills of recognition; this, surely, is a large part of what lies behind the attempts of our great Anglican Thomists, Eric Lionel Mascall and Austin Farrer, to build an epistemology of images as a way of making concrete in our modern cultural context what the classical discourses of analogy are driving at<sup>5</sup>: we learn by

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking especially of *Wittgenstein’s Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett, Oxford: Blackwell, 1970 – for example, p. 4 on exactitude in aesthetic response (“In fact, if we want to be exact, we do use a gesture or a facial expression”), p. 30 (“The expression is not an *effect* of the face”) and p. 31 on why we might say of a smile that it “wasn’t genuine,” and the more general discussion in the aesthetics lectures of the kind of explanation that is appropriate in responding to art (the kind of unity it is appropriate to look for?).

<sup>5</sup> I think here not so much of *Eric Mascall’s Existence and Analogy*, London: DLT, 1949, as of the later essays, *Words and Images*, London: DLT, 1957, in which he notes in passing (p. 93) the “cognitive” aspect of art, and *Theology and Images*, London:

being reminded; we understand by chains of association, not by the delivery of a self-standing concept.

But something similar would need to be said about how we recognise unity or coherence in a biography, how we might conclude that a life was characterised by integrity, moral unity. We might want to say about Cardinal Newman, for example, that his is a life that makes a whole – not because he consistently held the same opinions (hardly, since he is the most famous convert of the nineteenth century), nor even because he consistently did the best and saintliest thing possible in any given circumstance (his long-suffering friends would have had a word or two to say about that), but because he repeatedly turns in the same direction and seeks to orient his life towards an authoritative truth; he continues to ask the same sort of questions, to submit his words and acts and thoughts to the same vision of a sovereign divine reality that will always elude capture by any specific response, spiritual, moral or intellectual. The unity, in other words, doesn't consist in something simply internal to Newman's human biography; it is given in this rather odd and fluid relation to what he attempts to respond to. The repeating patterns of his life story are recognisable *as a pattern* only in this light, the realisation that he is consistently trying to allow a truth beyond adequate verbal formulation to shape what and who he is.

In a sense, all biographers look for such patterns, patterns of response or engagement. The person whose consistency could be represented as simply a continuity of habit, a series of repetitions, would not be a very interesting subject for biography; indeed, if this were all one could see in a life, one would start asking serious questions about the subject's mental health. And we acknowledge moral unity in a life, I suggest, when we see someone's development not as a drift of reactions dictated by casual or momentary response, nor as a series of self-reinventions, but as a constant readiness to be drawn and shaped by a truth that is not instantly and wholly available for inspection. The singleness or constancy of that truth appears, shows itself, in the recurring patterns of a subject's searching for ways of response to it. The skill of biography is so often to identify the fun-

---

Mowbray, 1963. *Austin Farrer's A Rebirth of Images*, London: Dacre Press, 1949, is his best-known essay in this field, but the short pieces on "Poetic Truth" (reprinted in: *Reflective Faith*, ed. Charles Conti, London: SPCK, 1972, pp. 24–38), "Inspiration: Poetical and Divine" and "Analogy in Common Talk" (reprinted in: *Interpretation and Belief*, ed. Charles Conti, London: SPCK, 1976, pp. 39–53 and 202–210 respectively) are wonderful digests of his views.



damental questions in a person's life and to display continuities in disparate contexts. This is also perhaps why a good biographer will pay attention to a subject's childhood, to discover how fundamental questions are first shaped. A careless biographer accumulates detail or else imposes a structure alien to the subject's own process of questioning and movement. There may be legitimate debate between biographers about whether certain moments represent a regressive or repetitive process or a genuine movement: W.H. Auden's biographers have offered some very different accounts of his return to religious practice in middle life<sup>6</sup>. But the issue for the biographer remains whether there is a vital continuity of engagement or whether a life fragments into directionless and reactive response or sterile repetition. To the extent that biography always looks for intelligible shape in a life, it can't help being in some sense a moral enterprise – not as passing a final judgement on the “goodness” or “badness” of a life, but as inevitably posing the question of moral unity in the way I've tried to outline.

