

SYMPHONIA IN THE SECULAR: AN ECCLESIOLOGY
FOR THE NARTHEX

By

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For Stephanie

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I began asking the questions that the following essay addresses nearly ten years ago, as a youth pastor, finding my Hauerwasian retorts about the “politics of the gospel” and Milbankian talk about the “triumph of the church” inadequate responses to my fellow congregants’ seeming inability to draw lines within themselves between their faith and their increasingly nationalist environs. Which is to say: it has been a long time since I started thinking about the boundaries between church and culture. Fallen creature that I am, I will surely forget some of the countless people who helped me along the way. Therefore I begin, as all good theology must, by begging forgiveness.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

AN ECCLESIOLOGY FOR THE *NARTHEX*?

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.
Romans 12:2

The narthex is a liminal space, if, indeed, it is a space at all. It is neither the church nor the world, but both places at once. It is where we “leave the world behind” as we walk into church, and where we pick it up again on our way out.¹ Of course, we never really leave the world behind. Christians do not stop being Americans or consumers or political party members or employees when they walk into church. In and of itself this fact would pose no problem for discipleship were it not for some sense that we are supposed to be “different,” at least if we take Paul seriously.

Often, however, the nature of modern American society (my context) renders obedience to the biblical command to be not-conformed an act of tragic irony. Once upon a time, the church was a minority religion, a persecuted sect standing against the devil’s proxy (Rome) and its idols. Back then, it was possible to be not-conformed because one could lean on other members of a

¹ I am going to make what some might consider a rather bold move in academic theological parlance and sometimes refer to the church in first person. By opting for this designation I do not intend to say something about what should be the religious affiliation of my readers. It is, rather, that I cannot *help* but refer to the church in this way. As David Tracy says, the theologian’s vocation is normed by the internal coordination of three publics: society, the academy, and the church. Though I am in the academy, and probably should write like it, as an ecclesial theologian, I am ineluctably formed by the people in the pews next to me. Therefore I use the first person to foreground the people for whom I work and to live into what I aspire to be. I have three publics, but I want my primary public to be the church. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 4-46.

tight-knit community for support (being hyper-eschatological certainly helped, as well, because it is easier to risk the world for Jesus when he is about to end it). Once upon a time, nationality, economy, and politics were imbued with the spirit of Christ, at least officially. Then, too, it was possible to be not-conformed because everything, in theory, was already *transformed*. But now? Now we are ineluctably secular, and religiously plural. (This new problem for the church is especially pronounced in my context, where Christianity – baptized in the waters of nationalism – has long been the half-official religion of the United States.) We no longer know how to be Christian as we struggle to figure out where modern, American secularism ends and faith begins. We no longer know how to be Christian as more of us negotiate faith like we negotiate everything else in life, through discrete acts of purchase.² We no longer know how to be Christian because there are no more tight-knit communities, except maybe for those that withdraw completely from the world. We no longer know how to be Christian because we are often not even “officially” religious; if we are born into a religion, we can always opt for another one that suits us better. Now more than ever, faith – like everything else – is something each of us has to figure out for ourself. The narthex needs an ecclesiology because we are a people of the narthex, not just *church* or *world*, but both at once.

In the following pages, I am going to be talking a lot about the narthex, a metaphor that indicates *the way that we negotiate between sacred loyalties and secular inevitabilities in our modern society*. In proposing an ecclesiology for the narthex, I am obviously not going to

² For this point, I am indebted to David Dault’s recent dissertation, which argues, among other things, that since the interpretation of the Bible is shaped as much by the secondary material surrounding most Bibles (such as commentary, cover art, and market demographic) as the “actual text” (which, Dault says, there is none), Bible printers and Christian retailers amount to a “covert magisterium” in Protestantism (and I would point out, to a lesser extent in any religion insofar as it is a recognized “market”), inescapably forming our interpretation of the “Bible” beneath all that extra material. David Dault, “The Covert Magisterium: Theology, Textuality and the Question of Scripture” (Dissertation, Vanderbilt, 2009).

develop an entire ecclesiology, nor am I suggesting that the totality of the church is located in the narthex. I will use the term to indicate the way that Christians today often feel themselves “caught in the middle,” but I will say more on this in a moment.

An ecclesiology for the narthex concerns itself with *how to be church in a world where we are ineluctably shaped by and inevitably support (by shopping, paying taxes, watching television, etc.) that which, by definition, is not Christian*. Thus, in the following pages I attempt to develop a constructive, limited ecclesiology that tries to bring together what it means to be unavoidably secular with what it means to be faithfully Christian. I do this by re-imagining a defunct political theology, called *symphonia*, for our modern context. I call it *ecclesial symphonia* to distinguish it from its Byzantine forebear, as a way to account for how the disciple relates sacred loyalties to secular inevitabilities in a way that is consistent with the being and mission of the church. *Symphonia* can help us be church today because it resists engaging society as one institution to another. For Byzantium and, I will argue, for us (though, obviously, in a modified way) the church is the body of Christ *extended* into its institutions, working the kingdom of God into them. In other words, this essay transforms *symphonia* from a political ideal into an ecclesiology of conditional engagement with secular society on the basis of its proleptic realization of the kingdom of God.

Ecclesial Presuppositions

Before developing the above thesis I need to say a word about the presuppositions I bring to it. Though such prolegomena are normally the stuff of full systematic theologies, the benefit of a brief foray into some of the biases I bring to the table can help serve even this partial and

limited ecclesiology. Namely, it can help keep things concise by preventing my later argument from doubling back upon itself in digressions to answer questions singly that can here be addressed all at once. Because the subject of this essay is *ecclesiology*, I limit the following brief set of presuppositions to the church.

The Significance of the Church

Everything I have said so far reveals several biases I have about the church. The first bias relates to my church affiliation, which I mention because it will shine some light on the way I develop my argument, with an eye toward Christian practice (it is also important for an ecclesial theologian to be upfront about such things). I happen to be Orthodox, but I am not doing Orthodox ecclesiology in any narrow, partisan way. The following account presumes certain conventions of Orthodox worship (e.g. eucharistic practice) and theology (e.g. eucharistic doctrine), broadly speaking, but it also self-consciously ecumenical. An ecclesial theologian always writes out from within her particular community, even if what she says is for the whole church.

My second bias (which is closely related to biases three through five below) is that I presume the church is important, but I do not presume one church is inherently “more important” than any other. The most important church for the singular Christian is the one of which she is a part. Though the Christian’s ultimate loyalty is to Jesus Christ, he is never known apart from his body, which we broadly encounter in a community of disciples. Also, this emphasis on the catholic body of saints requires the church to question its own “identity.” The emphasis I place on ecclesial identity will become particularly important as I develop an account of *symphonia* for

the contemporary church in the proceeding pages. When I refer to ecclesial identity, I mean that the very nature of the church enjoins it to reflect upon *what it is and what is its place in the world*. That does not mean there is something like a uniform Christian identity or culture that makes Christians a uniquely recognizable social group. In a way, the fact that we ask questions about identity and context are more important than the answers.³ We do have an aspirational center in our reception of Jesus Christ from the scripture and tradition that sets limits both on the questions we are given to ask and the range of answers the community deems acceptable. Ecclesial identity refers to a shared task to relate this center to new social contexts in our particular communities. Thus my fourth bias is that, for Christians, the church takes priority. At baptism we bind ourselves not to blind obedience to an hierarchical authority, but to heed the wisdom of our sisters and brothers before all others. Another way to put this bias is to say that the church is “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2.9); the church is

³ Though I do not agree with all of her conclusions, Kathryn Tanner helpfully construes Christian identity as awareness of internal diversity within a broad range of “acceptable” Christianity. I am particularly indebted to her criticisms of postliberal theology. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 93ff.

not incidental to helping us live out the teachings of Jesus.⁴ The church needs to think about its identity because of a final bias, one that is the primary motive force of this essay. I believe the mission of the church is to change the world. Specifically, our mission is to prepare the world to receive the kingdom of God in the eschaton; understanding its place in the world is essential for the church to fulfill this mission. Therefore, the rationale for this bias (for not all biases are without reason) needs to be addressed further, below.

The Significance of the Kingdom

Though talk of “changing the world” sounds like half-a-lyric to a bad Christian pop song (quaint at best and naive at worst), it is a modern way of expressing the *raison d'être* of the early church. Now is not the place for an extended discussion of messianology, but as Jürgen

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all translations come from the NKJV. I am aware that this translation has some serious shortcomings. In the first place, its rendering of passages does not always reflect the most current biblical scholarship. In the second place, it defaults to gender-exclusive terminology when gender-neutral terminology would be just as acceptable. The NRSV is the preferred translation among academics for biblical exegesis. It reflects the most current scholarship, and it, laudably, defaults to gender-inclusive terminology whenever it does not obscure the intent of the text. Thus, in the New Testament, *adelphoi* is rendered “brothers and sisters,” because obviously the author was not only addressing the males in the group. True as that may be, however, I do worry that obscuring the sexism present in the Bible and its language may keep us from confronting it, not to mention that the translations of some passages depart a little too much from the more literal meaning of the Greek text. (For instance, the NKJV renders Philippians 2:13 as follows: “for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” That translation sticks fairly closely to the Greek: “θεὸς γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ ἐνεργῶν ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ τὸ θέλειν καὶ τὸ ἐνεργεῖν ὑπὲρ τῆς εὐδοκίας. The NRSV, on the other hand, injects a fair amount of commentary into a potentially objectionable passage, which reads “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”) Of course, those issues are secondary to my main reasons for opting for the NKJV. In the first place, this essay only engages in something like biblical exegesis once (barely, and then I opt for the RSV). Instead, I tend to use scripture as poetic gloss or to refer the reader to an idea contained in a particular passage. When invoking the Bible in this way, it seems more appropriate to preserve something of the wording with which an American audience is more familiar. The theological evocations John 3:16 is able to muster are diminished when “begotten” is dropped from the verse. For this same reason, I sometimes use the KJV over the NKJV. Subsequent biblical references are not prooftexts as much as invocations of entire theological concepts or even acts of doxology. In the second place, the NKJV is becoming the translation of my American Orthodox tradition for reasons that have as much to do with marketing “accidents” as with the way it parallels certain passages of the liturgy (the NKJV is the translation of the *Orthodox Study Bible*, which is slowly working its way into more and more homes of Orthodox Christians, especially converts from evangelical traditions, like me; this edition of the Bible is published by Thomas Nelson, which owns the rights to the NKJV and is headed by an Orthodox Christian). In the same way that some theologians opt for the KJV, NASB, or NIV, defaulting to the NKJV is my way of standing in solidarity with my particular Christian communion.

Moltmann has noted, the self-understanding of the church as the body of Christ is inseparable from the biblical witness to the hope of Israel.⁵ To be Christian, as Paul said, is to be “grafted in” to Israel’s story, and thus to share Israel’s messianic hope (Romans 11:17). The first disciples followed Jesus because they saw this hope in him. This is what it means for Jesus Christ to be the Messiah; he is the bringer of that hope and this hope incarnate. This hope is expressed in Israel’s prophets. As Amos said, Israel (and so the church) hopes for a world where “justice roll[s] on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream” (5:21-25). One must always be careful when making broad pronouncements about biblical themes. There are always exceptions. Nevertheless, according to John G. Gammie, the prophetic witness, in all its variation, is remarkably consistent in its understanding about God’s standard of righteousness that the kingdom would bring. This witness focuses on what we call social justice.⁶ Thus Isaiah says, “Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow” (1:16b-17).

Though I will say more about the following point in a later chapter, a brief word about how I understand the church to relate to Jesus Christ’s embodiment of God’s reign will help illuminate my constructive argument. The church is the community called to embody God’s righteousness in its remembrance of Jesus. The church is not the kingdom, but it is invited to be a foretaste of the kingdom in the present. Jesus announced the kingdom of God in himself when he stood in his home synagogue and, in his first recorded public sermon, read from Isaiah (61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19),

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans., Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 1-37. Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, trans., Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 7.

⁶ Of course Gammie’s particular claims are far more nuanced. John G. Gammie, *Holiness in Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 71-124.

*The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.*

He concluded his reading with the simple words, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (21). There is some speculation that Jesus had announced the beginning of the biblical Jubilee, a biblical prescription for debt forgiveness and regular redistribution of wealth and resources (indeed, much of the above passage does focus on economic issues – the poor and possible reference to those in debtors’ prison).⁷ Whether or not that is the case, though, Jesus had announced the beginning of a new order. Consistent with the theme of his Mother in the Magnificat, “He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty” (Luke 1:52-53). All present that day understood Jesus’ meaning. The congregation was filled with awe (albeit briefly) because “Joseph’s son” had just announced the beginning of God’s reign in himself (4:22).

M. Douglas Meeks draws attention to the political themes of the kingdom of God by describing it as the “reign of God’s righteousness,” which refers to the power of God for abundant life over death – the fullness of human flourishing.⁸ Like nearly every other Jew, Jesus and his followers knew the the kingdom of God was a new, egalitarian social order. Zealots flocked to Jesus (see Luke 6:15), and Rome rightly feared him as a political agitator because the reign he announced was a threat to the hierarchical and oppressive society of Rome. The

⁷ Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 19-22. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 21ff.

⁸ M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 77, *passim*.

language of righteousness implies not only a new social order but an aspiration. The biblical term – δικαιοσύνη – implies being conformed to a new divine standard. In a manner of speaking, we are called to embody the kingdom in anticipation of its final arrival (a theme I will return to later). As Jesus Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection, we might say that the church is the firstfruits of the kingdom of God. This means the church aspires to the righteousness prophesied by Amos and the egalitarianism pronounced by Isaiah. As John Howard Yoder says, this does not mean the church is the kingdom. Rather, “The believing body is the image that the new world – which in the light of the ascension and Pentecost is on the way – casts ahead of itself. The believing body of Christ is the world on the way to its renewal; the church is the part of the world that confesses the renewal to which all the world is called.”⁹

This call to embody God’s righteousness implies not perfection but the struggle toward a goal, and it speaks to the particular universal quality of *symphonia* to be discussed later. The church has *gravitas*. Like a large celestial body, its faithfulness to Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom has a way of bending the fabric of reality toward that which is the source of its own life and the reason of its own existence. The kingdom makes the church what it is. Without it, we would not exist. Insofar as it lives into the reality of this kingdom, the church brings the world with it.

Now is not the place to run down a list of the teachings of Jesus and to explain how the church lives into them (of course, the kingdom is more than what Jesus said but also who he is). I have broadly described what I presume the kingdom of God to entail as essential background, so that the reader may have a sense of what I mean when I use the term, particularly that I do not

⁹ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Schottsdale, PA: Herald, 1992), 78.

mean “heaven” or anything else ethereal. The kingdom of God is concrete. Nevertheless, in the context of this essay, the concrete content of the kingdom is secondary to the recognition of its presence. I am focusing not on *what* the kingdom is but *where* it is. Naturally, knowing where something is requires knowing what it looks like, but drawing a map is not the same thing as drawing a portrait. This essay is a map. I invite us to locate the kingdom of God – our commitment to which makes us Christian – in the intersection of our ecclesial commitments and secular inevitabilities. In other words, where is the kingdom of God where faith happens in the everyday life of the believer?

The Significance of the Secular

Finally, I need to say a word about the way I understand the secular to present a particular challenge to the practice of the Christian faith. Because I am more concerned with the way that living in the secular divides our loyalties and our world-views, I will not be spending a great deal of time analyzing, deconstructing, or developing genealogies of the origins of the secular and its implications for the church. Not only would that distract from this essay’s focus on practice, but it would also “remake the wheel.” Analyses of the secular are the regular stock and trade of modern theology. My intent is, modestly, to account for the presence of the secular in the church and the church of the secular.

Still, given that intent, it would help to know what I intend this term to indicate in the context of this essay. Broadly, I intend it in the biblical sense of “the world,” both in its positive and negative connotations (like we find in the prologue of John and the writings of Paul, respectively). Technically, secular is a time-word. It once referred to the time we live in before

the arrival of the eschaton. Modern “secularism” is more complicated. It refers to a whole “disenchanted” way of looking at life, in the language of Taylor, where belief in supernatural things like God, the saints, the angels, and the eucharist – all the stuff of traditional faith – have to be justified and explained.¹⁰ Taylor’s description is accurate, as well as what I take to be his implication that some developments in the secular were positive, others negative.

My concern however is not with the secular as an abstract concept but an experience. Two children of the secular I keep in mind in the following pages are the state and the market. I also have in mind what we might call a general historic worldview – the understanding that modern societies see themselves and the world differently than people did in the past. When I use the word *secular* or *secularism* in the following pages, I presume the way these forces influence our thinking and our behavior, often without our knowing it. Secular thus refers to *the narratives we absorb, both passively and actively, from living in a modern society, especially as they are provided to us by state and market forces under a notion of historic “progress.”* Such influences are not inherently problematic, but they can challenge what, for lack of a better term, we might call a “biblical worldview” in some troublesome ways. For instance, in modern, secular politics individuals are seen to possess certain “inalienable” rights. These rights are a good thing. People should be free to believe and express themselves as they wish. However, the rights of an individual are not identical to the dignity that comes as a creature made in the image of God. Rights-talk tends to define people in an exclusionary way, so that legal disputes get sorted out by weighing how the actions of one individual violated the autonomy of another (whether the movement of his hand violated the integrity of my nose, *etc.*). Individuals with rights are not

¹⁰ By which I mean that saying, “God did it,” is no longer an acceptable explanation for scientific phenomena or socio-political events. Charles Taylor covers the rise of secularism in his intellectually (and actually) hefty book, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 300 and *passim*.

called to be inherently open, loving, or responsible to others, whereas seeing people as *imago Dei* puts individuals in infinite series of obligations to each other. My intention in pointing out this difference is not to make a case for one against the other. Rights-talk can exist within an *imago Dei* framework. The point is that we often do not reflect upon this difference anymore than we think about what it means to be a market demographic or a product of evolutionary forces, and so on. My point is not opposition, only influence and the need to reflect upon it.

Therefore, though I sometimes use the word secular and world interchangeably – especially as I develop an account of Christ, cosmos, and history in the constructive portion of this essay – I often opt for the former term to impress upon us the fact that we have been irrevocably shaped by the Enlightenment and its legacy. I use *secular* to remind us that our world is different from the world of Paul or John and to foreground the forces I mentioned above. Though our context is not more *complicated* than that of the first century church, it is more *complex*, and these complexities – the concepts of individual rights, democracy, the market, human autonomy, mechanism, science, and so on that we take for granted every day – requires a novel approach to dealing with our world. In sum, I am not focusing on the secular itself, but with its influence upon us – the way it inhabits the church by inhabiting us – with or without our knowledge, a phenomenon of interpenetration I, again, refer to as *the narthex*.

The Development of Ecclesial Symphonia

This limited ecclesiology thus attempts to develop an account of the church-world limen in the heart of the believer that helps her reconcile the competition between secular inevitabilities

and sacred loyalties.¹¹ That is why the development of my argument will focus more on issues of efficacy than logic. Not that my argument will be illogical, but I will not always claim that A or B is true because of *x*, *y*, and *z* logical principles. Such an argument would require the architectural support of an entire systematic theology. Instead, my strategy in this essay is to make sure that the points I make are internally consistent, and that the structure I build with them *works* – that it offers a functional account of the church-world limen. Naturally, this implies that some narthexical ecclesiologies do not work, which brings us to the the first two chapters of my argument, proper.

My argument is divided into two parts. Chapters two and three are analytical. There I identify a set of problems to which my constructive chapters (four through six) propose a solution. Thus, chapter two offers a couple of dysfunctional ecclesiologies as a joint critical foil to my overall constructive aims. I argue that an ecclesiology that sees the secular as the, *ipso facto*, “enemy” or “problem” for the church leads to a cognitively dissonant discipleship. I recognize that term carries certain psychological baggage, but I use it here in its most general (least discipline-specific) sense to refer to inconsistency between belief and practice. Naturally, all of us, to some extent, fail to live up to our statements about the church. Within the context of this essay, however, *Christian cognitive dissonance refers to a tendency among some theologians and their adherents to insist upon the primacy of the church for the formation of Christian personhood and Christian practice, without developing a concomitant ecclesiological account*

¹¹ The term *limen* can connote a threshold or a boundary. Were I talking about a church/world limen, I would be indicating a separation between the two terms (church and world). However, this term unites church and world with a hyphen. Paired with the concept of a limen, it thus acknowledges the fact of their merger while recognizing a difference between the two: The church and world are united but distinct in their union. Another way to think about this is with a psychological analogy. In psychology a *limen* refers to a threshold below which a stimulus cannot be experienced. We may think of a church-world limen as a place where church and world stimulate each other. While we recognize a conceptual difference between these two stimuli, we cannot separate one from the other in our actual experience.

for the fact that we are not only shaped by secular culture, but also support it. Christian cognitive dissonance is a kinder, gentler way of saying “accidental hypocrisy.” I make this case by establishing a conceptual range between two extremes of what I dub “postliberal ecclesiology,” by which I mean ecclesiologies that replicate in some way the intratextualism of George Lindbeck. On the one hand, there is the ecclesial sectarianism of Stanley Hauerwas, which develops a vision of the church as an “alternative” to modern secularism, as well as “secularized” churches. On the other hand, we have the ecclesial triumphalism of John Milbank, which desires the establishment of a renewed Christendom through the visible church’s conquest of secular thought and, with it, secular institutions. Both would object to my description of their work as “sectarian” and “triumphalist,” respectively, but I am not the first to raise these accusations.

At this point, I need to pause and say a word about my use of the term “postliberal” in this essay. The term suggests an allegiance to so-called Yale theology. It might rightly describe Hauerwas, who studied at Yale, but I have never seen this term applied directly to Milbank. For that reason, in the course of writing this essay, I experimented with a number of terminological alternatives to it. John Bowlin has recently hinted at affinities between Milbank and Hauerwas similar to those I identify below. His term “hyper-Augustinian” was attractive, but only for a moment.¹² It is true that Milbank and Hauerwas have similar readings of Augustine. So the advantage of this term is in the way it points to an affinity between the two without all the *Yale v. Chicago* semantic baggage of “postliberalism.” However, I will argue that Milbank and Hauerwas misuse and misread Augustine, and I invoke the good bishop of Hippo against them.

¹² J. Bowlin, “Just Democracy, Just Church: Hauerwas and Coles on Radical Democracy and Christianity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1 (2010): 82.

“Hyper-” suggests the opposite, that Milbank and Hauerwas are *very* Augustinian. So for me to call them “hyper-Augustinian” would only confuse the issue. Not to suggest that Milbank and Hauerwas are heretics, but, as an analogy, calling them hyper-Augustinian would be a bit like calling Mani hyper-Christian, and my conscience will not abide such abuse of the good bishop. In his recent book *The Trial of the Witnesses*, Paul DeHart does suggest a greater degree of harmony between Milbank and Lindbeck than some might immediately recognize (I make a similar point later).¹³ Therefore, it does not seem out of the question for me to apply the term “postliberal” broadly to both figures. Not unlike Bowlin’s “hyper-Augustinianism,” I use it not to be terminologically precise but to illustrate some conceptual affinities between Lindbeck, Milbank, and Hauerwas. Thus, in the context of Milbank and Hauerwas’ ecclesiologies, the term “postliberalism” intends to be little more than broad theological shorthand to indicate their critical posture toward liberal theology and replication of a certain aspect of Lindbeck’s methodology applied to the church.

My intent in the second chapter is not necessarily to show absolute dependence upon Lindbeck so much as conceptual parallels. Insofar as their ecclesiologies replicate Lindbeck’s method, Milbank and Hauerwas are subject to some of the same critiques leveled against Lindbeck, namely a false “unidirectionality” he posits between culture and the text that allegedly absorbs it. As others have noted, the relationship is not so simple. Text and culture interpret each other. Likewise, the relationship between *the church* and culture is equally interactive, something for which the ecclesiologies of Milbank and Hauerwas cannot account. They think of the secular

¹³ DeHart’s deals at length with the appropriation and reinterpretation of *The Nature of Doctrine* by theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, William Placher, John Milbank and others, as well as critics like David Tracy. His thesis is that the debates to which Lindbeck himself refers contributed to a misreading of *The Nature of Doctrine*, which DeHart tries to amend (not uncritically) in his own book. See Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 1-56, 148-90.

as the church's "enemy" that we can either only conquer or evade, but they cannot explain how, in their doctrines of the church, Christians can be ineluctably shaped by the secular, not to mention support it through their everyday actions, without *de facto* apostasy. This disjunction between claims about the primacy of the church and the way we actually live our lives (Christian cognitive dissonance) is the heart of my charge against them: their ecclesiologies make consistent Christian discipleship impracticable.¹⁴ We say one thing about the priority of the church against the secular, but live very secular lives.

The third chapter closes out the analytical portion of my argument. It claims that a major factor contributing to Christian cognitive dissonance is an excessive confidence in the visible church that comes with identifying it with the kingdom of God. It is one thing to posit the kingdom as the aspiration of the church, imperfectly realized in the present. Indeed, I have little doubt that Milbank and Hauerwas would insist that the kingdom remains such for their ecclesiology. However, despite their intentions, I intend to show that their ecclesiologies do confuse the church with its own eschatological perfection in their refusal of the Augustinian category of "invisibility." This accusation of confusing the church with the kingdom is not unique to my argument, but I will try to breathe new life into it by making it in Augustinian terms, attempting to show how their collapsing of the kingdom into the church stems from their respective misreadings of Augustine's ecclesiology, in particular his distinction between the "visible" and "invisible" church. Both Hauerwas and Milbank seem to worry that the language of "invisibility" robs the church of a substantive critique or alternative to secular modernity, when,

¹⁴ I recognize that there is a downside to lumping Milbank and Hauerwas together in this way. In particular, it blunts my critique because I'm going to end up speaking at a certain point in generalities. However, the point of a foil is not necessarily to decimate one's "opponent," but to describe an alternative more clearly by playing it off what it is not. Establishing a range between these two extremes in the way that I do is not an attempt to derail either figure, but to show how to step off the train entirely.

actually, the opposite is true. The Augustinian distinction focuses attention on the “visible” church by stressing the presence of the kingdom in it, which is proleptically realized in the love of the saints that holds the church together. Refusing the distinction between the church and its eschatological perfection leads Milbank and Hauerwas to their respective ecclesiological extremes, for it leaves available two options: either go on an impossible quest to make the empirical church “match” the perfection of the kingdom (i.e. Neo-Donatist sectarianism) or slacken the kingdom’s critique of worldly power by identifying the kingdom with the dominance of the church in a new Christendom (i.e. Neo-Eusebian triumphalism). By invoking the Augustinian distinction in a way contrary to its intended purpose, which was to foreground the ambiguous nature of a mixed ecclesial body, both fail to see the interaction between the world and the church as it really is.

Chapter four begins construction of an alternative account of the church-world limen. Locating a major failure of postliberal ecclesiology in the isolation of the kingdom of God to the church suggests its resolution lies in expanding the bounds of that kingdom. The fourth chapter addresses the problem of Christian cognitive dissonance by proposing that we see the kingdom of God not only in the church but in the culture we inevitably engage and support. It is not enough to acknowledge the fact of inevitable Christian support of the secular, but to relate that support to our primary commitment to the kingdom of God in the church. Thus, this chapter begins our constructive turn by moving from Roman North Africa to Constantinople, offering Byzantine political theory as an example of the possible. Though their society was formally Christian, in the now defunct ideal of a *symphonia* (or harmony) between church and state, we see an interactive account of the inevitable *perichoresis* that takes place between church and

culture more consistent than that offered by Milbank and Hauerwas. Though *symphonia* had its problems (to put it mildly), it was an honest attempt to comport both church and culture to the kingdom of God that was realizing itself in both. That is why a handful of contemporary Russian thinkers saw the potential of *symphonia* to inform the way the church could relate to an increasingly secular and modern culture. They suggest that the failed experiment of political *symphonia* need not have died in 1453, but that a symphonic relationship between church and world is even more viable in a context like ours. Vladimir Solovyov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Sergei Bulgakov variously suggest that the dream of the Byzantine's might be redeemable not just as a political theory but an ecclesiological "principle" for engagement with secular society.

Chapter five builds upon this dream to develop *symphonia* as a rationale for ecclesial engagement with culture, offering an initial argument that we are able to engage the secular insofar as the kingdom of God is proleptically present in it. To develop this thesis I rely on the latter thinker mentioned above – Sergei Bulgakov. In his sophiology (which is also an attempt to re-think *symphonia* as a theory of culture), the creation is made the expression of God's own inner-divine life, in particular God's love of Godself. Thus God loves Godself by loving the creation and the creation knows itself in knowing God. This helps account for the significant contextual difference between us and the Byzantines by showing how even a culture that is not formally Christian can still be the domain of the kingdom. The sophiology of Bulgakov thus enabled him to develop their basic insight for a more or less secular context. In a word, he made creation the expression of God's own inner-divine life, in particular God's love of Godself.

Though this helpfully grants culture a kind of revelatory, and thus theologically legitimate, status

for the church, I nonetheless end on a critical point that this “sustained metaphor” does not provide sufficient concrete content for ecclesial action.¹⁵

The sixth chapter develops such content by assigning to Christ the functions Bulgakov gives to Sophia, which is thereby “historicized” as the unfolding content of the kingdom of God driving human history. Having offered this christological corrective to Bulgakov’s sophiology, we then turn to the manifold scriptural witness to Jesus Christ to “fill out” that content for the church. The purpose in doing this is to keep the constructive alternative to postliberal ecclesiology only from being an hypothetical “model” – a kind of ecclesial tactic – but to explain how the secular can be incorporated into the self-understanding of the church – its very identity – without such interaction thereby contributing to cognitive dissonance. I conclude that the identity of the church is not to be found simply in its narratives anymore than its culture but in the interaction between the two – a dynamic relationship wherein the need to discern the presence of God’s reign in the secular throws the church back upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, which in turn send the church back into the secular.

This is *symphonia*. Once it had been a conditionally cooperative engagement with the state. Our state is secular (and in our market-driven society it is not the only “ruler”). This *symphonia* is ecclesial because it happens *in* the church – in people of God’s dynamic to and from church to world and back again. It is a *symphonia* that takes place in the narthex. The church can still do the work of God’s kingdom in secular society, by supporting society where it does God’s work and opposing the parts of itself that do evil in the world by constantly

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, “Eastern Orthodox Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, The Great Theologians (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 576.

remembering what it means to be the body of Christ and a foretaste of the reign of God's righteousness.

PART I

CHURCH V. SECULAR:

ANALYZING AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMPASSE

CHAPTER II

“POSTLIBERAL” ECCLESIOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.

Mark 3:25

Facing the man who was about to execute him, Jesus was asked if he were a king, where was his kingdom? He answered, “My kingdom is not of this world...My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36). Jesus did not say his kingdom was spiritual. Jesus’ kingdom is not spiritual anymore than Jesus is a spirit. Rather, it is not of this world because the kingdom of Jesus is not the kingdom of Pilate. Though the church is not the kingdom, it is how we lean into the kingdom of God while living in the kingdom of Pilate. In the conflict between Christ and Pilate we experience an ecclesial crisis – a crisis of church life, a crisis of the people of God pressed together in their pews. This crisis is that we confess with our mouths (Romans 10:9) an absolute loyalty to Christ’s kingdom, but so often we live with our lives a loyalty to the kingdom that is “from here.” This ecclesial crisis cannot truly be measured (though some have surveyed confessing Christians and found that the character of their lives is indistinguishable from anybody else¹), but, at the risk of making an audacious presumption, it is a crisis felt by many of us; we know something is wrong here.

Fully addressing this ecclesial crisis is the work of pastors, not lay theologians, who can

¹ See <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/188-faith-has-a-limited-effect-on-most-peoples-behavior>. Accessed 11 December 2009.

only address it secondarily, insofar as it becomes an *ecclesiological* crisis – a crisis for Christian theologians who try to say what the church is and should be. In the following pages, I intend to focus on the way that some theologies can promote an ecclesiological crisis when their doctrines effectively blind us to the war these kingdoms wage within us by encouraging us to assert (until we feel it to be true) that the church is our number one priority and the fundamental determiner of our thinking and acting, keeping us from recognizing ourselves as the faithful Roman citizens we often are.²

It is true that this ecclesial crisis is a Christian symptom of the challenge modernity and modern life brings to all religions. Once defined by rituals, liturgical cycles, feasts, and fasts, our lives are now defined by the disintegrating rush of the workweek and the high holy days of the gods of consumerism. Nonetheless, ecclesiology contributes to this crisis by proposing a false way out of this challenge. For the past few decades in systematic theology it has become increasingly fashionable to lay the blame for the problems of the church on liberalism, a word often disparagingly forced out of the reluctant mouths of some contemporary theologians. The solution becomes somehow to get around liberalism, often by stressing Christian practices and narratives or by offering a Christian re-reading of the history of thought that shows how liberalism is a heretical parasite on Christian theology and that Christianity is rhetorically more attractive because it is more just, peaceful, etc. For the purposes of this essay, I will rather broadly label these detractors “postliberal,” insofar as, in one way or another, they intend to make the church “absorb” the world (but more on that in a moment). Normally, I prefer

² I distinguish between the words *ecclesial* and *ecclesiological*. The latter refers to the way theologians think about the former, which refers to the ins and outs of church life. Another way to put it would be to say that *ecclesial* refers to concrete Christian practice in communion with the people of God, whereas *ecclesiology* is the abstraction of that process into concepts.

terminological precision over theological shorthand, but the latter can sometimes better serve clarity by alluding to similarities between formally distinct schools that their respective labels might make us overlook. Critics of these postliberals (liberal and otherwise) have generally attacked their postmodern philosophical presuppositions, their readings of particular figures, or their metacritical method that makes sweeping statements about historical epochs and schools of thought. This chapter takes a different approach. In a way, my critique of these figures is not theoretical but practical. In particular it is ecclesiological.