This is where the relevance of all discussion so far to Christology comes into focus. Christian theology early on ascribed to the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth a “unity” of a somewhat distinctive kind: whatever it was that grounded or established the moral unity of this life, it was claimed, was itself at one with God in such a way that there could be no response to the human Jesus that was not also a response to God. But the unity of this human identity with God proved difficult to expound. It was evidently not a unity of simple identity: no-one was very happy with the idea that God was somehow “inserted” into a human envelope, or replaced an absent human mind or soul<sup>7</sup>; very few could cope with the notion that human appearance of Jesus was an illusion and the real agent was God all the time. But equally there were problems with supposing that Jesus of Nazareth was simply a human being whose humanity was “used,” from

---

<sup>6</sup> Thus *Charles Osborne*, W.H. Auden. The Life of a Poet, London: Eyre/Methuen, 1979, and *Humphrey Carpenter*, W.H. Auden. A Biography, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981, consider Auden's resumption of Anglican practice either frivolous or regressive; *Richard Davenport-Hines*, Auden, London: Heinemann, 1995, is far more positive; and *Edward Mendelson*, Later Auden, London: Faber & Faber, 1999, displays with enormous subtlety the all-pervading character of theological agendas and references in the post-1939 poetry.

<sup>7</sup> This was the heresy of Apollinaris of Laodicea; a convenient and reliable summary in *Stuart Hall*, Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church, London: SPCK, 1991, pp. 154–156.

outside, so to speak, by God<sup>8</sup>. Four centuries of debate finally produced the careful and complex formula of the Council of Chalcedon in 451<sup>9</sup>. Although it has often been seen as a piece of over-refined speculation, the fact is that it provides guidelines and suggestions for thinking about unity that are of very immediate relevance to the self-understanding of the Church, as I hope to show in what follows. The formula insists, again and again, that it is about “one and the same” reality, the eternal Word and Wisdom of God who is also Jesus of Nazareth. At the foundation of the structure here erected is the divine reality that is for ever in relation to God as Father – the Son or Logos; this reality subsists in and communicates through every detail of the human identity of Jesus. Between this human identity and the eternal Word there is a union that can be called “hypostatic,” a union of actual subsistence, and is “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation”. Jesus is related to the Logos in such a way that there is no alteration in the *kind* of individual he is (a human individual) or in the nature of God (who is not subject to change or to being affected from outside); yet Jesus cannot be thought of adequately without reference to God the Word, and there is no area of his humanity that is not a vehicle for the action of God the Word.

In other words, to understand the moral unity or integrity of Jesus, we look not to some immanent pattern of goodness in his human life, nor even to the pattern of response to his environment overall, but to a twofold relatedness to the divine. There is first an alignment with the eternal response of the Son to the Father, an alignment mysteriously given from the first moment of Jesus’s existence as a human individual. Nothing he does or says, we are enjoined to believe, interrupts or qualifies that alignment. Jesus responds in and to the world and responds to God as “Abba” in a way uniformly open to and shaped by the reality we call the eternal Word. As a result, his life is to be seen as united with the life of the eternal Father: he does what the Father does and what the Father wants. In terms some-

---

<sup>8</sup> On the complexities of asserting that Jesus was a complete human being inspired to a unique degree, see, e.g., *R. Williams, Arius, Heresy and Tradition*, London: DLT, 1987, pp. 159–162. The language of the humanity as *organon* or “instrument” for the divine appears in the fragments of Nestorius (various references s.v. “organon” in: *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G.W.H. Lampe, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Designed to affirm both that there is one and only one source of agency in Jesus, which is the act of the eternal Logos. Text in: *James Stevenson* (ed.), *Creeks, Councils and Controversies*, revised edition W.H.C. Frend, London: SPCK, 1989, pp. 350–354.

times used by patristic writers, he is the will of God in the world<sup>10</sup>. Jesus, in other words, is so related to the eternal relation of the Son to the Father that his human life is the embodiment in time of that eternal relation; and – the crucially important next step – our relation to him relates us as human beings to the same eternal relation, so that our lives begin to embody his likeness.