Postliberal ecclesiology can be attractive because it stresses traditional orthodoxy and community. It thus provides theological conservatives with a rationale for continuing to practice their faith (they believe) in the way it has always been practiced, which it does by stressing the importance of a counter-cultural Christian identity formed through participation in the church. There is much truth to the claim that Christian identity must be formed by the narratives of the scriptures, reinforced by the practices and rituals of the people of God, and that this dynamic relationship between narrative and ritual is what will preserve the Christian church from being disintegrated by the forces of modernity. However, postliberal ecclesiology is an inadequate solution. I intend to show that, existing in a parasitic relationship to modernity, postliberal ecclesiology exacerbates the internal conflict between Christ and Pilate, characteristic of the ecclesial crisis described above, into a full-blown Christian cognitive dissonance by presuming a false “unidirectional” relationship between church and world.

There is internal diversity within postliberal ecclesiology, a diversity that will be captured by establishing a range between two ecclesiological extremes, both of which have a common correlate in George Lindbeck’s *Nature of Doctrine* (which many saw as expanding upon the

narrative theology of Hans Frei).³ Therefore, the first section will briefly summarize the argument of *The Nature of Doctrine*, which includes a subsequent exegetical critique posed by Miroslav Volf. This introduction to Lindbeck will be followed by showing how Stanley Hauerwas develops what has been called a “sectarian” understanding of the church in secular culture, and then the “triumphalism” of John Milbank will be presented. The conclusion will again take up Volf’s exegetical critique and apply it to the ecclesiologies of both Milbank and Hauerwas, focusing especially on its implications for Christian practice.

Intratextualism and the Interpretive Community

This section will show how what began as what Lindbeck called an “ad hoc” reflection on theological method can be taken in both sectarian and triumphalist ecclesiological directions, because the postliberal intratextual or “cultural-linguistic alternative” to liberal methods advocated in *The Nature of Doctrine*, ends up being less about the *text* and more about the

³ Paul DeHart has recently argued that the popular reception of George Lindbeck’s *Nature of Doctrine* misunderstood how liberal Lindbeck’s argument was. The differences between Chicago and Yale had much more to do with popular reception of Lindbeck than what he actually said. DeHart’s insight was in many ways anticipated by Gary L. Comstock, who as early as 1987 suggested that the “Chicagoans” and the “Yaleys” were actually performing two similar types of narrative theology, one wherein the meaning of the text was found in correlating it to the contemporary situation, and the other wherein the meaning was supposed to derive from the text itself. Nevertheless, in neither case is meaning achieved without the narrative of a community. Gary L. Comstock, “Two Types of Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1987). DeHart goes further by suggesting that, while the difference between postliberalism and liberalism has been exaggerated by popular theological polemic, the difference between Frei and Lindbeck has been *under*-stressed. According to DeHart, though Frei and Lindbeck have been depicted as “collaborating in the definition of a new, ‘postliberal’ option now offered to contemporary theologians,” when their methodology is re-situated *vis-à-vis* their dogmatic claims, significant differences between the two emerge (191). In particular, Frei’s understanding of the church knowing itself to be a witness to the kingdom of God requires sustained witness to the New Testament depiction of Jesus Christ, the meaning of which must be constantly re-evaluated from “ever new cultural vantage points” (244). See DeHart, 191, 244, and 142-48. For a concise and illuminating example of this narrative, wherein Frei and Lindbeck are depicted as a methodological David and Jonathan, facing down twin hoards of liberalism on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other, see Gary J. Dorrien, “A Third Way in Theology? The Origins of Postliberalism,” *Christian Century* 118, no. 20 (2001). Though I am in agreement with DeHart, and am particularly dependent on the links he draws between the shared objectives of postliberalism and radical orthodoxy, my concern is not necessarily with misreadings of Lindbeck. Instead, I am focusing on the way that *popular* reception of his methodology (the very object of DeHart’s critique) was incorporated into the ecclesiologies of Milbank and Hauerwas. In other words, in this essay, I take the *misreading* of Lindbeck as normative (because it is).

community that interprets it.⁴ Broadly, postliberalism as a method argues that Christian theology need cede no ground to modernity's challenge to orthodoxy, but rely wholly on the revelation of God in Christ, to which the scriptures bear witness, not only for the answers it gives but even the questions it is allowed to ask.⁵ My focus being the church, my intent is not to present a genealogy of postliberalism or a "proper" reading of *The Nature of Doctrine*. As a watershed moment in contemporary Christian theology, this book is important not only because it marks the beginning of increasingly dug-in conflicts between two putatively distinct schools of thought, but in this section for the way it appears in the work of Hauerwas and Milbank. When I say it appears in the work of these two thinkers, I am not arguing for dependence but correspondence in order to extend an important critique of Lindbeck to their ecclesiologies as well.

Though *The Nature of Doctrine* is fundamentally an ecumenical work that tries to explicate "the criteria we [theologians] implicitly employ when we say that...some doctrinal differences are church-dividing and others are not,"⁶ as Lindbeck himself observed ten years after its publication, it was received differently. What he intended to be an "unsystematic" precursor to a longer ecumenical work about how to overcome doctrinal divisions emerged at a time when theological conservatives were turning to postmodern emphases on narrated reality to advocate for doctrinal orthodoxy.⁷ Because Lindbeck's criticism of perceived "liberal" methods deployed similar concepts, his book was quickly taken up and to a certain extent reinterpreted by

⁴ George A. Lindbeck, "Foreword to the German Edition of *the Nature of Doctrine*," in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley, Radical Traditions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002 [1994]), 198.

⁵ It thus considers itself in some way continuing the early work of Barth. See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans., Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford, 1933). Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans., Douglas Horton (New York: Harper and Row, 1957 [1928]).

⁶ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 7.

⁷ Lindbeck, "Foreword to the German Edition of *the Nature of Doctrine*," 196-200. Quotes are from 198 and 199.

that group. In the words of Paul DeHart, “[A] significant proportion of the theological community apparently became convinced that the main point of Lindbeck’s book was to repudiate all liberal theology and promote a ‘turn’ to a new ‘method’ under the banner of postliberalism.”⁸

Lindbeck seemed to have posited two untenable extremes in order to offer a new, third way of retaining doctrinal orthodoxy in a postmodern setting. On one end, *propositionalism* presumes a one-to-one correspondence between doctrinal expressions and reality, which Lindbeck quickly dismissed. Though he acknowledges that some take this view seriously, the short shrift he gives it implies approval of philosophical developments by individuals like Ludwig Wittgenstein, which allegedly have shown the absence of stable linguistic signifiers, such that there is never a perfect correspondence between any expression and a “real” thing “out there.”⁹ He spilled substantially more ink refuting *experiential-expressivism* or *symbolism* on the other end of the spectrum.¹⁰ *Symbolism* is rightly suggestive of Paul Tillich as Lindbeck’s interlocutor on this point. For symbolists like Tillich, doctrinal expressions are “noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.”¹¹ Or, in Tillich’s own words when describing *faith*:

⁸ DeHart, 33-34.

⁹ As an ecumenist, he also raised the problem that if doctrines are either true or false, then ecumenism can only happen in the mode of proselytization. “Thus,” says Lindbeck, “on this view, doctrinal reconciliation without capitulation is impossible because there is no significant sense in which the meaning of a doctrine can change while remaining the same.” Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 16-19, 37-38.

¹⁰ Between the two lies a kind of hybrid, which holds that propositions correspond to real things that are nonetheless absolutely transcendent and unknowable. Finding the “complicated intellectual gymnastics” of this approach unconvincing, Lindbeck quickly dismissed it. Later he indicated that he considered it just another form of experiential-expressivism. Thus, in chapter one he cites Bernard Lonergan as an example of this hybrid method, but in chapter two he becomes an example of the experiential-expressivist approach. This suggests he considers the hybrid and symbolism functionally equivalent. *Ibid.*, 17, 31-32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

God is the basic symbol of faith, but not the only one. All the qualities we attribute to him, power, love, justice, are taken from finite experiences and applied symbolically to that which is beyond finitude and infinity. If faith calls God “almighty,” it uses *the human experience of power in order to symbolize the content of its infinite concern*, but it does not describe a highest being who can do as he pleases. So it is with all the other qualities and with all the actions, past, present and future, which men attribute to God. They are symbols taken from our daily experience, and *not information* about what God did once upon a time or will do sometime in the future.¹²

Here, language is not about the object defined but the adherent’s intentions. The symbol is an expression of her desire to encounter (though always incompletely) the infinite reality at the heart of all religious experience. Symbols must therefore change with language whenever they become inadequate entry-points for such divine communion. Lindbeck takes this to mean that there are two senses of doctrine for the experiential-expressivist. First, doctrine is the religious expression constantly demanding reinterpretation. Second, and conversely, (true) doctrine is the (first order) experience underlying the (second order) expression. Thus Lindbeck concludes, “For experiential-expressive symbolists...religiously significant meanings can vary while doctrines remain the same, and conversely, doctrines can alter without change of meaning.”¹³ It seems to Lindbeck that as a consequence of this oxymoronic double-meaning, symbolism can only reach the most “banal” conclusions.¹⁴ To say for instance, as Tillich does in *Dynamics of Faith*, that all people have faith in something, or that religious people have faith in the Absolute, as far as Lindbeck is concerned, is a “banality” because it ignores the more important question of the *function* of faith for belief and practice in a particular religious context. This brings us to

¹² Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001 [1957]), 54-55. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 17.

¹⁴ Thus Lindbeck writes, “The datum that all religions recommend something which can be called 'love' toward that which is taken to be most important ('God') is a banality as uninteresting as the fact that all languages are (or were) spoken.” *Ibid.*, 42.

Lindbeck's alternative to these extremes.

Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic alternative," or intratextualism has been described as "an extended reflection on an analogy."¹⁵ In truth, Lindbeck never *defines* intratextualism so much as he describes it through an interrelated series of metaphors. His basic thesis is that religion is like a language. Though many implications can be drawn from this this, for our purposes we need to focus on only two. First, drawing inspiration from Wittgenstein, Lindbeck argues that, like language, religion does not express the way the world really is but irrevocably shapes our perceptions of it.¹⁶ It thus comprises a "cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought ... somewhat like a Kantian *a priori*, although in this case the *a priori* is a set of acquired skills that could be different."¹⁷ As a "set of acquired skills" it is therefore, in the second place, something that is best learned through immersion. Mastery requires not only speaking another language, but *thinking* in it, which can only be learned over time and with much practice. (This second implication will be important when we turn to Hauerwas in the next section.)

¹⁵ James J. Buckley, "Radical Traditions: Evangelical, Catholic, and Postliberal," in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley, Radical Traditions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xi.

¹⁶ This is not actually what Wittgenstein says. Lindbeck seems to reduce truth to conformity to the rules of the game, eschewing the idea that language/religion communicates anything "objectively" true about the outside world, but Wittgenstein's point is more subtle. He famously critiques Augustine's theory of language as a collection of objective signifiers for subjective experience in order to develop a theory that language is a network of relationships we inhabit. Yet, Wittgenstein clearly states that his intent is not to do away with the idea that language refers to objects. Of his critical foil, Wittgenstein writes, "Augustine...*does* describe a system of communication; only *not everything we call language is this system.*" Thus language as objective correspondence between sign and signified is not wrong, only incomplete. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans., G. E. M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 3. Emphasis mine. There seems to be a more dynamic relationship between language and experience (religious practice and objective truths) than Lindbeck recognizes. A more faithful reading of Wittgenstein should suggest to Lindbeck that, though religion irrevocably shapes our experience of the world, this does not preclude religion being shaped by the world. See also Molly Claire Haslam, "Language as Expression: A Wittgensteinian Critique of the Cultural-Linguistic Approach to Religion," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2007): esp. 245-50.

¹⁷ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

Intratextualism does not preclude propositions or experiences, but subordinates both to their role in shaping the thought-world of the adherent.¹⁸ A propositional “array of beliefs” and practices form a nexus of communal rituals “*expressive* of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments”¹⁹ that constitute a “set of acquired skills,” generating “basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments.”²⁰ Few would deny that religious adherents have experiences that symbols express. For example, an American may salute her country’s flag because she is patriotic, but Lindbeck’s point is that she came to know herself as patriotic because of ritualized reverence for the flag taught from an early age. For Lindbeck the symbol and the practices around it take precedence over the symbolized. The symbol and the rituals together *create* the experience. Nor does Lindbeck deny that religions make propositional truth claims. But the point for him is not their ontological truth. To ask if something *really* happened is to ask the wrong question. The truth of something is not in its objective correspondence to the outside world, as if there were such a thing as an *outside* to the narratives of the religious adherent, but in its intrasystematic coherence to other symbols, gestures, and propositional truth claims within the intratextual nexus of the religion. In Lindbeck’s own words, “The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols [experiential-expressivism] or as truth claims [propositionalism], but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.”²¹ To ask about the truth of something is to ask if it conforms to the doctrinal “rules” – be they implicit or explicit – of the religion. Thus if religion is like language, then the

¹⁸ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁹ Ibid., 33. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Ibid., 64.

²¹ Ibid., 18.

theologian is like a grammarian. The grammarian is not an apologist, justifying why English tends to put the verb after a noun instead of at the end of the sentence, like German. Nor is she a fact checker, tasked with determining the objective accuracy of the language. The grammarian only judges the internal consistency of linguistic expressions for her or his own particular language. If someone says, “This cat be blue,” the grammarian’s job is not to determine whether or not there is a real blue cat, only if the sentence itself corresponds to the explicit and implicit rules of the language. The theologian affirms the truth of religious propositions in the same way.

In the oft-cited words of Lindbeck, “Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.”²² For Christian theology, he sees the “text” of intratextualism primarily as the Bible, which he call’s Christianity’s “lexical core.”²³ The same was assumed by at least some of Lindbeck’s interpreters.²⁴ But is limiting the *text* to the written word of the Bible sufficient given that, Lindbeck says, religion is a “communal” phenomenon whose doctrines comprise an *a priori* linguistic framework for its individual adherents?²⁵ Lindbeck himself says that the text is the “biblical narratives” that are always already “interrelated in certain specified ways,” ways that are at least partially determined

²² Ibid., 118.

²³ Ibid., 81.

²⁴ For example, William Placher wrote an article summarizing some of his basic concerns about postliberalism (lumping Frei and Lindbeck together as proponents of this new “school”) shortly after the publication of *The Nature of Doctrine*. These concerns focused on the viability of seeing wider culture out from within the world of the Bible, narratively interpreted. He thus understood intratextualism to provide the theoretical apparatus by which to apply Frei’s narrative hermeneutic to contemporary theology. If biblical narrative (Frei) is the *what* of Christian doctrine, Placher said, intratextualism (Lindbeck) is the *how*. William C. Placher, “Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology : A Conflict of Interpretations,” *Modern Theology* 4, no. 1 (1987): 38. The same is true of Volf, as we shall see below. Miroslav Volf, “Theology, Meaning, and Power: A Conversation with George Lindbeck on Theology and the Nature of Christian Difference,” in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

²⁵ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33. Emphasis mine.

by “later doctrinal developments” considered authoritative by different church traditions.²⁶ In other words, the meaning of the Bible is priorly positioned by what Jonathan Wilson has called the “community of interpretation.”²⁷ If there is never a text without a reading of that text, and if that reading is communal, then the *text* of intratextualism must include the community for which the Bible is the authoritative book.²⁸ Defending Lindbeck against charges of relativism, his fellow Lutheran, Peter J. Thuesen invokes Lindbeck’s concept of intrasystematic coherence, which subordinates the ontological truth of a doctrine to its consistency *vis-à-vis* other doctrines of a particular religious community, as the “gold standard” of truth of Christianity. Thus, Thuesen says that for Lindbeck a doctrine is true if it is true for the church. “The determinate settings,” he writes, “which make truth possible are *communal, liturgical activities* such as adoration, proclamation, obedience, promise-hearing and promise-keeping. Thus, for example, when a Christian congregation asserts in the creed that Christ rose on the third day, this proposition has truth-potential by virtue *of the liturgical context in which it is uttered.*”²⁹

This broader sense of the text as the community that interprets it adds new meaning to

²⁶ Of those “doctrinal developments” Lindbeck seems to have the *homoousion* in mind, saying that it comprises the lexicon of Christianity. But the fact that an extrabiblical concept could be authoritative for the majority of Christians only underscores my point that Lindbeck does not understand the “text” of intratextuality to be simply the Bible but mostly the *people* reading, interpreting, and applying it. *Ibid.*, 80-81.

²⁷ Jonathan R. Wilson, “Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm of Biblical Authority,” in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 158.

²⁸ This is not the same as a critical conversation between the reader and the text like the kind David Tracy advocates. It simply means that for Lindbeck truth is not a question of ontology or historicity but intrasystematic correspondence with other doctrines. For a summary of the differences between the way Tracy and Lindbeck conceive of truth, see Richard Lints, “The Postpositivist Choice : Tracy or Lindbeck?,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 4 (1993). On the intrasystematic nature of truth for Lindbeck, see *ibid.*, 660.

²⁹ With apparently unnoticed irony Thuesen goes on to add that the true theology only happens in the liturgical context of the church. Academic treatises by academic theologians in academic contexts do not count as “real” theology because they are not incorporated into the liturgical life of the church. Peter J. Thuesen, “George Lindbeck on Truth,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1996): 50. Emphasis mine.

Lindbeck's statement that the text "absorbs the world, rather than the world the text."³⁰ Miroslav Volf sees in this statement "a strong sense of Christian identity within changing cultures..." Lindbeck seemed to him to be saying that, though the world may change, the church's core beliefs can stay the same. This is because, according to Volf, there seems to be a "unidirectional" relationship between the text and the world. If the job of the text is to absorb the world, and not the other way around, then the world cannot tell us how to interpret the text. Volf thinks this is infeasible. He observes, "We can look at our culture through the lenses of religious texts only *as we look at these texts through the lenses of our culture*. The notion of inhabiting the biblical story is hermeneutically naive because it presupposes that those who are faced with the biblical story can be completely 'dislodged' from their extratextual dwelling places and 'resettled' into intratextual homes."³¹ To reinforce his point Volf notes that not even Lindbeck can follow his own principle insofar as *he* relies heavily on Ludwig Wittgenstein's regulative theory of language, as well as Clifford Geertz's work on the role of language in human development and the construction of reality, to develop his own regulative theory of doctrine.³² Neither man is Peter, Paul, or Jesus, yet their extrabiblical philosophies have informed the way Lindbeck himself has thought about the relationship between the Christian, the text, and the truth.

This has implications for the church. The problem of trying to interpret the world out

³⁰ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

³¹ Volf's critique of Lindbeck could stand to be more nuanced, for Lindbeck does not seem to stress an absolute unidirectionality like Volf thinks he does. Lindbeck just seems to want the text to shape our view of the world *more* than the world shapes our reading of the text. Nonetheless, my concern is not to defend Lindbeck or to offer a better reading of him than that given by those who made *The Nature of Doctrine* the dividing line between liberal and postliberal theology. My point is to examine the ecclesiological implications of this standard misreading, and to apply its critiques to those who stress a similar unidirectionality between *the church* and the world. Volf, 51. Though Kathryn Tanner believes theology operates from within "a Christian cultural context," she criticizes static views of culture, which unidirectionality presumes. See Tanner, 69, also 38-58.

³² See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 20, 33, 37-39, 107, 130. Volf, 49.

from within Bible takes on new significance if the Bible is inclusive of the church, for it suggests that a similarly unidirectional relationship between church and culture is equally infeasible. Our interpretive community is not the only community that positions our reading of the Bible and the world outside it. Try as we might to be shaped solely by this text, there are inevitably other stories that influence us. The outside world also informs the way we think about the Bible and the church that allegedly tells us what it means. This raises question about the ways Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank assert that the church is – or should be – the *primary* factor in constructing individual subjectivities, thereby organizing social and political life. Maintaining the perdurance of such infeasible ecclesial unidirectionality may be a kind of ecclesiological fallacy that contributes to our ecclesial crisis. I will expand this point of critique in the final section of this chapter.

Intratextualism Applied: Sectarian and Triumphalist Postliberal Ecclesiology

In this section we will consider the implications of George Lindbeck’s interpretive community for a doctrine of the church in two ecclesiological extremes. On the one hand, Stanley Hauerwas stresses the church as a counter-cultural institution which, as Lindbeck said, plays a pivotal role in the shaping of subjectivities. In Hauerwas’ view, the church, in a manner of speaking, “makes” Christians who understand themselves to be a separate people, formed by and loyal to the church, *not* modern secular society. Hauerwas thus assumes and accentuates what Volf called Lindbeck’s “unidirectionality” between text and world, making explicit the implication that the text in this case is the church. Likewise, John Milbank has stressed that absorbing the world is the mission of the church, “bringing every thought into captivity to the

obedience of Christ.”³³ While Hauerwas tends to eschew Christian triumphalism in favor of presuming a minority Christian community constantly at odds with secular culture, Milbank is self-consciously “Constantinian.” He wants the church to be the dominant organizer of society (through which our subjectivities are shaped). Though Milbank’s triumphalistic neo-Christendom seems to be at odds with Hauerwas’s counter-cultural sectarianism, they are united in the way each conceives of the limen between church and culture and in their mutual production of Christian cognitive dissonance.³⁴ It is the way they distinguish between church and culture that concerns us.

Stanley Hauerwas’s Postliberal Sectarianism

Though he studied at Yale and names Lindbeck among the theologians from whom he has learned “about the narrative character of theological convictions,”³⁵ Stanley Hauerwas rarely

³³ 1 Cor. 10.5, NKJV.

³⁴ I am not the only one who sees this connection. Arne Rasmusson, a defender of Hauerwas, repeatedly draws comparisons between his and Milbank’s ecclesiologies, particularly as it is supposed to exist as a counter-narrative to modern liberalism or the modern nation-state. See Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jurgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* ([S.l.]: Lund Univ Pr, 1994), 174ff, esp. 274.

³⁵ Hauerwas’ account of Lindbeck’s influence on his theology is not entirely consistent. In his recent autobiography, he downplays Lindbeck’s influence on his thought, noting that Lindbeck was away at Vatican II while Hauerwas was at Yale, and suggesting that he came to similar positions as Lindbeck mostly on his own. Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 49-86-87. Yet Hauerwas earlier credited Lindbeck as being formative for his own thinking, listing him among “Professor Frei...David Kelsey...Ron Thiemann, James McClendon, and many others.” Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1988), 54. See also Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, “The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives It,” in *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, Ma ; Oxford ; Carlton, Australia: Blackwell, 2004), 13-14. Given how rarely Hauerwas cites Lindbeck directly, it is possible that not even Hauerwas is aware of when he is “channeling” his thought. But these links have been noted by others. For instance, Theo Hobson pins the blame for postliberalism on Barth for failing to continue with the anti-authoritarian/anti-ecclesial tendency of his early work. He says this was picked up by Lindbeck who influenced the work of both Hauerwas and Milbank. Theo Hobson, “Ecclesiological Fundamentalism,” *Modern Believing* 45, no. 4 (2004). It is also worth noting that Lindbeck himself observed certain “affinities” between his early work and Hauerwas’s advocacy of a post-Constantinian, counter-cultural Christianity. George A. Lindbeck, “Confession and Community: An Israel-Like View of the Church,” *Christian Century* 107, no. 16 (1990): 492. Lindbeck, “Foreword to the German Edition of *the Nature of Doctrine*.”

cites Lindbeck as a formative influence on his ecclesiology.³⁶ Though the point of presenting Lindbeck's thought in the last section was not to show how Hauerwas' depends upon him in this one, briefly mentioning what appear to be some unstated (and perhaps unrecognized) genealogical links will help us know what points of correspondence to look for. Hauerwas sees the church as a counter-cultural sect whose mission is to make disciples wholly formed by what we might call the politics of the kingdom of God rather than the politics of the state (in Hauerwas' case, the United States). Thus, Paul DeHart has observed that under the pen of Hauerwas, Lindbeck's interpretive community (which in *The Nature of Doctrine* could be any community) became *the* church threatened by liberalism.³⁷ Hauerwas seems to have amplified Lindbeck's critique of symbolist translation of traditional theology into "extrabiblical" concepts and applied it to the Christian community itself. By succumbing to the temptation to translate the

³⁶ He more often cites Yoder as his most important influence, an intellectual biography that has gained wide currency in many theological circles. Yet recent scholarship is beginning to show that there are significant differences between Hauerwas and Yoder. Chief among these was Yoder himself. See Gerald W. Schlabach, "Continuity and Sacrament, or Not: Hauerwas, Yoder, and Their Deep Difference," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2007): esp. 192. Schlabach reminds us that Yoder's final book was a deliberate attempt to differentiate himself from Hauerwas. There is no doubt that Hauerwas and Yoder remained friends, but that is no reason to conflate their projects, which is so often the case. Thus, in *For the Nations* (a title surely meant to answer Hauerwas' *Against the Nations*), Yoder sets out to differentiate himself, somewhat, from those who have embraced a certain kind of ecclesiological sectarianism, among them Hauerwas (whom Yoder names). Yoder intends to demonstrate, through this collection of essays, that the fundamental purpose of the church is not to embody an alternative to society, but to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to it. Withdrawal depends upon the world's response to that proclamation. See John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3-9 (in particular notes 6 and 9), 180-98, 237-45. Nathan Kerr, in particular, has recently shown that, though allies, Yoder and Hauerwas are most divided in how each thinks of the politics of the church (insofar as the kingdom of God is the ground of that politics). Nathan R. Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 128-34.

³⁷ In an illuminating passage on how Hauerwas's defense against this charge was influential in shaping postliberal ecclesiology, DeHart writes, "Hauerwas . . . invested Lindbeck's carefully moderated statements about 'sectarianism' with a sense of crisis, and a cultural combativeness, which were quite his own. Suddenly a recondite discussion of theological method had become a question of the very survival of the church's witness in a secular culture. The rejection of theological liberalism was subsumed with a rejection of 'liberalism' in the socio-political sense, a sweeping denunciation of the very shape of post-Enlightenment society and ethics in the West. Where Hauerwas's charismatic persona and acerbic voice were influential, theological method no longer seemed quite the main issue. Now the call of postliberalism was addressed to a church threatened with apostasy, with corruption by the 'liberal' consensus of the modern Western consumerist and capitalist democracies (and the 'progressive' theologies which provided them religious cover). It was a call back from compromise, to be a counter-cultural witness against the blandishments of contemporary American society." DeHart, 36-37.

gospel into a popular idiom, the peculiarity of its message gets reconfigured into a socially acceptable, but religiously neutral, set of moral platitudes, transforming the church from the singularly unique sacrament of the kingdom of God,³⁸ into what Hauerwas has called a “lifestyle enclave” (significantly called the threat of apostasy by Paul DeHart).³⁹ As Lindbeck said that learning “to become religious – no less than to become culturally or linguistically competent – is to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training,”⁴⁰ Hauerwas has made this communal training the *raison d'être* of the church itself.⁴¹

Hauerwas has thus combined a “Yale School” emphasis on “narrative theology” with John Howard Yoder’s work on the political implications of the gospel to conceive of the church

³⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1974), 240 (footnote 41).

³⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 96. DeHart, 36.

⁴⁰ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 35.

⁴¹ Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 93ff.

as a person-forming *alternative* to the modern secular.⁴² In *Resident Aliens*, which Hauerwas wrote with William Willimon, the authors call for the church to inhabit a kind of tribal mentality *vis-à-vis* modernity (insofar as they pine for the days of a pre-Constantinian and thus counter-cultural church in a post-Constantinian culture). The premise of *Resident Aliens* is that the “politics as defined by the gospel” are incommensurate with the politics of secular society.⁴³ There are church politics and there are secular politics, and the two shall never meet. To make their case, the authors use H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* as their critical foil, a book they call “a prime example of repressive tolerance” that characterizes liberal society.⁴⁴ The problem with Niebuhr’s understanding of the way the church is to relate to the world, the authors say, is simply this: the message of the gospel is not Christ *and* anything, just Christ! Niebuhr’s mistake, they argue, is one shared by all liberalism: to see the church as an institution *within*

⁴² John Bowlin has detected a shift in Hauerwas’ methodology (and thus his ecclesiology) in his recent book, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary* (with Romand Coles). He says that Hauerwas now seems to be “post-post-liberal.” No longer is Hauerwas concerned to defend the supremacy of the gospel *vis-à-vis* other narratives. Rather, he sees in Hauerwas’ openness to the work of radical democracy “a concession to the fact that the churches quite often need extra-ecclesial assistance in order to understand their own convictions, their own narratives.” Rather than speak about the gospels reinterpreting the work of groups like the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) or the Nonviolent Student Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Hauerwas admits that these groups can help the church understand its own mission. Furthermore, Bowlin also observes that Hauerwas seems to have exchanged his one-time emphasis on the Aristotelian virtues (because these can become idols the church uses to cut itself off from the world) for an emphasis on practices. J. Bowlin, “Just Democracy, Just Church: Hauerwas and Coles on Radical Democracy and Christianity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1: 85-86, 88. However, I am not persuaded by Bowlin’s reading for a couple of reasons. In the first place, Hauerwas’ emphasis on practices is not new. If anything, it is a return to the argument about learning to be Christian in earlier works. Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 93-111. Secondly, much of Bowlin’s evidence for this shift to a more “vulnerable” understanding of the gospel comes not from Hauerwas but from a portion of the book written by his co-author. In a rather informal letter written to Hauerwas, Romand Coles talks about vulnerability of the gospel to *critique* Hauerwas’ Christian exclusivism. Romand Coles, “Letter of July 17, 2006,” in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, Theopolitical Visions (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 42-44. At no point in the book did Hauerwas recant his “Christian jealousy.” He only insisted it was not a problem for an effective but “distrustful alliance” between Christians and other activists. Stanley Hauerwas, “A Haunting Possibility: Christianity and Radical Democracy,” in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversation between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, Theopolitical Visions (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 18.

⁴³ Stanley and William H. Willimon Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

secular society rather than a “radical alternative” to it.⁴⁵

The ecclesiological implications of this counterposition are more apparent in *After Christendom?* (which Hauerwas dubbed the sequel to *Resident Aliens*). There Hauerwas argued that Christianity is not a set of beliefs (as liberalism thinks), but it is fundamentally membership in a community – the church.⁴⁶ Of course this implies, “There is no salvation outside the church,” but there is more going on here than that famous dictum suggests.⁴⁷ Soteriological questions aside, Hauerwas seems to be saying that, for the Christian, nothing outside the church is worthy of her consideration and support except insofar as it is ultimately put to the service of the church. The church, Hauerwas argues, is its own polis. That is why he rejects the category of ethics, because it is based on the liberal Enlightenment notion that goodness can be divorced from community-based practices. For Hauerwas, to say, “There is no salvation outside the church” is to invoke the so-called New Testament church’s early surety in its visible, and visibly counter-cultural, purity. He thus approvingly quotes Denny Weaver who wrote that the ancient church “existed over against the world or in a state of confrontation with the world.”⁴⁸ For Hauerwas, this must be the attitude of the true church today.

The mission of the church is simply to be this “different kind of community,”⁴⁹ a people who live solely by the political demands of the gospel, not the secular. The exclusiveness of the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁶ Hence Hobson’s observation that “His [Hauerwas’s] rhetoric constantly flirts with chiliasm, as if salvation is to be achieved through the establishment of a pure Christian community. Hobson: 54.

⁴⁷ Cyprian, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, ed. Walter J. Burghardt and Thomas Comerford Lawler, trans., G. W. Clark, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, vol. IV (New York: Newman, 1989), Ep. 73.21.2.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 36.

⁴⁹ In Ibid., 22.

church upon the life of the believer, in absolute contradistinction to modern liberalism, makes it hard not to conclude that even tacit support of the secular nation state is not tantamount to apostasy.⁵⁰ As we have seen, like Lindbeck, Hauerwas stresses the communal nature of the church in the formation of individuals. The church makes Christians by inculcating them into a kind of craft (like brick-laying) or a tradition. The church is a way of life that one can only learn by doing it.⁵¹ This train of thought is continued in *Sanctify Them in the Truth*, where Hauerwas attempts to deploy the concept of narrative to show how the “cultural linguistic practice” of the church churns out, somewhat like a machine, gospel-practicing, secular-renouncing Christians.⁵²

Calling this ecclesiology sectarian is not without precedent. James Gustafson and others have raised similar points.⁵³ Hauerwas’ strong reaction to Gustafson makes his essay worth examining more closely. Gustafson actually does not concern himself entirely with Hauerwas’

⁵⁰ This, because it would be a rejection of gospel-politics. *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, 93-111.

⁵² Quoted from Emmanuel Katongole in Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 188. See also 77-103, 123-42, 191-200.

⁵³ See also Gloria H. Albrecht, “Myself and Other Characters : A Feminist Liberationist Critique of Hauerwas's Ethics of Christian Character,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1992). Wilson D. Miscamble, “Sectarian Passivism?,” *Theology Today* 44, no. 1 (1987). Michael J. Quirk, “Beyond Sectarianism?,” *Theology Today* 44, no. 1 (1987). Arne Rasmusson defends Hauerwas against this charge. His argument, in part, is that Hauerwas’ critics beg the question by assuming Troeltsch’s distinction between the church (which has a positive connotation) and the sect (which has a negative connotation). This leads to a blending of pejorative theological connotations of sect as heterodox and the sociological definition of sect as an isolated community. Rasmusson insists that Hauerwas’ ecclesiology transcends these categories. His is not a sect but a *polis*, which indicates that the church is a community with a story, and thus a politics, that counters the politics of the modern nation-state. Rasmusson, 183-89, 210-230, 231-34, 245-47. In my opinion, Rasmusson has committed two related errors. First, he has stacked the deck by defining sect so pejoratively. Troeltsch defines the sect much more benignly. He writes of the sect, “Their attitude towards the world, the State, and Society may be indifferent, tolerant, or hostile, since they have no desire to control and incorporate these forms of social life; on the contrary, they tend to avoid them; their aim is usually either to tolerate their presence alongside of their own body, or even to replace these social institutions by their own society.” This is a rather broad description of a “sect.” Thus, in the second place, Rasmusson’s definition of the church as a *polis* – a counter-political community – conforms to Troeltsch’s actual description of a sect. In other words, Troeltsch definition of a sect is Rasmusson’s definition of the church. Therefore, it is not entirely clear against whom Rasmusson is arguing. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans., Olive Wyon, vol. 1 (New York: MacMillan, 1931), 330-31. Rasmusson has basically repeated the argument Hauerwas himself made in “Will the Real Sectarian Stand Up,” *Theology Today* 44, no. 1 (1987): 87. Furthermore, in the case of both authors, the question is not whether Hauerwas *intends* to be a sectarian but whether his ecclesiology defines the church in a sectarian way.

ecclesiology, but his concern extends to those methods, whereby “some historic point gets frozen” and “becomes the basis for contemporary faith and life.”⁵⁴ In an address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, he credited George Lindbeck in particular with providing the theological basis for a point of view that makes “the task of doctrine...to maintain an aspect of culture called Christianity.”⁵⁵ The crux of Gustafson’s argument focuses on the way the “sectarian” theologians have been misreading the Barthian tradition as well as Niebuhr (their foil) to justify their assumption that “the Church or the Christian community is sociologically and culturally isolable from the wider society and culture of which it is a part.”⁵⁶ Again, Gustafson actually devotes very little attention to a critique of Hauerwas, whom he mentions only as example of Lindbeckianism “expressed in ethics.”⁵⁷ Hauerwas’ reaction was stronger than Gustafson’s critique and reveals what the former takes to be at stake in his ecclesiology.