But the principle sketched out in the definition of the Council of Chalcedon still holds: the unions we are talking about are not unions of absorption or simple identities, or what Ernst calls “logical” unities. It is as if the basic and eternal difference between Father and Son is the prime analogate (to borrow the Aristotelean and scholastic term) for the differentiated unions of Jesus with the Logos and ourselves with Jesus. And, as with all analogy, we need to hold on to the significance of differences. Mascall, in his finest purely theological work, “Christ, the Christian and the Church,” speaks eloquently of the “three fundamental modes of union which bridge in three stages the gulf between God the Father, who is the source of all being, and our own finite selves<sup>11</sup>,” but insists, a few paragraphs further on, that “we shall fall into the most grotesque heresies” if we fail to differentiate properly between these modes<sup>12</sup>. Each is a union in which one term is wholly given its integrity and reality by relation to the gift of the other’s presence; each represents a unity constituted by *response*. But the response of God to God in eternity is not the response of one individual to another; the response of Jesus to the Word is emphatically not just a case of a holy person hearing the Word as from a distance; the response of the believer to Jesus is not a judgement made on a figure remote in time. Likewise, the Son’s response to the Father constitutes what or who the Son is, and there is no process of assimilation involved; the union of Jesus and the Word, in contrast, does not mean that God can’t be God or humanity humanity without the union, or even that *this* human identity (Jesus) would be literally unreal apart from the union<sup>13</sup> – only that the actual historical outworking of the human identity involved depends wholly upon the unique presence

---

<sup>10</sup> The usage is found in Hippolytus, Clement and – more hesitantly and ambiguously – Origen; see *R. Williams* [note 8], pp. 125, 139–141.

<sup>11</sup> *Eric L. Mascall*, *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, London: DLT, 1946, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.93.

<sup>13</sup> Early mediaeval theologians considered in depth whether the union of body and soul in Jesus depended on the union of both with the Word; on this question, see *Lauge Olaf Nielsen*, *Theology and Philosophy in the Twelfth Century*, Leiden: Brill, 1982, for an exhaustive treatment.

of the Word within it. And our union with Jesus (unlike his with the Logos) is something into which our humanity must grow; we do not somehow become new incarnations in the same sense as Jesus.

Yet the analogy is real and central to the whole picture. Precisely through these traditional dogmatic formulations about different levels of union, there comes into focus something of what must be said of Cornelius Ernst's "metatheology," the unity that resists reductive formulation. Because the unities of which doctrine speaks are unities like these, analogous and connected forms of differentiation and response, we can see how the *concrete* final meaning of our world could only be a network of mutual recognition, the recognition of common response, of lives formed by the same pressure of God's gift upon them. The ideal of unity that matters for the Christian is neither total system nor total institution. And the further implication is that what grounds and sustains unity will not be some visible particular feature of an earthly system or structure, but the invisible gift at work upon it. The unity of Jesus's person – both in the modern sense of the moral unity of a biography and in the patristic sense of the single root of Jesus's identity in the action of the Logos – isn't something we can give an adequate account of without reference to something more than is visible in his life. It is as the first believers reflected on the kind of difference made by Jesus that they understood the action at work in his actions as divine and imagined for him a new level of integrity or wholeness in his human particularity. How any one feature or episode in Jesus's human life might be seen as charged with the full weight of divine activity is not something available for investigation. The claim that this humanity is "sinless" is not a claim that there is a perceptible pattern of perfect moral conduct (how on earth would that be established?) in him<sup>14</sup>, but an expression of the faith that nothing in his life gets in the way of its being an unrestricted channel for God's act. To put it much more loosely but perhaps more evocatively: this is a unity intuited as we look at a face turned consistently towards the light.

These are unities which could only be in any sense *perceptible* eschatologically, in a situation where we could grasp the transparency of Christ

---

<sup>14</sup> Strictly speaking, the claim that Jesus was sinless is not an historical one; it would obviously be incapable of historical proof. Some confusion is caused in contemporary theology by misunderstandings of this: our lack of exhaustive and unchallengeable historical information about Jesus is neither here nor there in respect of the belief in sinlessness.