Hauerwas balked at the apparent charge of “sectarianism.” He defends himself against Gustafson’s perceived attack, in large part, by referring to his previous writings, which he says demonstrate how Christians can be of great service to secular culture. However, the manner of his apology indicates that he may have misunderstood what is at stake in the accusation.⁵⁸ Citing

⁵⁴ Gustafson’s critique does focus on methodological issues, given its timing – a year after *The Nature of Doctrine* was published – as well as the attention it devotes to Lindbeck himself. However, as the term “sectarian” implies, he also has teased out some of the ecclesiological implications of Lindbeck’s methodology. The crux of his argument was that postliberal methodology is conceptually flawed because the church is always already implicated in its culture. By foregrounding the incendiary term “sectarianism” (however benignly intended) in his critique of postliberal methodologies, Gustafson helped focus subsequent debate about this method specifically on its ecclesiological implications. He helped make the debate over postliberal method an ecclesiological one, especially as Hauerwas responded to him. James Gustafson, “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40, no. (1985): 84. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* 1-21.

⁵⁵ Gustafson: 86.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 90.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 88.

⁵⁸ Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* 1-21.

Vision and Virtue, Hauerwas says that he has always maintained “that insofar as the church can reclaim its integrity as a community of virtue, it can be of great service to liberal societies.”⁵⁹ However, the nature of this service is not entirely clear. In that book Hauerwas does devote an essay to the subject of the common good, which we might associate with liberal society. His argument is that the common good is not to be achieved by the oppressiveness of a morally neutral pluralism, but by the moralization of politics. He says (in somewhat ambiguous terms) that this moralization happens not from the church making pronouncements on political issues, but simply by being itself.⁶⁰ What exactly the “self” the church is remains unclear, but later Hauerwas does indicate *how* the church becomes itself. In a statement reminiscent of Lindbeck’s critiques of experiential-expressivism, Hauerwas writes,

“[T]heologians continue to foster the idea that the church’s mission is to translate the gospel into the pieties of contemporary culture – that her mission is to spiritualize our civilization and our lives by identifying the current moralisms with the meaningfulness of salvation...but such a view of the church’s mission, I would argue, is theologically askew. The church is not called to build culture or to supply the moral tone of civilization, old or new. The church is called to preach that the kingdom of God has come close in the person and work of Jesus Christ. *It is only as the church becomes a community separate from the predominant culture that she has the space and rest from which to speak the truth to that culture.*”⁶¹

Thus, the “service” he advocates is premised on the church counterposing itself to its “predominant culture” in order to stand as a kind of unique alternative to it.

Continuing his response to Gustafson, an exasperated Hauerwas declares that such

⁵⁹ In *Ibid.*, 77-103, 123-42, 191-200.

⁶⁰ Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 234-40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 245. Emphasis mine.

writings will probably not persuade “those who are convinced I am a ‘*withdrawn*’ sectarian.”⁶²

This response is ironic since Hauerwas has done little to address the charge that his ecclesiology does not allow for a constructive engagement of culture. In fact, his above defense only underscored the need for the church to draw divisions between itself and its surrounding culture.

Hauerwas’ apology suggests he misunderstands the charge. He seems to think he is being accused of wanting the church to “withdraw” into a kind of “holy huddle,” but Gustafson’s point is not that sectarians advocate ecclesial separation. He only uses the word “withdraw” once, and then to describe its impossibility. He does not say that Hauerwas wants the church to withdraw from society. His point is about the intellectual integrity of the postliberal perspective, which he says ignores the fact that Christian morality is shaped by extra-ecclesial institutions in which Christians participate. Because such participation is inevitable, Gustafson says, “[E]ither Christians are put into positions of intense inner conflict, or they must withdraw from participation in any structures which would presumably compromise their fidelity to Jesus.”⁶³ In other words, sectarianism is not so much an *accusation* as a point of critique that stems from an inference. He is saying that withdrawal from society is the only option *if* one is to avoid the otherwise inevitable Christian cognitive dissonance that results from living as if the narratives of the church were the only narratives that mattered for Christian morality. Hauerwas is not a sectarian in the sense that he believes the church can or should retreat from culture, but in that he

⁶² Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* 7. Emphasis mine.

⁶³ William J. Weston has made a similar complaint of Hauerwas’ doctrine of the church. On the one hand Hauerwas wants to make the church the subject of the Christian’s exclusive loyalty, defined by taking a stance against modern secular culture. On the other he wants a church that is “open” to the world around it and can work with extra-ecclesial institutions to make that world better. Weston complains that “Hauerwas wants to have his cake and eat it, too.” The result being that Hauerwas’ ecclesiology lands squarely on the side of sectarianism with no way of accounting for the goal of constructive engagement with culture. See William J. Weston, “The Invisible Church : The Missing Element in Hauerwas’ a Community of Character,” *Journal of Religious Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 104.

believes it is possible to be Christian as if the politics and practices of the gospel are the only kind of politics and practices that shape us. It is the fundamentally antagonistic relationship Hauerwas presumes between the church and secular society that makes his ecclesiological position sectarian.⁶⁴

John Milbank's Postliberal Triumphalism

Though to a certain extent the charge of “sectarianism” might aptly apply to Milbank as well as Hauerwas, triumphalism is a better descriptor for his view of the church because, if for Hauerwas the relationship between the church and society is one of political antagonism, for John Milbank it is one of discursive conquest. The church *is* the eschatological realization of the kingdom of God in history when it becomes not just the dominant institution in society, but society itself, regulating human behavior (*Sittlichkeit*) through the proper ordering of human thought and language. Milbank explicitly sees his project as a development on the work of Lindbeck (as well as Frei, whom he lumps together with him). After summarizing this connection, I will present Milbank’s ecclesiology in the context of his critique of modernity to see how, building on Augustine, he intends to take all thoughts captive not to Christ, *per se*, but to the institution that is the earthly realization of his mission.

Though (again) my intent is not to show that Milbank depends on Lindbeck, it is worth noting that he directly credits George Lindbeck (as well as Frei) for the development of his own

⁶⁴ Some may object that it is inappropriate for me to accuse an ethicist of having anything like an ecclesiology. Such an objection would be ironic given Hauerwas’s own refusal to distinguish between the two fields. Every ethics presupposes a theology, he would say. Insofar as he makes asseverations as something of a popular theologian, a critical examination of his theology is appropriate. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000), 117-128.

ecclesiology, for calling “us back to narrative as being that alone which can ‘identify’ God for us.”⁶⁵ He does think Lindbeck needs some modification, however, but only to make the presumed methodological implications of *Nature of Doctrine* more deliberately ecclesiological. Milbank’s main critique of Lindbeck relates to the static way he thinks about narrative. As stated above, though Lindbeck does not come out and say it, an implication of his methodology is that the interpretive community is tantamount to the *text* of intratextualism, inasmuch as the rituals and narratives of that community shape its reading of its physical text (its “book”). Milbank builds on this idea by finding problematic the way that Lindbeck conceives of the “performance” of these narratives, which he thinks of as being “defined in advance by the exemplary narratives of Jesus,” as if those narratives were deposited at some point in time and now all we must do is live within them (and how a particular cultural-linguistic community could receive such a deposit as “something new” remains an *aporia* in Lindbeck’s theology), as if we were not constantly taking them up again and reinterpreting them in new situations.⁶⁶ As a result of living in these “fixed narratives,” Milbank says, “There is no real possibility here for Christianity to exert a critical influence on its cultural receptacles, nor for these in turn to criticize Christianity.”⁶⁷ To a certain extent the church may operate in those narratives, but the church is not a character within them as Lindbeck seems to presume. If that were the case, the church

⁶⁵ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 387.

⁶⁶ Thus when it comes to christology, Milbank argues that when we read the Gospels we must focus “more upon the kingdom than upon Jesus.” The coming of Jesus, Milbank claims, is simultaneous with the coming of the church, “Jesus figures... simply as the founder, the beginning, the first of many.” The work of Christ is therefore only salvific insofar as it is realized in this community. Jesus does not atone but he makes atonement possible in the church, which means that the work of Christ is yet to be realized. “Christ’s full incarnate appearance,” Milbank says, “lies always ahead of us.” The Incarnation is not yet complete until it is complete in the church. John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 148, 150, 152.

⁶⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 388.

would have no way of critically reflecting upon its sources of theology – that which dictates to the church what it is. From Milbank's perspective, it is as if Lindbeck's view of the church's relationship to the Bible is like a person held captive to the Matrix, unable to evaluate or critique the story in which she also is being told. Thus, in Milbank's estimation, for Lindbeck to think of the story of Christ as a paradigm upon which church doctrine is based unmoors Jesus from history, and thus also dehistoricizes the church that looks to him for its own story.

Milbank intends to “correct” Lindbeck by making explicit the priority of the interpretive community: the *text* of Christianity is not Jesus but, in a manner of speaking, the church. But the narratives of the church have not been deposited in history anymore than the narratives of Jesus. This book is still open. Though Milbank says the church is actually part of another narrative – the realization of the kingdom – he indicates that the church is that through which the kingdom is to be realized. In a passage so pregnant with meaning it must be quoted in its entirety, Milbank writes,

For we do not relate to the story of Christ by schematically applying its categories to the empirical content of whatever we encounter. Instead, we interpret this narrative in a response which inserts us in a narrative relation to the ‘original’ story. First and foremost, the Church stands in a narrative relationship to Jesus and the Gospels, within a story that subsumes both. This must be the case, because no *historical* story is ever ‘over and done with’. Furthermore, the New Testament itself does not preach any denial of historicity, nor any disappearance of our own personalities into the monistic truth of Christ. Quite to the contrary, Jesus’s mission is seen as inseparable from his preaching of the Kingdom, and inauguration of a new sort of community, the Church. Salvation is available for us after Christ, because we can be incorporated into the community which he founded, and the response of this community to Christ is made possible by the response to the divine Son of the divine Spirit, from whom it receives the love that flows between Son and Father. The association of the Church with the response of the Spirit which arises ‘after’ the Son, and yet is fully divine, shows that the new community belongs from the beginning within the new narrative manifestation of God. Hence the metanarrative is *not* just the story of Jesus, it is

the continuing story of the Church, already realized in a finally exemplary way by Christ, yet still to be realized universally, in harmony with Christ, and yet *differently*, by all generations of Christians.

Though Milbank says the church and Jesus and the Gospels are “subsumed” by a single story, the church is nonetheless the culmination of that story. Milbank rightly says that Christ is inseparable from his mission, which includes “the preaching of the Kingdom” and the “inauguration of a new sort of community.”⁶⁸

Milbank does not indicate that this mission is a two-step process, but both comprise the singular mission of Jesus in a way that seems to conflate the preaching of the kingdom with the establishment of the church. I indicated above preference for Yoder’s idea that the ministry of Jesus was to establish the church to be a foretaste of the kingdom, but for Yoder the church’s conformity to the kingdom is regulated by its adherence to Jesus. Even Lindbeck seems to intend Jesus (or the Bible’s testimony about him) to be the narrative norm for judging the validity of Christian doctrine. For Milbank, however, this priority is reversed insofar as “the story of Jesus” is included in “the continuing story of the church.”⁶⁹ Milbank takes up Lindbeck’s idea that the church is an intratextual community, conforming the world to itself rather than adapting itself to the world, but he is even more confident in the integrity of the church than Lindbeck because for Milbank the central axis around which the church revolves and against which its doctrines can be tested is the church itself. The priority Yoder gave Christ *vis-à-vis* the church as a foretaste of the kingdom appears to have been reversed by Milbank. That is not to say that the church does not err. Indeed, most of *Theology and Social Theory* blames the church – or at least church

⁶⁸ Ibid., 389. Emphasis original.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

theologians – for giving rise to modernity, liberalism, and nihilism. Yet these errors do not call into question the fundamental priority the self-understanding of the church has for the triumph of the kingdom on earth. It just means that, if modernity is the “bastard child” of “bad” Christian theology (fathered by Duns Scotus⁷⁰), then “good” Christian theology (radical orthodoxy) must work all the more to right our ecclesial course.

The church’s conquest of the secular is not physical, but insofar as it is ideological it is visible. (An early article which I will discuss at length in the next chapter confirms this. In it, Milbank says the church must visibly absorb the secular by making penance the currency of a visible ecclesial economy, thereby exposing the coercion and violence of the secular.⁷¹) For Milbank, by demonstrating the unfreedom of secular liberalism, with its ideas of human rights and individual liberty, the church shows itself to be a more peaceful and free alternative to the it. The secular is characterized by a simple understanding of space that tries to account for all the parts within the larger whole. Milbank argues for the peace of the visible church on the grounds that it understands space differently; its understanding of the relationship between the parts and the whole is more complex *and* less organized. Within the church the parts are arranged within

⁷⁰ Only theology can address this problem because it was theology that created it. The secular begins by reimagining the relationship between God and the world. Though Milbank acknowledges that Kant and Descartes played a large role in the philosophical structuring of modernity, it was Duns Scotus who laid its foundations. Thomistic metaphysics, following Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, recognized that God did not exist in the same way that creatures exist. God’s essence is God’s existence. Creatures exist as a gift – by participation in God’s existence. Therefore, Thomas Aquinas understood the worth of a creature to derive solely from its dependence upon God. But Scotist univocal metaphysics “flattens out” being, so that existence is something that both God and creatures share. What this does, Milbank argues, is release humanity from dependence upon the divine by positing creaturely self-subsistence. James K. A. Smith sums up this perspective saying, “Scotus’s univocal ontology ... reduces God while at the same time exalting creatures; the result is a double idolatry that stands in contrast to Aquinas’s metaphysics of participation.” The Scotist idolization of the creature enabled Kant completely to occlude any participation between finite and infinite being, and Descartes to posit the existence of God solely from the perspective of the self-awareness of the individual, disembodied soul, etc. See *ibid.*, 278-325. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 47. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, Radical Orthodoxy (New York: Routledge, 2001), 33-35. James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 98.

⁷¹ John Milbank, “An Essay against Secular Order,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 15, no. 2 (1987).

the whole. There are, for instance, canons which specify the political structures and individual practices normative for all the churches. On the other hand, in complex space the parts also deconstruct the whole. In the Orthodox Church, for instance, there are some canons that are simply “dead” (such as those requiring all bishops to memorize the Psalter), with no real explanation for why they are dead. They simply no longer conform to the will of the body. I mention Orthodoxy because in his essay “The Last of the Last,” Milbank expands upon the idea of complex space to explain how power-differentials operate in such a system. There he indicates that he has the Orthodox doctrine of conciliarity in mind.⁷² In Orthodoxy synods may meet to decide on a course of action, or even doctrine, for the whole church, but the synod is only considered legitimate if it is succeeded by the “Amen” of the people. Thus the parts – the “official” rulings of the council of bishops – are deconstructed by the whole church’s refusal to recognize them, thereby declaring the council not really to have been a council at all. In this way ecclesial relationships are orderly without being ordered, peaceful without being coerced.

Thus, in the conclusion of *Theology and Social Theory* Milbank imagines the triumphant church – the church that has persuasively exposed all the heresies of modernity, fully to “take every thought captive to Christ”⁷³ – as “the Other City,” the kingdom of God on earth. While it is true, Milbank says, that the church gave rise to the problems of modernity, liberalism and nihilism, it is even more true that the church is the answer to them. As Milbank said in “Against Secular Reason,” salvation is completely corporate, to be saved from one kind of polis into another kind of polis (the parallel to Hauerwas is worth noting). For Milbank, the choice is simple, “In the midst of history, the judgment of God has *already happened*. And either the

⁷² John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 128.

⁷³ 2 Cor. 10:5, paraphrased.

Church enacts the vision of paradisaal community which this judgment opens out, or else it promotes a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity...”⁷⁴ This statement indicates that Milbank understands the final judgment of God not to come at some point in the future, but, in a manner of speaking, the *parousia* has already happened. The sheep already have been separated from the goats, and it is up to the church to realize this judgment through the instantiation of its own ontology of peace in the way I described above. The significance of this eschatology is that Milbank makes the kingdom realizable in the *visible church in history*. The judgment of God waits upon us to realize it. This visible City, critiquing and correcting itself not by “Protestant” excision but by a constant “metanarrative” self-deconstruction, like a constantly growing and changing Gothic cathedral, inaugurates and is itself the fulfillment of this peace.