to Logos, Logos to Father, apprehend the absolute continuity of act in all this. And this eschatological dimension to our talk about unity, about the integrity of the redeemed creation and the redeemed community, is particularly important as we try to draw out the consequences of what's been said so far for our thinking about Church and Bible and other elements in our theological picture. It has often been said (notably by Vladimir Lossky in his "Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church"<sup>15</sup>) that errors about the nature of the Church duplicate Christological heresies. There are doctrines of the Church that treat it as essentially a human association, more or less inspired by a distant Jesus; there are doctrines of the Church that seem incapable of granting to the Church a real human *history* and are constantly trying to reduce the Church's life to a state of timeless transparency to revealed truth, regarding the essential task of the Church as repeating securely what has been delivered from heaven. But we should also be able to see that there is a *positive* aspect to this connection between Christology and ecclesiology. The union between the eternal Word and the humanity of Jesus is a giving of form and integrity of divine action; and this is true even though the *way* in which the humanity "carries" divine action in all its aspects is not available for inspection, and could only be perceptible in a situation where as a matter of achieved fact the human race had arrived at a mutual reconciliation and conscious peace with God and acknowledged that reconciliation as bound up with the relation of all humans to Jesus. So perhaps we can go on to say about the Church that the union between the Church and Jesus is what gives form and integrity to the history of an empirically human community, so that this human community makes present and effective the action of Jesus. It does not cease to be a human, historical community, susceptible to the distortions of human relation that sin brings about, yet it is indefectibly the instrument of connection with Jesus. And, as in the case of Jesus's relation to the eternal Word, the unifying form is, within history, intuited, manifested occasionally and fleetingly and often paradoxically, and is perceptible only in the eschaton.

A clarification may be in order. What is being proposed is not that the historical chaos and intermittent infidelity of the Church can be paralleled to some sort of moral disorder in the humanity of Jesus. In each case, there is a different sort of unity or integrity appropriate to the particular level of divine action. In the case of Jesus's humanity, the presence of sin or infi-

---

<sup>15</sup> Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957, pp. 186 f.



delity, deliberate refusal of transparency to God's action, would (because of the subtle interweaving of all acts and motivations in a human life) destroy the integrity of Jesus as *agent*. The nature of the union may be obscure, and the way in which certain words or acts or episodes are compatible with it may be, as a matter of temporal fact, problematic; but the sinlessness of Jesus is "heuristically" asserted as the condition for that unreserved openness to divine action which brings about the transformation of the human condition as a whole. But what would be fatal to the unity of an agent is not necessarily fatal to the unity of a community. Here the issue is not to do with the once-for-all irruption of divine action in the event of new creation, but with how a community consistently witnesses to that action in such a way that it is rendered accessible and plausible in the world. And if the Church is not a continuation of the incarnation by other means (a tempting and often popular but alarmingly misleading theological idea), the unity or integrity of its witness cannot lie in a sinlessness and transparency like that of Our Lord; which means that its integrity will lie rather in its persistent return to the prior agency of Jesus; in the ways in which it patiently and hopefully goes on submitting to receive this agency so as to heal and restore its historical woundedness and betrayal. In short, the integrity of the Church is in the way it conceives of itself as a penitent community, turning consistently to a stable source of restoration<sup>16</sup>. If we thought of the Church's unity in the same terms as the unity of a single personal agent, we could not begin to make sense of the mess and distortion of its history.

In this perspective, the unity of the Church seems to lie on both sides or at both ends of its history. On the one hand, it is given, absolutely and unreservedly, in the bond Christ makes with believers in the baptismal covenant. It is a point which Lutheran theologians are quick to emphasise in ecumenical discussions, when Anglicans and others talk of "full unity" as something to aim at and plan for at the human level: unity is not a future goal but a present and unconditionally real dimension in the Church's life<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>16</sup> Compare the picture of the Church in the work of *William Stringfellow*; in *Conscience and Obedience. The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming*, Waco: Texas, 1977, 79ff., 91–94, he writes of the Church's calling to be a "holy nation," a community that transforms its political environment ("the nations") by being a people living in expectation of the judgement.

<sup>17</sup> I acknowledge a debt here to the deliberations of the March 1999 meeting at Springe of the Meissen Theological Conference between members of the British Anglican churches and the Evangelical Church of Germany.

On the other hand, unity will be perceptible only at the end time when it becomes possible to see and acknowledge the centrality of the Church to the history of humanity: it hardly needs saying that our present attempts to demonstrate that centrality land us in painful absurdities, since the patterns and achievements we are able to observe are none too likely to correspond to the work of Christ in the Body. Between those moments, of the giving of the gift and the revealing of the gift, the Church's unity and integrity will always be contested and ambiguous. When they do appear, unexpectedly and uncontrollably, it will once again be a moment presented to intuition rather than systematic analysis, and irritatingly resistant to theoretical organisation – the song or the smile.