I will say more about the relationship between the church and the kingdom in the next chapter. The point now is only to observe how John Milbank’s confidence in the visible Christian community and its mission makes this ecclesiology triumphalist. Like Hauerwas, Milbank has identified Christian salvation as incorporation into a visible community (the conceptual problems of refusing to distinguish between the true and the visible church – as Milbank does – will be saved for later). But unlike Hauerwas, the mission of the church is not to continue itself by inculcating Christian offspring in the “craft” of Christianity. It is to expose modernity as the heresy it is. Because the mission of Christ – indeed the narrative of Christ from which the church draws its inspiration – is the church itself, then to take all thoughts captive to Christ actually means to take all thoughts captive to the church. Though Milbank does not deny the necessity of coercion, he prefers to think of this approach as persuasion. The weapon in this war with

⁷⁴ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* Signposts in Theology (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 433. Emphasis mine.

modernity is rhetoric, and the peace of Christ will come when we moderns learn to accept this new view of history, wherein no thought is thinkable without thinking of Christ manifestly continued in his church.

Postliberal Ecclesiology and Christian Cognitive Dissonance

This section will draw the preceding presentations to a close by arguing that, despite the substantial differences between Milbankian triumphalism and Hauerwasian sectarianism, their accounts of the narthex are functionally nearly identical. Again, the narthex in this essay refers to the way we relate church and secular culture at the level of contemporary Christian practice – the “nitty gritty” of everyday discipleship. In doing so, it will raise the problem that my constructive alternative will work to overcome, tying the first methodological section together with the second ecclesiological section by applying Volf’s critique of Lindbeck to Hauerwas and Milbank’s similar visions of the relationship between the church and secular culture.

One advantage of Milbank and Hauerwas’ ecclesiologies is that they seem to remove much of the ambiguity that comes from living in modern society. We express our loyalty to Christ’s kingdom in the church. True! But for Milbank and Hauerwas the church is in contradistinction to nearly every thought and institution we associate with modern secular society. To be Christian is not to be liberal, democratic (for its own sake), capitalist, *etc.* For them, Yes to Christ’s kingdom requires a deliberate No to the secular. Each may conceive of this Yes and No differently. Generally speaking, Milbank focuses on intellectual and rhetorical triumph over modernity that, by exposing its heresies, sublates it to the visible peace of the church. Hauerwas, on the other hand, focuses on reinvigorating a pre-Constantinian sense of the

Christian church as a sect in the midst of modernity. For him, the church's job is to focus on its own particularity, thereby resisting all forms of "Niebuhrianism" that would tempt us to water down gospel truth by translating our narratives – that can only be communally enacted – into extra biblical idioms. While the application of these ecclesiologies takes different forms, what unites them is the sharp boundary they draw between the church and the secular. This could explain the appeal they increasingly have among theological conservatives and disaffected evangelicals. Each allows individuals to stress in some way or another the traditional beliefs and practices of the church in the face of an increasingly fragmented and fragmenting society. In short, postliberal ecclesiology attractively promises the church and its doctrines as stable ground in the often disorienting and disintegrating effects secular culture can have on Christian discipleship.

The charge Volf made against Lindbeck shows the problem with this ecclesiological perspective. The church is no more impermeable to the world than is the postliberal text. Just as the reader approaches the text pre-formed by her culture, the Christian exists in an interactive relationship between the church and the secular.⁷⁵ The church cannot absorb the world anymore than Bible can because neither is a static entity. Both *are* only insofar as they are acted upon by

⁷⁵ The original sin of postliberal ecclesiology, which it inherits from its readings of Lindbeck, is to think of the church as its own culture. Kathryn Tanner rightly argues that the church's appropriation of its narratives are culturally conditioned, even if this point ironically inverts and repeats the object of her critique. To a certain extent the church is its own culture. It has traditions and customs that are unique to itself, informed by the gospel, and shape the way the people of God see and participate in the culture around them. In the United States, some church traditions can have a profound impact on the surrounding culture. (Thus Tanner's *Theories of Culture* represents the ecclesial crisis backwards, for it solves the problem of relating ecclesial loyalties to secular obligations by refusing to draw a distinction between them). The fact that ecclesial life does not – cannot! – live up to postliberal ecclesiological claims suggests instead that there is a dialectic between church and secular society. Though the body of Christ receives its identity from its Head, its understanding of the meaning of that identity is in some sense pre-formed by factors beyond itself. It may be that, practically speaking, the Christian is shaped just as much by what she watches on television as she is by her baptism. Perhaps in some sense this is tragic, but it is also the way it has always been. There never has been and never is a moment when the church and the secular are not to some degree always already inside each other. Tanner, 93ff.

the people who encounter them. The Bible is our reading of it. The church is our participation in it. That does not mean either the Bible or the church is reducible to our subjective experiences of them, only that neither Bible nor church can be separated from our subjective experiences. Like scripture, the meaning of the church changes depending upon the people who are in it. To say otherwise would make the church not an instrument of God's salvation in the world, but a kind of totem or perhaps the artifact of a bygone era. If the church has life today it is because it is made up of real, living human beings, people who operate in the world and are shaped by it, people who shop and vote and pay taxes. In all these actions, we not only find ourselves shaped by the secular, but we support the secular. If the church is its people who inhabit both the church and the secular at the same time – if the body of Christ is porous – then for the church *to be* is to be counterposed to the secular. The house of God thus divided cannot stand (Mark 3:25).

That is not to say that is not a certain appeal to the way Milbank and Hauerwas counterpose the church to the secular. They do have the effect of driving Christians into their narratives of the church and its scriptures in an honest attempt to live out from within them, but this benefit comes at too high a cost. Namely, it is to be Christian with blinders on. That is a strong claim, I know. Milbank and Hauerwas would not unjustifiably protest that they are well aware that the relationship between the church and secular culture is quite complex and interpenetrative. Does not Hauerwas call for tactical alliances between the church and other, non-Christian groups? Does not Milbank himself appropriate sources antagonistic to the gospel in his own metanarrative? I have no doubt that scholars of such intellectual caliber as Milbank and Hauerwas are fully aware of the church's embeddedness in its cultural environs. My point, however, is that their ecclesiologies do not *account* for such embeddedness at the level of

Christian practice. It is hard to see how participating in a system against which each so sharply counterposes the church – either as an object of rhetorical conquest or a perpetual communal foil – does not make our inevitable support of the secular and our participation in it tantamount to passive apostasy. Both are aware of the *fact* of ecclesial engagement with the secular, but there is no explanation of *how*, from within the high walls of the church, such engagements with the “enemy” are not deals with the devil. This Christian cognitive dissonance – *insisting* that we are exclusively shaped by the narratives of the church and the gospel when, in fact, we are not (and I suspect at some level we know we are not) – is what Gustafson warned us about.⁷⁶ This is an ecclesiological crisis insofar as theologians do not account for the inevitable *perichoresis* between church and secular within the life of the church in a way that informs consistent Christian discipleship.

The church must not imagine itself as if the people it receives are not in some way pre-formed (and constantly re-formed) by the world. What it needs instead is a theological account of itself *in* the world. Yet this theological account of the secular must not be made at the expense of the postliberal emphasis on Christian identity in the body of Christ. First, from a purely pragmatic and strategic standpoint, the religious communities that thrive in modern society are those that stress their differences from it. This is fortunate because, secondly, though the New Testament bears a diverse witness to Jesus Christ, there is a remarkable unity of testimony when it comes to the people who bear his name. The church is “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [God’s] own special people” (1 Peter 2:9). Paul’s lengthy lists of Christian ethical commitments (such as in Ephesians 3 and Galatians 5:16-6:10) are not legalistic injunctions that must be

⁷⁶ See Gustafson: 91.

followed to avoid divine wrath (though they might be that) but the characteristics of an eschatological people, of a people he expects to live differently than the world that is “passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31). So, while Milbank and Hauerwas’ insistence on the unique identity of the church is misconceived, from the perspective of the New Testament it is not necessarily misinformed. What we need instead is to account for the presence of the secular in the narthex while simultaneously preserving Milbank and Hauerwas’ laudable emphasis on ecclesial identity.

Conclusion

The ultimate aim of this essay is to develop such an alternative to postliberal ecclesiology. The vision of the church Milbank and Hauerwas espouse has a certain appeal we should not ignore. As I said in the introduction to this essay, modern secular society has a disintegrating influence on the church. This goes beyond purely intellectual challenges to faith, which in the history of modern theology have been rehearsed almost to death. In terms of practice, which most concerns us, this disintegration is experienced in the way individuals’ sense of themselves – who they are and how they behave in the world – is unwittingly shaped by extra-Christian and extra-biblical forces, and the struggle to reconcile themselves to their influence. The market calls us *homo economicus* rather than *imago Dei*. Likewise, science invites us to think of ourselves not as uniquely crafted beings but the products of evolutionary forces – remarkable, but not inherently so. The state calls upon us to see ourselves as *citizens* rather than disciples. In the absence of often conflictual and ever-shifting identity markers, the invitation to think of ourselves first and foremost as *baptized*, and the call to stand with a troop against an identified enemy, can be quite appealing. It is inconsistent, but appealing. Therefore, postliberal

ecclesiology requires an “high church” response.⁷⁷

Such a response is required because, as I argued above, sharp lines of demarcation between church and culture lead to Christian practice that is no less problematic. We cannot know how to relate ourselves to the influences the secular has upon us if we are blind to them. It is thus that I referred to postliberal ecclesiology as indicating an ecclesiological crisis. Being a disciple is difficult enough without being called to accidental ignorance regarding all the ways we are influenced by and support the secular in our everyday actions. Christian discipleship is never perfect, never fully consistent, but surely it can be less *in*-consistent than that!

In the fourth chapter, I am going to begin developing an alternative to postliberal ecclesiology that stresses ecclesial identity without counterposing the church to the secular, but such a call requires us first to inspect a little closer the streams that flow into Milbank and Hauerwas’ comparable account of the church-world limen. This, because this chapter has only pointed out the problem postliberal ecclesiology creates for Christian practice. I have not identified the source of that problem – *why* postliberal ecclesiology is able to draw such a sharp line between church and secular culture – which is necessary to for an alternative to explain *how* to avoid it.

An ecclesiology of the narthex concerns itself with the relationship between the church and the world, seeking an engaged ecclesiology that stresses the unique identity of the church. As it turns out, so I shall argue in a moment, the way to accomplish both ends is to focus on the

⁷⁷ Admittedly, liberal theology offers a highly consistent account of the relationship between the church and the secular. The church is regarded as an institution inherently subject to change. I do not want to be seen as dismissing liberal theology, but this is not the place to discuss it. Insofar as I am constructing an alternative to postliberal ecclesiology, I can rightly be seen appealing to Hauerwas and Milbank’s theological audience. As far as that objective is concerned, a liberal view of the church is a tactical dead end. For a synoptic account of liberal theology’s vision of the church and the world, see Peter C. Hodgson, *Liberal Theology: A Radical Vision* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

presence of the kingdom of God in the church and the world. In other words, a consistent account of Christian practice in secular culture, coordinates church, world, and the kingdom, while preserving a postliberal stress on the uniqueness of the church. The excessive confidence of postliberal ecclesiology and the inconsistent Christian practice to which it leads, as it turns out, is funded by a misunderstanding of those three terms (church, world, and kingdom). In chapter three I will argue that both Milbank and Hauerwas think of the kingdom of God in the church and against the world when, in fact, so I will say in chapters four and following, to prioritize Christian identity while accounting for our support of and formation by the secular, we must see the kingdom of God as that which gives life to both.

CHAPTER III

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH: REINFORCING CHRISTIAN COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

The kingdom of God does not come with observation...
Luke 17:20

The kingdom of God hides. We think we know where to find it because we have experienced it in the church. We have felt the kingdom in the kiss of peace, in warm wine on our tongues, and in the “perfected praise” of jabbering infants who do not know they are supposed to be quiet during the homily (Matthew 21:16). At least, we think these things are the kingdom happening. It is hard to know for sure where the kingdom happens when angels look like the intense piety of aged widows. To glimpse a wing peeking out from under an overcoat would be more assuring. Yet, this ambiguity is as God intended. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). This is perhaps because too much certainty is a dangerous thing in a fallen world. Already prone to believe we are right despite the evidence, the last thing we need is the presumption of divine assurance of our own veracity. So, it is a good thing that we have to experience the kingdom of God in soggy bread, holy hugs, and infants’ squeals. Were we not so conditioned to look for the kingdom of God in the ambiguous things of life, we might find ourselves possessed of an excessive and false confidence in our own holiness, and the sinfulness, heresy, or apostasy of everything else.

Of course, this failure to see the church and the world as they really are is the problem of Christian cognitive dissonance. Though Christian cognitive dissonance can have many causes, chapter one laid most of the blame on ecclesiologies that apply the methodological unidirectionality of George Lindbeck to the church. It is worth repeating that the previous chapter did not lay the blame on Lindbeck himself. Any suggestion of dependence was secondary to an argument for analogy. To wit, in the ecclesiologies of Milbank and Hauerwas, the church is to culture as Lindbeck's text is to culture; therefore, Volf's critique against Lindbeck's unidirectionality can also apply to their ecclesiologies, the logic of which should see any consorting with the secular "enemy" as apostasy. That neither author would admit such confirms the cognitive dissonance of their respective ecclesiological extremes. Whatever dependence there may be upon Lindbeck is certainly a factor in these extremes, but it is not the only cause. If it were, then my argument would involve critiquing and correcting Lindbeck or their readings of him.¹

Christian cognitive dissonance comes from an ecclesiology that defines itself against secular culture, but such definitions are made possible by excessive confidence in the capacity of the visible church to stand as some kind of purer alternative to or critic of the secular, points of view which are funded by a realized eschatology. The last chapter already indicated that Milbank and Hauerwas tend to identify the church with the kingdom of God. This chapter will make that claim outright. In particular, it will show that the way Milbank and Hauerwas collapse the

¹ My intention to focus on practice is thus partly informed by Francesca Aran Murphy's observation about the nature of contemporary theology. Murphy has observed in her recent book that theology nowadays seems to focus increasingly on methodology at the expense of doctrine (which method is supposed to serve). We are not "doing" theology because we are bickering about how we are doing theology, with the result that how we do theology becomes the theology we end up doing. Thus, method itself, she says, has become the content of much contemporary theology. Francesca Aran Murphy, *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 5.

kingdom of God into the visible church leaves their respective ecclesiological extremes as the only practical options.

In other words, cognitively dissonant ecclesiologies rest on a foundation of realized eschatology. In this chapter I am going to make the case that Milbank and Hauerwas identify the visible church with the kingdom of God, but I am going to develop this argument in Augustinian terms. Though other scholars have argued that Milbank and Hauerwas conflate the church and the kingdom, I propose, in Augustinian terms, that they confuse the “visible” and “invisible” church, which allows for a bit more precision, getting across the same basic point without running the risk of separating the two (the kingdom and the church).² The kingdom of God *is* present in the church, after all (a conviction upon which the alternative I propose later will rely). To make the equivalent claim, however, that Milbank and Hauerwas fail to distinguish between the “visible” church and the “City of God” (which correspond to what modern scholars mean by the church and the kingdom³) is to state, more specifically, that they fail to distinguish between the clearly imperfect church we have before us now and its own eschatological perfection (also

² I am thus reiterating in different words what others have already said. Nicholas Lash, “Not Exactly Politics or Power,” *Modern Theology* 8, no. 4 (1992): 362. Aidan Nichols, “Non Tali Auxilio’: John Milbank’s Suasion to Orthodoxy,” *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 861 (1992): 331-32. Kerr, 123-24.

³ For instance, though Moltmann is critical of Augustine’s eschatology, he does rightly recognize the equivalence between what Augustine called the heavenly city and what we mean to day by the kingdom of God. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 180-82. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans., Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 138.

proleptically present in it).⁴ It implies that they see this fallen church as in some sense already perfect. The second reason for developing this thesis in Augustinian terms is that it funds a focus on Christian practice, particularly when it comes to the presence of the kingdom of God in our eucharistic gatherings, but more on this in the final chapter. In this chapter, I will develop my argument first by presenting their readings of Augustine on the church, then comparing it to what Augustine actually said, and finally showing how their refusal of what I will call *the Augustinian distinction* (between the “visible” and “invisible” church⁵) leads to their respective ecclesiological extremes.

Refusing the “Invisible” Church

Some theologians reject the concept of the “invisible” church because they feel it prioritizes an imagined “perfect” body over this broken one. Serene Jones’ work is typical of a perspective that prefers a “messy church” to an “invisible” one.⁶ Though I do not want to take away from a more thorough discussion of Augustine below, a word or two about his ecclesiology

⁴ Others have observed how both tend toward a realized eschatology. On the realized eschatology of Hauerwas see Mark Gingerich, “The Church as Kingdom: The Kingdom of God in the Writings of Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder,” *Didaskalia (Otterburne, Man.)* 19, no. 1 (2008). Gingerich appears to have filtered his reading of Yoder through Hauerwas, thereby largely conflating the two. John B. Thomson observes that Hauerwas’ attempt to “purge” the church of the uncleanness of its liberal adulterations amounts to “a scaled-down version of the Constantinian settlement,” insofar as it intends to be “a distinctive society with a distribution of powers that are not solely clerically led and cultically focused.” John B. Thomson, *The Ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas : A Christian Theology of Liberation*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology & Biblical Studies (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 206-7. The same is true of Milbank, who, in “Last of the Last,” practically equates the eschaton with radical orthodoxy when he writes, “Theologians who may be the last of the last still have an ecclesial task before them,” which is the fusion of “High mediaevalism” with “Christian socialism,” i.e. the radically orthodox project. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 137.