But so far from this implying a shapeless or haphazard doctrine of the Church's unity, it concentrates our attention more closely upon the very specific moments of epiphany. As, in the life of Jesus, we might point to narrative moments in which the believed-in unity somehow manifestly controls the appearances (Gethsemane), so that we can say of the rest of the narrative, "*That* is what makes *this* possible<sup>18</sup>," so in the life of the Church. The most obvious level at which this operates is in sacramental action, where the community puts itself fully and articulately "into" the act of Christ: sinful and fallible humanity is gathered in the name of Jesus to speak and act in that name, that role. For this time, the community is transparent to the underlying action of Christ on his way to the Father and on his way to the ends of the earth. "In the Eucharist," wrote Mascall, "... the identity of the Mystical Body of Christ with his glorified natural body is most fully manifested and maintained"<sup>19</sup> – so that the entirety of Christ's humanity as it existed in first century Palestine is present, but also the eternal prayer of the Son to the Father and the promise and foretaste of the

---

<sup>18</sup> I relate this to the conceptuality sketched in *Michel de Certeau's* extraordinary essay "La rupture instauration," in: *La faiblesse de croire*, ed. Luce Giard, Paris: Seuil, 1987, pp.183–226. Certeau here speaks of events that "permit" new kinds of relation to the world (p. 210), and thus become in their own right incapable of being perceived in a simply "objective" way. This obviously applies to the entire event of Jesus, and offers some very fruitful openings for Christological reflection on the importance and unimportance of exact historical knowledge about Jesus; but I should want to apply it also to the relation between different parts of the narrated life of Jesus. Because, say, the Transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden are located as they are in a continuous narrative, we must say of the surrounding story that it must be read as telling us what "permits," what makes possible, these particular moments of transparency. There are no straightforwardly indifferent details.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* [note 11], p. 172, and chapter 9, *passim*.



eschaton. The Church does not live in a perpetual condition of liturgical eucharist, but at the celebration of this sacrament the plurality and even tragedy of actual human experience in history is so given into God's hands that the active presence of Jesus is enacted among us in the concrete form of sharing the elements.

That is a fairly familiar theme in our ecclesiology; but I should also want to point to another, less obvious but in some ways equally important mode of the manifestation of the Church's elusive unity; and that is in holy lives. We are probably not used to seeing saints as signs of the Church's *unity*; but the unsystematic unity, the song and the smile, of the Church's life, appear with clarity here. A holy life is not an admirable individual attainment, but a showing of what gives the community its integrity<sup>20</sup>. *This* life shows what holds Christians together; as this particular human biography is drawn into coherence by its relation to Jesus (a process in which error, revolt, imperfection and beginning all have place), we see something of what it might mean for the community itself to live in the hope of some such manifest integration. And the rest of the Church's life, with all its ambiguities and infidelities, is drawn together in a certain sense as part of what makes this holy life possible. Sanctity, it is quite often remarked, is an eschatological reality; but it is so in part as a manifestation of the unity of the Church in Christ. The recognisability of this or that life as a reflection, even in its unevenness and its changes, of the integrity of Christ, transparent to him as he is to the Father, is the discovery of a deeper level of common language in the Church: if you want to see how the Church's story is, in spite of all appearances, one, reflect on what this recognition of common language implies.

Practically speaking, of course, this does not solve the painful questions that surround the issue of unity. But I wonder if we do not create for ourselves more trouble than need be. For one thing, if "unity" itself is an analogical notion in the way I have been suggesting, it is inevitable that we shall find in the Church different degrees of unity as between Christian communities, even different understandings of what proper continuity with tradition might entail. I should want to argue that the most fully appropriate form of unity for the Church is when there is clarity about the mutual recognisability of the Church of the past and of the present, of sanctity and fidelity in diverse cultural and historical contexts, and, above all, of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 215–9; also the texts on sanctity in: *Medard Kehl / Werner Löser* (eds.), *The Von Balthasar Reader*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982, pp. 376–380.