⁵ My use of inverted commas around these terms indicates that I do not think they are the most precise for Augustine’s ecclesiology. More on that below.

⁶ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 174. See also Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume 2: The Works of God*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford, 1999), 174. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, ed. Alan G. Padgett, Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 270. Volf is actually dealing with the Westminster Confession, not Augustine, but insofar as the former is a reading of the latter, it is reasonable to see this as a rejection of Augustine’s ecclesiology on this point as well.

might helpfully clarify my subsequent critique of Milbank and Hauerwas' misreading of him. I mentioned Jones' preference for a "messy" ecclesial body because she exemplifies a common misperception about the difference between the "visible" and "invisible" church. As I will say in more detail later, Augustine understood ecclesial invisibility actually to foreground ecclesial "messiness." In other words, he and Jones are in agreement on their preference for "messy" bodies. As a bishop, Augustine was keenly aware of the moral weaknesses of his congregants. He also had to contend with the Donatists, who divided the church by insisting on a visibly pure communion. The visible-invisible distinction allowed Augustine to counter their claims by insisting that God's salvation was present, despite the visible sinfulness of the church. In other words, it enabled Augustine to insist that in this fallen church, God's salvation is still present.

Furthermore, this distinction keeps the body of Christ from falling into hubris, the kind that can beset postliberal ecclesiologies. Milbank and Hauerwas reject ecclesial invisibility in favor of the particularity of the church either in triumph over or as an alternative to secular culture. Neither would claim the church is a perfect institution, but that is not the point. Admissions of some ecclesial blemishes are undermined by the way they reject ecclesial "invisibility." In their concern that this distinction robs the church of a substantive critique of the modern secular, they weaken the eschatological thrust of Augustine's ecclesiology by making dangerously clear a kingdom it seems God would have be ambiguous. Because Hauerwas' reading of Augustine seems to depend on Milbank, we begin with the Briton.

Postmodern Critical Augustinian Ecclesiology

In recent years Milbank has turned toward the *nouvelle theologie* and sophiology, but his debt to Augustine is early and significant.⁷ The emergence of radical orthodoxy (originally postmodern critical Augustinianism) is generally considered to have begun with the publication of *Theology and Social Theory*.⁸ However, in many ways an essay published a few years prior, “Against Secular Order,” is a surprisingly readable, more specifically ecclesiological, synopsis of what would become the argument of *Theology and Social Theory*. Though this particular essay offers more precise insight into Milbank’s reading of Augustine’s ecclesiology, we begin by situating it within the context of his metanarrative, without which his vision of the church makes little sense.

In a way, Milbank’s method *is* his ecclesiology insofar as “the situating of oneself within such a continuing narrative [which theology gives] is what it means to belong to the Church, to be Christian.”⁹ In other words, to be Christian is to have one’s own story located in the ongoing story of the people of God. This understanding of salvation, which from this perspective is entirely communal, is a Christian appropriation of the insights of postmodernism. One of the accidental gifts of postmodernism to theology is the destabilization of modernity’s fixed essences. Claims that once required allegedly stable epistemic ground have given way to a kind

⁷ See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri De Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, Mich; London: Eerdmans, 2005). And John Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon,” in *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word*, ed. Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

⁸ John Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty Two Responses to Unasked Questions,” *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (1991). This essay seems to have been intended to draw further attention to the book and to situate it as the beginning of a “movement.”

⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 253.

of narrational fluidity that mirrors faith. With no sure ground ever to stand upon, the world is once again, at every moment, *creatio ex nihilo*. Like the creation in Genesis, Milbank says, we inhabit, “A reality suspended between nothing and infinity... a reality without substance, composed only of relational differences and ceaseless alterations.”¹⁰ However, it turns out this postmodern gift to the church comes with some negative consequences. If life is nothing but the “ceaseless alterations” of narratives, with no clear criteria for choosing one narrative over another, then any narrative is as good as any other. Life becomes a nihilistic version of “King of the Mountain.” One set of stories reigns for a time only to be dethroned by another equally valid set. Like the child’s game, the only arbiter between narratives is *dominium*. Postmodernism, says Milbank, thus leads to nihilism and ontological violence.¹¹ What we choose to believe (no matter how horrific) is, in the end, just a matter of preference and force.

Methodology shifts to ecclesiology when we consider that Milbank’s solution to this postmodern problem is the Christian narrative of “peaceable difference.” This “difference” is not just the narrative provided by the church. It is the church itself!¹² To accept the Christian narrative simply *is* to be incorporated into a community where difference is not erased but embraced in the inclusiveness of agape. The church is the “overcoming of secular power” in “an ecclesiastical counter-history... in which historical individuals find their true identity and their salvation,” insofar as the church stands as an alternative to the postmodern rule of pure *dominium*.¹³ The Christian narrative is thus the church’s embrace of difference without violence.

¹⁰ Milbank, “Postmodern Augustinianism,” 227.

¹¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 278ff.

¹² See Kenneth Surin, “Rewriting the Ontological Script of Liberation: On the Question of Finding a New Kind of Political Subject,” in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, ed. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, Sic (Durham: Duke, 2005), 258-59.

¹³ Milbank, “Against Secular Order,” 199.

We think the Gospels are about Jesus, wrongly! They are about Jesus only insofar as they are about us – his body.¹⁴ To be sure, Jesus is born, suffers, is resurrected and (perhaps most importantly) ascends, but this is all to make way for “the hypostatic descent of the Spirit” to unite the followers of Jesus together in his name.¹⁵ Thus, says Milbank, in the Gospels “Jesus figures...simply as the founder, the beginning, the first of many.”¹⁶ Therefore Jesus was only incarnate in a very narrow sense. In “coming to earth” he was *being* Incarnate, but the Incarnation of the Word is not yet complete until it is complete in the church. Says Milbank, “Christ’s full incarnate appearance lies always ahead of us – if we love the brethren...”¹⁷ Despite what Paul seems to say in Galatians 3:8, in the church we continue to recognize differences in sex, race, and class. The important aspect of the incarnation is that, in embracing Christ, the church embraces all the humanity he assumed. It is not as if difference does not exist. We see Jews and Greeks, slave and free, men and women, but we love them.

This peaceable community is nothing if it is “invisible” because only a “visible” community can overcome secular power. In “Against Secular Order,” Milbank says he intends to use Augustine’s “post-modernist” renarration of Roman history to correct the largely apolitical ecclesiology of Lubac,¹⁸ but, Milbank adds, Augustine himself needs revision when it comes to the way he distinguishes between the “visible” and “invisible” church.¹⁹ In *The City of God*

¹⁴ Milbank wrongly attributes this reading of the relationship between Jesus and the church to Frei. The latter presumes the New Testament to be normative for the church’s understanding of the identity and presence of Jesus Christ in the church, not the other way around. See Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), esp. 45ff, 86ff.

¹⁵ Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 105.

¹⁶ Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 150.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁸ Milbank, “Against Secular Order,” 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 199ff.

Milbank believes Augustine comes close to subordinating the *dominium* of Rome to the peace of the church, but his project fails fully to trace the implications of his ecclesiology. In this allegedly “postmodern” exposure of Rome as an empire built upon violence, Augustine retells Roman history as the history of the triumph of Christ in the church.²⁰ Thus, in Milbank’s estimation, “Augustine effectively treats Roman culture as a ‘text’ in which myth and action are fundamentally at one, and claims to expose meanings of this ‘text’ of which the Romans could not be consistently aware without removing the corner-stone of illusion upon which their society was based.”²¹ Unfortunately, according to Milbank, Augustine made the mistake of presuming the perdurance of the earthly city with the heavenly city until the end of time. This distinction, which was both ecclesiological and eschatological, allowed for the toleration of Roman coercion, and thus it opened up a space for the exercise of pure *dominium*, which, as we have already seen, is now the fundamental characteristic of postmodernity.

Milbank tries to address this apparent problem by making Augustine more Hegelian. He says that Hegel’s meditations on “bourgeois property and exchange relations...connects Hegel’s philosophy of history to Augustine’s philosophy of history.”²² Because forgiveness cannot be given, since we are never able to catch up to the effects of our sins, we are always already put into a relationship of mutual indebtedness. This mutual, infinite indebtedness is constitutive of the mutual, infinite obligation characteristic of ecclesial peace. Perpetual penance negates the “chains of offense and revenge” that constitutes the Roman economy, creating true peace through

²⁰ Given that Milbank makes a similar attempt in *Theology and Social Theory*, it is not too much of a stretch to say that Milbank sees Augustine as an intellectual precursor to himself. Though more generous to Milbank than I am, James K. A. Smith makes a similar observation. See Smith, 46.

²¹ Milbank, “Against Secular Order,” 208.

²² *Ibid.*: 214.

patience and humility, a “life of co-inherence, of constant bearing of each other’s burdens...”²³

In sum, Hegel’s philosophy of history corrects Augustine’s ecclesiology by making “visible” that which Augustine left “invisible.” Presumably this would not have been necessary had Augustine not distinguished between the “visible” and “invisible” church in the first place. Instead, in an important statement that reveals what he takes to be the fundamental implication Augustine’s alleged ecclesiological “failure,” Milbank says that the “positive content” of the church “becomes *invisible* and the world is once against ‘handed over to Pilate.’”²⁴

Milbank’s criticism of Augustine thus relates to the way he reconciles the fallen church now with its perfection in the kingdom. For Milbank the *telos* of the church is to make “visible” the “invisible” through the conquest of the secular *in history*. He reads Augustine in a way that undermines the presence of the “invisible” saints in the visibly mixed body. That is why Milbank (wrongly) rejects Augustine’s understanding that “the true Church, the *Civitas Dei*” is “the collection of true believers, known only to God,” calling this view “almost totally erroneous.”²⁵ He appreciates how Augustine believes the accession of the church in history means “the realm of absolute *dominium* can progressively recede in time,” but he claims that this recession is undermined by the belief that human sinfulness perdures until the eschatological “end of history.” In short, he criticizes Augustine for believing that “as long as time persists, there will be some sin, and therefore a need for its regulation through worldly *dominium* and the worldly peace.”²⁶

²³ Ibid.: 218.

²⁴ Ibid.: 214. Emphasis mine.

²⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 404.

²⁶ Ibid., 405.

I will save a full critique of this reading of Augustine for later, but before moving on to see how Hauerwas makes use of Augustine's ecclesiology, let us pause to take stock of the main difference between Augustine and Milbank's appropriation of him. Augustine left the end of history as God's triumph, coming about when the last of the elect (only God knows) comes into the visibly mixed church. After that, the kingdom would come, the wheat would be separated from the chaff, and the church would become a visibly perfect body.²⁷ Though at times Milbank seems to recognize a notional difference between the empirical fact of ecclesial imperfection (Augustine's mixed body) and the church's eschatological perfection, Milbank nonetheless sees the end of history as the triumph of *the church* over the secular. Though he would probably insist that this work of the church is more synergistic than I have suggested, when all is said and done, the kingdom comes *because* of the church and *in* the church, whereas for Augustine it comes *in spite* of the church. Augustine's distinction between the mixed "visible" body and the pure "invisible" body (within the visible church) inserts a healthy amount of ambiguity into our confidence in the purity of the church's intentions and actions. That ambiguity is removed in Milbank's conflation of what Augustine left distinct. Otherwise the conquest of secular *dominium* cannot happen. The distinction Augustine held in order to foreground the fallenness of the church, holding out hope for its coming perfection in the kingdom of God, is thus explained away in Milbank as something that robs the church of its essence by prohibiting a narrational conquest of the secular.

²⁷ See Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, ed. Betty Radice, trans., Henry Bettenson, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 1972), XX.4-5.

A “Constantinian” in Hauerwas’ Church

Like Milbank, Stanley Hauerwas collapses the kingdom of God into the “visible” church, which is best seen in the way he misreads Augustine’s juxtaposition between the heavenly city and the earthly city into a counterposition between “the church” and Rome, which in the context of his critique, is proxy for the secular. Though Hauerwas has shown more of an interest in Augustine in recent years, to my knowledge he addresses his doctrine of the church only in a few pages of *After Christendom* and more recently in an essay in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*.²⁸ Of these two works, the first is more explicitly ecclesiological. The second assumes the argument of the first, helpfully clarifying points here and there. Therefore, the following analysis will focus on *After Christendom*, invoking *Radical Ordinary* as needed.

Hauerwas tried to use Augustine to make a case for the Christian’s uncompromising commitment to the peace of God in the church. Thus, Hauerwas’ reading of Augustine’s ecclesiology intends a critique of what he sees as the American church’s thoroughgoing domestication. Martyrdom is the starkest expression of this commitment. Christians in the Roman era were tempted to offer sacrifice to *caesar*. Our American “pinch of incense” is a more subtle and more dangerous cultural legitimacy, granted if only we translate our particular theological claims into broad ethical principles, forming the bases for peaceful co-existence with other groups in the “neutral” territory of the secular.²⁹ Yet, for both Rome and America, the uniqueness of the church is under assault by “the pretentious power” of the state.³⁰ Christianity,

²⁸ For Hauerwas’s interest in Augustine, see Stanley Hauerwas and Charlie Collier, “Review Essay: Paul J Griffiths Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity,” *Pro Ecclesia* 13, no. 4 (2004). Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, “How the Church Managed before There Was Ethics,” in *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, Ma ; Oxford ; Carlton, Australia: Blackwell, 2004).

²⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Durham: Duke, 1992), 23ff.

³⁰ Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 36.

says Hauerwas, has never been a set of abstract philosophical or ethical teachings, but a tribe!³¹ One cannot read a book or craft widely interpretable ecumenical statements to join a tribe. One must be initiated, which, for the church, requires immersion in the complex narratives and ritual practices of the community.³² Therefore, today's church must rediscover what the first Christians knew: not its "teachings" but the church *itself* was the instrument of God's salvation. This means that the church must learn to resist the temptation to compromise by turning itself into some kind of "handbook" for healthy living. In short, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord" (2 Corinthians 2:15, 17, KJV). Though a "Constantinian," Hauerwas believes that Augustine's distinction between the earthly and heavenly cities can help the church learn to adopt the necessary uncompromising posture toward liberal, secular culture, teaching "the church to survive, if not triumph, in such a world."³³ The lesson, Hauerwas says, Augustine teaches is that "genuine politics is about the art of dying," which "places the church at cross purposes with the politics of liberalism."³⁴

Of course, Hauerwas continues, Augustine can present a bit of a challenge because he is often read in a "liberal," Niebuhrian way. To wit, Hauerwas says Reinhold Niebuhr invoked the distinction between the earthly city and the city of God to justify the privatization of particular religious commitments for the sake of living in the "public," earthly city. Apparently, Niebuhr's sin here was to stress the "comingling" of the heavenly in the earthly city, wherein Christian pilgrims are to work for the good of an "earthly peace," improving it by "leavening" the earthly

³¹ Ibid., 34.

³² See also Stanley Hauerwas, "The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretative Power of the Christian Story," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8, no. 1 (1980). Stanley Hauerwas, "The Gesture of a Truthful Story: The Church And "Religious Education"," *Encounter* 43, no. 4 (1982).

³³ Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 39.

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

city with the love of the church. In Hauerwas' estimation, this *alleged* misreading transforms the church from a concrete community with untranslatable truth claims (i.e. a tribe) into an abstract religious principle of compromise.³⁵

Hauerwas reads Augustine differently. For him, the point of *The City of God* is to show that the church, not the secular polis, is the only legitimate community.³⁶ Attempting to follow Rowan Williams' interpretation of Book XIX of *The City of God*, he says that justice is defined by Augustine as giving each person her due. Because Rome does not give God the worship owed God, then Rome lacks justice. Therefore, it is not a commonwealth. The only true commonwealth is the church, which possesses justice because it worships God. Christians have to live in society, which makes some coercion inevitable (due to the fact that law is only enforceable with the threat of punishment), but such coercion is not Niebuhrian compromise insofar as one intends education in virtue.

Essentially, Hauerwas says, the Christian lives in society, but is always somewhat indifferent to it. Hauerwas thus refers to the "insoluble dilemma" of a Christian emperor, faced with the possibility of war, to make this point. Because his intention in this reference needs exegesis (i.e. it is not very clear), an extended presentation of this point is in order. Noting that Augustine can sometimes "wax lyrical about the Christian emperor," who desires to educate his citizens in virtue, Hauerwas adds the following caveat:

Yet the Christian ruler, even one like Theodosius I, is in an insoluble dilemma. For the city of God as such, according to Augustine, can never go to war even in self-defense. This is true even though the death of the city is of a different order than the death of an individual. The individual may find death a happy release, but the death of a state means the dissolution of those bonds of speech

³⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner's, 1953), esp. 129-34.