continuity and integrity of the sacramental actions that a community performs with the actions of other communities separated in time and space. But in the historical actuality of the Church, this full mutual recognisability is and has always been far from straightforward; were it present, we might well talk of eschatological fullness. We struggle to define faithfulness to tradition without committing ourselves to a slavish repetition that in fact destroys the real meaning of analogy itself; we struggle to secure mutual understanding of patterns of holiness, but are aware of the ways in which even the most loyally traditionalist modern Christian will find areas of incomprehension in reading the spirituality of an earlier age, aware of the awkward discontinuities in accounts of holiness on either side of the Reformation (how much of a revolution in imagination did it take to conceive of the holiness of a married priest?). And we wrestle repeatedly with issues over the recognisability of sacramental actions in different churches, even within the same church at times. What I am proposing is that we should *expect* such struggles in the continuing history of the Church, if the unity of the Church is to be understood in relation to the unity of the incarnate Lord. How that unity will be compellingly manifest is not a matter for present inspection; but it is important not to foreclose that eschatological perspective by seeking impossibly tight current criteria for recognisability.

Yet this would be only a prescription for relativism if it did not attend seriously to the content of Christ's material identity, in ministry, passion and resurrection, as the basis for any talk at all of recognition. It is perfectly possible to be clear about what could and could not imaginably count as a eucharist; it is perfectly possible to be clear about what could count as a holy life – though we need to be aware of the fact that these definitions shift somewhat in history (as with the married priest). Without some such patent reference to the particularity of the Word Incarnate, there would be no chance of seeing the historical life of the Church as a repeated turning away from the agenda of the moment or the individual towards the integrity of Christ; the life of the Church would not manifest repentance and the new creation that is opened up in the wake of repentance. However analogical our notion of the Church's unity, it must not lose sight of the fundamental analogical principle here, the notion of unity derived from relation to what remains inscrutably other. Any strategy, theological, philosophical, political or liturgical, that begins to absorb the inscrutable otherness of Jesus into the pragmatic life of the community is involved in the equivalent of trying to think of Jesus without Gethsemane. Theologies of left and right need equally to beware of this.

But discussion of the basic criteria for what might count as a eucharist or who might count as a saint leads naturally to some reflection on the textual touchstone of faith, the Bible. Here too, the issue of unity is a focal problem; but I suggest that the model of analogical unity so far outlined may help us here. There have been theologians who have tried to make sense of the unity and authority of the Bible by linking it with the hypostatic union – the co-presence without confusion of divine and human activity<sup>21</sup>. But on the basis of my earlier discussion, we should need to say that the unity of a text or textual narrative, like the unity of a historical community, was not identical with the unity of an agent. Here again, we should be looking at the non-systematic unity that comes from sustained relation to something outside the surface life of the text. The text is *engaged*: and it is this engagement that not only gives it what unity it has but also invites the reader's engagement, as opposed to the reader's passing interest, or even the reader's fascination<sup>22</sup>. If the text is read as showing the impress of the kinds of change effected by the coming and the action of what is beyond the text, the question is raised of how my engagement with the text may expose me and us to such a coming, such an action, such changes. The Jewish theologian, Peter Ochs, speaks of Jewish Scripture as representing a "performance of the name [of God]"<sup>23</sup>: the unity of the text is in its reference to this "name," to God's "I am that I am". The divine self-articulation is what consistently impresses upon God's people a form and a focus that generate, across a wide field of historical and social difference, something that can be construed, against all likelihood, as a single story. For the Christian, that self-articulation of God is the particular historical person of Jesus, and the unity of the text is in the performance of *that* name, the transcription into our history of Exodus's "I am that I am". But for Jew and Christian alike, engagement with God's self-naming shows a pattern of both conversion and evasion, hearing and misunderstanding. Only as the text displays all this can the full scope and power and difference of the name be heard; only as it is *misheard*, limited and forgotten or abused can we begin to see what its resource truly is and how it is not exhausted by the error of human repetition.

---

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the discussion in *John Goldingay*, *Models for Scripture*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans / Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994, pp. 238–241.

<sup>22</sup> See *Stephen Fowl*, *Engaging Scripture. A Model for Theological Interpretation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, esp. chapters 3 to 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Peter Ochs*, *Scriptural Logic: Diagrams for a Postcritical Metaphysics*, in: *Modern Theology* 11, 1995, pp. 65–92, esp. pp. 66–69, 81–83, 89.

The transforming power of the name of God appears finally and unquestionably, of course, only in the fact of transformation; which is why the eschatological character of the unity of the Bible is as inescapable a conclusion as that of Christ and the Church. Once again, the unity is *given* by the abiding self-gift of God, not by a simple perceptible pattern on the surface of things, and so it is in important ways inscrutable. But also, as with Christ and the Church, there are points of transparency which provide the hermeneutical clue enabling us to say of the rest, “this is what makes it possible”. Reading as Christians, if we can understand the often paradoxical claims about fulfillment in the gospels, or Paul’s analogising of the Christian’s experience with that of Abraham, we may see what kind of unity we are invited to trust in. And the temptations and distortions are comparable. We might attempt to deny the concrete actuality of the biblical text, refusing, as Christians have regularly done, the proper religious and historical integrity of Jewish faith. We might treat the text as a timeless or simultaneous utterance, self-identical in a way that rules out significant conflict, as the modern fundamentalist does. We might – as with an adoptionist Christology – treat the biblical text as a human historical record, externally related to the act of God, so that it may be an instrument of God’s purpose in a very general way that would allow some sections to be disregarded.

Here too we can say that what might threaten the unity of an agent can be compassed within the unity of a textual narrative or a dramatic performance. We do not have to look for a systemic consistency, but for a direction or convergence of meanings within a complex temporal process and a complex literary evolution. To say, with both Catholic and classical Protestant theologians, that Christ is the primary interpreter of Scripture and that the reading of Scripture in the worshipping life of Christ’s Body is the primary place for its understanding is not to look for edifying foreshadowings of the gospel narrative or primitive Christian morality in every detail of the whole text, but to believe, on the basis of those moments of transparency already sketched, that the whole of this record presents us with what – humanly – makes Christ possible: tracing the lines of such possibility, through the very conflicts and incoherences of the text, is part of a Christological reading, more so than looking for a timeless coherence that is not actually *achieved* through the interaction of particular human agents. It is not unlike the process going on in the genealogy that begins Matthew’s gospel, with its carefully inserted references to the tragic or irregular episodes in the story of Jesus’s ancestry (Tamar, Rahab,

Bathsheba): Jesus's identity is constituted by these also, and thus their identity becomes significant in ways not at all straightforwardly related to the detail of the lives involved.

Drawing conclusions from all this is not easy; but I shall suggest a few points that may indicate some implications for our practice as a church. First, if I am right in seeing the sort of analogy outlined in the relation of Christ, Church and Bible, part of the authoritative presence of the Bible in the Church has to do with its witness precisely to the analogical character of unity in our language as Christians. The Bible tells us, certainly, of Jesus Christ, in the fullness of his worldly context, and provides our most basic criteria for recognising the continuity of our actions and narratives with his; but it also shows us what it is for a complex and differentiated unity to emerge around Jesus Christ, in which we are not to look for invariably clear connections and regularities, but for the intuitions of a unity never visible without ambiguity in history; a unity that is enacted through conflicts and in the active overcoming of sin or blindness. The Bible, we could say, warns us against a simplistic account of what unity we may reasonably hope for in the Church. Equally and reciprocally, the tensions of the Church's life ought to warn us against an unhistorical and bland account of the unity and coherence of the Bible: fundamentalism is to be refused not only because of inherent theoretical problems but because of the experience of unity in and through conflict in the Church<sup>24</sup>.

But this is no alibi for the *labour* of discerning or nurturing unity in the Christian community. That labour, though, is less to do primarily with negotiation and formulae than with the shared exploration of how holiness is defined and experienced, how we find a common language for talking about those lives that we regard as desirable and deserving imitation. Clarifying this forces us to reflect upon the essential outline of Jesus Christ's identity as specified in the scriptural narrative. We are involved in developing skills of recognition, as I earlier called them, enabling us to see analogical unities across some historic boundaries.

And I think that our debates about the authenticity of sacramental practice as between confessions need to develop such a concept of analogical recognition: as with the recognition of sanctity, we may privilege certain instances as carrying a maximum of the elements we look for as recognisable signs, yet may be rightly unwilling to refuse recognition to other cas-

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *R. Williams*, *The Discipline of Scripture*, in: *idem*, *On Christian Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 44–59.



es. Ecumenical debate will be about not a total presence or absence of recognisability, but about the core features of the criteria for recognition. Thus, for instance, current discussion between Anglicans and German Lutherans turns on the sense in which the historic episcopate belongs with a core of criteria<sup>25</sup>; internal debate within Anglicanism turns on the relation to such core criteria of the maleness of the ordained priesthood<sup>26</sup>. What makes any discussion at all possible here is *some* sense of the inevitability of analogical difference and the contests that follow from it. The expectation that the Church in history will at some point be free (or has at some point been free) from such contests is, I have been suggesting, a misunderstanding of the relation between the unity that is in Christ's person and the unity appropriate to Christ's mystical body.

All I have said, however, turns upon the nature of that relation and the relation it embodies in turn, that between God the Son and God the Father. Unless our destiny as creatures is to share the contemplative joy of the eternal Son, a destiny restored to us by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the issue of the relation of Church to Jesus becomes a rather academic matter. But if we do begin with a conviction of our destiny, the case is very different. "Ontologically considered," wrote Eric Mascall, "created existence is itself worship<sup>27</sup>," a worship that becomes free and responsible in the case of human creatures (but thus also vulnerable to failure and loss). And the fact that the basic form of the creature's relation to God is worship depends in turn upon the nature of God in himself as free gift and free response: creation itself imitates the Son. It is fashionable to suggest that we do our ecclesiology in trinitarian form; but unfortunately this sometimes seems to mean only that plurality is built into divine reality as

---

<sup>25</sup> See para. 16 of the Meissen Common Statement, in: *The Meissen Agreement. Texts*, published by the Council for Christian Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England, London 1992, pp. 18 f.; and also: *The Report of the Meissen Commission, 1991–1996* (GS Misc 490), published by the General Synod of the Church of England, London, 1996, pp. 25–27.

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps too familiar a theme to need annotation, but it is a matter addressed with clarity and detail by *Eric Mascall* – most accessibly in his contribution to *Peter Moore* (ed.), *Man, Woman and Priesthood*, London: SPCK, 1978 (see esp. p. 23); for another view, see various essays in: *Monica Furlong* (ed.), *Feminine in the Church*, London: SPCK 1984, including the present writer's contribution (pp. 11–27).

<sup>27</sup> Christ, the Christian and the Church [note 11], p. 202: "by the very fact of existing, finite beings declare their utter dependence upon the loving will of the God who is infinite and self-existent"; cf. pp. 158 ff.

well as (or as much as) created reality<sup>28</sup>. The classical theological *formulae* imply something more: we need to think our ecclesiology and anthropology and doctrine of revelation or scriptural authority in connection with the trinitarian mystery, certainly, but specifically in connection with the eternal movement of Son to Father, not in terms of a static plurality of agents in the divine life. That eternal unity in self-giving is what the entire universe is, consciously and unconsciously, caught up in. All our searchings about the nature of unity have to return to this, so that, whether it is a question of the character of the hypostatic union in Christ, of the unity of the Church in sacrament and sanctity, or of the unity of the Bible, we shall be looking to see how what is said leads us back to the

Verbum supernum prodiens  
nec Patris linquens dexteram.

*The Most Revd. Rowan Williams (\*1950), D.Phil. D.D., FBA, ist seit 1992 Bischof von Monmouth. 1980–1986 war er Lecturer in Divinity in Cambridge und 1986–1992 Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity und Canon Residentiary of Christ Church in Oxford. Im Dezember 1999 wurde er zum Archbishop of Wales gewählt und im Februar 2000 inthronisiert.*

*Adresse: Bishopstow, Stow Hill, Newport, South Wales, NP20 4EA, UK.*

---

<sup>28</sup> See various discussion in: *Stephen Davis / Daniel Kendall SJ / Gerald O'Collins SJ* (eds.), *The Trinity*, Oxford; OUP, 1999, especially the articles by Sarah Coakley, Michel Barnes, Brian Leftow and Franz Jozef van Beeck. For a very nuanced and constructive essay on Church and Trinity, avoiding some of the crudities of other writers, see *Miroslav Volf*, *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998.