³⁶ Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 40.

and meaning that make us rational and human. Yet the church cannot use war to preserve itself since she knows the true bonds of human speech are preserved in God's eternal will and the *ordo* of the universe as a whole. The church is not dependent on any human system for its survival.³⁷

Hauerwas goes on to conclude from this dilemma that “the church [is] at cross purposes with the politics of liberalism, built as it is on the denial of death and sacrifice.”³⁸ What should be the Christian emperor's willingness to let the state die testifies to the incommensurable relationship between the two.

Hauerwas describes the “dilemma” of the Christian emperor in a way more akin to the temptation faced by the martyrs. Except this time, the emperor does not stand between the lions on the one hand and life on the other; he stands between earthly security and the peace of God found in the church. I have already discussed at length this stark choice between the church and liberalism/the secular in Hauerwas' theology. Seeing how Hauerwas comes to this conclusion by misreading Augustine shows that this contrast rests upon the foundations of a realized eschatology that all but identifies the peace of the kingdom with the peace of the visible church. In short, the above is not the proper conclusion to draw from Book XIX of the *City of God*. Because Hauerwas relies heavily Williams' reading of Augustine,³⁹ seemingly filtered through

³⁷ Ibid., 42-43.

³⁸ Ibid., 43.

³⁹ Indeed, based upon his endnotes, there is little evidence that Hauerwas has given any sustained attention to the primary material itself, which could explain why he misreads both Augustine and Williams. I do not want to be overly polemical by bringing up a seemingly minor point, but the way an author summarizes his source says a great deal about his degree of understanding of it. Hauerwas seems not to have taken the time needed fully to digest Williams' argument, evidenced in the fact that in several places, Hauerwas *nearly* quotes Williams' verbatim. He just changes a word or two. For instance, Hauerwas talks about the “art of dying,” whereas Williams uses the phrase “a discipline of dying” to describe the Christians' faith in “God's eternal and immutable providence” in the face of the possible dissolution of the state at war. Though this is hardly rock-solid evidence for Hauerwas' misreading, as many a writing teacher has told her students, repeated paraphrasing often does suggest a failure fully to grasp the source's claims. Ibid. Rowan Williams, “Politics and the Soul: A Reading of the City of God,” *Milltown Studies* 19/20, no. (1987): 67.

Theology and Social Theory,⁴⁰ seeing how this misreads Augustine requires some attention to Williams' argument. Hauerwas draws on Augustine to counterpose the church to the secular, but, as it turns out, William's point is more "Niebuhrian."

Williams' essay on Book XIX of the *City of God* is a response to Hanna Arendt, who criticized Augustine for allegedly annihilating standards of good citizenship by making a "spiritual" city the ultimate concern of Christians. Thus, she concludes, he makes the public not a good in itself.⁴¹ Williams agrees with that conclusion, but argues that the Christian's commitment to the heavenly city actually makes the public more just and peaceful than it would otherwise have been. A member of the heavenly city is committed to the state only insofar as the peace of the secular is a secondary good, but, Williams argues, this commitment can make the state better because Christian peace is not coercion but *caritas*. The peace of the church stabilizes the public insofar as it is not imposed on people from the outside, but arises out of their own "volition," so to speak. Unlike the external coercion of Roman unity, Christians are united by love "in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Thus, Williams argues that the "Christian community" makes the earthly polis more secure insofar as the public is a beneficiary of the genuine peace of the heavenly city, disseminated through the church into culture. Williams *agrees* with Niebuhr that the love of the church leavens the "secular" state.⁴² However, this improvement of the public has

⁴⁰ Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 170-71 (notes 27-32, 34).

⁴¹ According to Arendt, Christianity had introduced to the Greeks and Romans the idea that the public was not a good in itself because this world was passing away. From this background, she says Augustine attempted, "To find a bond between people strong enough to replace the world." This bond was charity. Thus what began to hold people together was not a sense of the common good but a sense that the church should form one body, "modeled on the relationships between the members of a family because these were known to be non-political and even antipolitical." She credits Augustine's promotion of Christian charity with being the beginning of a modern rebellion against the limits of human existence because for Augustine, she says, the motive for work in the world was no longer the world itself but an obligation to another, higher one, lived out in the church. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), 53-54.

⁴² Niebuhr, 134-137, also 116.

one important caveat: when it comes to war, Arendt does have a point. In those cases, sometimes the Christian must let the state die. Thus, says Williams, “There can be no crusade, no victory at any price: he [the Christian emperor] has the alarming task of discerning the point at which what he is defending has ceased to be defensible because the means of defence beyond this point undermine the real justice in the state by implicitly treating it as an absolute, to be preserved at all costs.”⁴³

Hauerwas reads this dilemma in a way that seems to solve it by implying that the proper course for a Christian emperor faced with war is to let the state die, whereas Williams’ point is more nuanced. Hauerwas seems to have missed that the tension he rightly reads between the earthly peace and the peace of the heavenly city is worked out in the pre-eschatological mixture of the two. Thus, though Augustine does say that the heavenly city refuses to wage war to defend itself, he also says that a *Christian* can go to war, and he is clear that the visible church and the saints within it are beneficiaries of the earthly peace won by violence.⁴⁴ Thus, he advised Count Bonifatius to remain a general because *the church* would better be served by the protection of his army.⁴⁵ In other words, though the church may not directly engage in war to defend itself, its *members* may engage in a war to defend *the state*, from which the saints in the visible church benefit.

It seems that Hauerwas has read his own prior counterposition between church and culture into the good bishop’s more complex ecclesiology. This brings us, finally, to the way his

⁴³ Williams, “Politics and the Soul,” 66.

⁴⁴ For a comprehensive summary of Augustine’s political thought (including war), see Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius : A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100-1625* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 104-63.

⁴⁵ See Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, trans., Antonia Nevill (London: SCM, 2002), 470ff.

counterposition between the church and the secular collapses the kingdom of God into the church. Because this conflation is revealed in an extended passage, to avoid confusion, I quote it in its entirety, emphasizing important statements that highlight Hauerwas' misreading. Hauerwas has just finished critiquing Niebuhr's reading of Augustine and offered his own, when he says,

The standard response to those who emphasize Augustine's account of the church is that such an emphasis on the church *confuses the church with the city of God*. The latter is not and cannot be instantiated in society or church. Yet such a reading of Augustine, a reading that is almost required by commitment to liberal social order, fails to see that *Augustine does not think of the two cities as two distinct human associations*.

It is unclear the conclusion Hauerwas wants his reader to draw from the above statement. In his attempt to dismiss his "liberal" critics' reading of Augustine, he seems actually to accept it, confirming their accusation. His response to the charge of confusing the *church* with *the city of God* is that Augustine does not keep the *two cities* distinct. This rebuttal suggests that Hauerwas is confused about the relationship between the two cities and the church in Augustine's theology. His conclusion does not follow from his argument. Of course Augustine does not separate the heavenly and the earthly city, but that is not the accusation leveled against Hauerwas. He is not accused of confusing the heavenly city with the earthly city but of confusing the heavenly city with the church. Therefore, Hauerwas' defense does not address the charge. Assuming he means to defend himself, there are only two ways to make sense of this rebuttal. In saying that Augustine does not separate the two cities, Hauerwas could mean to identify the church with the earthly city. That would mean Hauerwas intends to argue that the church and the world are not two distinct human associations, but that conclusion would contradict the rest of his ecclesiology, which (again) depends on sharply contrasting church and secular culture. Nor would such a response answer the charge of confusing the church with the kingdom. The other possibility is

that Hauerwas could mean to argue that the church and the heavenly city are not two distinct human associations. In that case, he would actually be accepting the charge, meaning to conflate the church with the kingdom. Admittedly, neither conclusion is entirely clear from the passage at hand, but the latter does make slightly more sense in light of the way I have already argued Hauerwas reads his own counterpositional ecclesiology into Williams. Hauerwas seems to say that it is acceptable to confuse the church with the kingdom because, he believes, Augustine does the same. That said, I do not want to be uncharitable to Hauerwas. The fact, as I have argued, that he misreads Augustine's ecclesiology in Williams makes also makes it possible that he simply did not realize he was not answering his hypothetical critics' charge. In that case, then, at minimum, it is reasonable to say that Hauerwas' short retort does not respond to the accusation. Really, from the perspective of Augustine's own ecclesiology, Hauerwas' statement about the two cities not being two distinct associations should take the air out of his argument. In that case, there can be no basis for claiming that the politics of the secular and the politics of the church are incommensurate (this side of the eschaton).

With all due respect to Hauerwas, it seems that he has greatly misunderstood Augustine's ecclesiology in a way that moves Augustine's eschaton into the present. As Hauerwas reads Book XIX of the *City of God*, Augustine juxtaposes the church to Rome. However, Williams is more careful in his presentation of Augustine, who actually talks less about *the church* and more about *the saints* who abide in it. This point is more than a terminological quibble. In Augustine's ecclesiology, as we will see more clearly in a moment, the difference between the saints and the church is significant. Put simply, Augustine's reference to the saints is eschatological. He is talking not about the whole church but the elect in it, who will be shown to be the true and

perfected body in the kingdom of God. Consistent with my presentation of Hauerwas' reading of Augustine above, talking about the church rather than the saints suggests a present contrast between the church and culture, whereas focusing on the saints stresses the present imperfection of the church that will finally be worked out in the eschaton. Thus, Book XIX of *The City of God* is less an ecclesiology than the beginning of his eschatology – which Augustine continues to develop in subsequent books – insofar as he tries to explain how the kingdom of God can be partially realized in the present.⁴⁶ Hauerwas' less precise terminology is significant in the way that it promotes confusion of what Augustine leaves more distinct: the “visible” church and the kingdom of God. Augustine draws a contrast between this life in mixed-up pilgrimage and the life of the saints to come, a contrast that gets flattened out on Hauerwas' ecclesiological canvas. Perhaps Hauerwas has not realized that, for Augustine, the heavenly city is in the church, but the church is not the heavenly city. That would explain why he seems to miss that, this side of the eschaton, the two cities (the saints and Rome) are really implicated in each other.

Though Hauerwas does not presume the absolute present perfection of the church, in his efforts to make the church a visible alternative to the modern secular, his reading of Augustine does tend to collapse Augustine's eschatological “saints” into the present “visible” church, particularly in Hauerwas' seeming misunderstanding that the church and Rome always already interpenetrate each other.⁴⁷ I do not want to belabor the point, but it is worth noting that Hauerwas virtually replicates this same argument and its conflation in an essay written almost twenty years later. Addressing the political philosophy of his friend, Romand Coles, Hauerwas invokes Augustine as an example of the disruptive politics of Christianity. The church, he says,

⁴⁶ See, for example, Augustine, XIX.19-20.

⁴⁷ Bowlin, “Just Democracy, Just Church: Hauerwas and Coles on Radical Democracy and Christianity,” 82-83.

can interrupt Roman coercion because its glory is sought not in the violence of earthly conquest but in martyrdom. It is the church's remembrance of its martyrs that makes it a radical political community. Says Hauerwas, "In short, a community shaped by the memory of the martyrs makes possible a patient people capable of the slow, hard work of a politics of place, because they are not driven by the politics of fear."⁴⁸ Such a community is possible because the nonviolence of the church forms "a people who are not only capable of working for justice, but who are themselves just."⁴⁹ Thus, consistent with Hauerwas' ecclesiology presented in the first chapter, the purpose of the church is to instill in its members virtues necessary to embody an alternative to the modern, secular state. Again, the emphasis for Augustine is not so much on the church being an alternative to Rome, but leavening Rome with its own peace to make what we would call the secular "better" (so to speak). In sum, the difference between Augustine and Hauerwas is that Augustine more clearly recognizes that the saints are also Roman and that Christians are also American, whereas, as Hauerwas reads Augustine, the two never meet.

The Necessity of the "Invisible" Church

The previous section attempted to show how Milbank and Hauerwas tend to collapse the eschatological perfection of the church in the heavenly city into its present manifestation (though both would rightly be quick to insist that the present church is not perfect). The next section will attempt to show how this contributes to their cognitively dissonant ecclesiological extremes, but to get to that point we need to consider why Augustine felt it necessary to distinguish between the "visible" and "invisible" church in the first place. My intent in this section is twofold. First, it

⁴⁸ Hauerwas, "Haunting Possibility," 26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

is to help us see, through an examination of the history, what can happen when we fail properly to distinguish between the church and its eschatological perfection; in so doing, I also want implicitly to demonstrate the necessity of the Augustinian distinction for Christian practice.

The controversies Augustine dealt with in his own life as a pastor and theologian demonstrate the need for this distinction to preserve ecclesial “messiness” by showing what happens when we want to realize the kingdom in the present. In other words, in this section, we turn to the history that Milbank and Hauerwas partly repeat. This does require a brief foray into some of the issues that informed Augustine’s ecclesiology. Augustine is sometimes depicted as an aloof academic, pontificating about things like predestination and the damnation of unbaptized infants from his intellectual ivory tower, when the fact of the matter is that he developed his theology “in the trenches.”⁵⁰ So, to understand the necessity of the Augustinian distinction, we need to understand the pastoral issues at play, which go back to the controversies he inherited from Tertullian and Cyprian.

Background to the Augustinian Distinction

The controversy that occupied most of Augustine’s pastoral life (and laid the groundwork for his reaction to the Pelagians) was Donatism.⁵¹ The roots of Donatism and Augustine’s response to it are derived from two different ways of synthesizing the theologies of Tertullian

⁵⁰ Some of his works are so complicated because he was always writing ahead of himself, his massive intellect trying to catch up to whatever controversy he was embroiled in. In many ways he was like John Wesley, whom Albert Outler called a “folk theologian.” Developing his “unsystematic” theology by careful study in reaction to whatever pastoral problem he was dealing with. Albert Cook Outler, “John Wesley : Folk-Theologian,” *Theology Today* 34, no. 2 (1977). Serge Lancel and, to a lesser extent, Gerald Bonner have gone a great way to showing the connections between the everyday affairs of Augustine’s own life and the development of his thought. See Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 3rd ed. (Norwich: Canterbury, 2002).

⁵¹ See J. Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1980), esp. 53-88.

and Cyprian, both of whom were reacting to culture in different ways. Tertullian emphasized a visibly pure church in a hostile culture, governed by the *charismata* of the Holy Spirit. Cyprian placed an equally strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit, “domesticated” by the episcopal *collegia*, as a tacit acknowledgment of inevitable ecclesial adjustment to culture. We turn first to Tertullian.

The view that Tertullian started out as a catholic, only to be seduced later by the Montanist “heresy,” has been thoroughly discredited.⁵² To be sure, Tertullian thought of the church as a community of rigorous discipline.⁵³ He was almost certainly drawn to the New Prophecy movement because he saw an unacceptable loosening of moral standards among his fellow catholics, as some of his later “anti-Psychic” writings suggest.⁵⁴ He was able to join this movement without schism (in his opinion) because of the way he thought of spiritual authority in the church. Though he believed in apostolic succession,⁵⁵ he believed the true church was one

⁵² See David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1995), 27-51. Rankin helpfully compares Montanism to Methodism, which started out as a renewal movement within Anglicanism that only formally separated from it after its founder’s death. In the same way, during Tertullian’s life, Rankin argues, the New Prophecy was a movement of reform, not schism. *Ibid.*, 37. Though historians often opt for an uppercase “Catholic” church to Donatism, but properly speaking we are not yet talking about Roman Catholicism. Therefore, I will continue to refer to the catholic church in a more credal sense.

⁵³ In his Apology he spoke highly of the morals of the Christians and the “great gravity” with which “tried men of our elders” censure and rebuke the congregants. Tertullian, “Apology,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997), 39.

⁵⁴ Tertullian defended the movement of which he was a part on the grounds that a more disciplined person is probably more spiritual than a person who complains about praying or fasting too much, or having too little sex. Thus one of his strongest arguments against the movement relying on false prophecy was that a devil would inspire less discipline, but the Holy Spirit (in the Paraclete) would call for greater rigor. See Tertullian, “On Fasting in Opposition to the Psychics,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997), 1, 10-12, 17. Tertullian, “On Monogamy,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997), 1-2, 4, 12, 15-16. Tertullian, “On Modesty,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997), 11-12.

⁵⁵ In his Prescription Against Heretics he challenged his opponents to produce records showing a line of succession back to an apostolic founder. Tertullian, “Prescription against Heretics,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997), 32.

that held on to the apostles' teaching – the rule of faith.⁵⁶ The apostles and their episcopal successors were subordinate to that which had been delivered by Christ and disseminated to the orthodox by the continued work of the Spirit. Thus, when the pope (either of Carthage or Rome) granted a general indulgence to adulterers, Tertullian objected on the grounds that he had no such authority. Tertullian's own words reveal a great deal about the nature of the church and the power of forgiveness in it.

For, in accordance with the person of Peter, it is to *spiritual* men that this power will correspondently appertain, either to an apostle or else to a prophet. For the very Church itself is, properly and principally, the Spirit Himself, in whom is the Trinity of the One Divinity – Father, Son. [*sic*] and Holy Spirit. (The Spirit) combines that Church which the Lord has made to consist in “three.” And thus, from that time forward, every number (of persons) who may have combined together in faith is accounted “a Church,” from the Author and Consecrator (of the Church). And accordingly “the Church” it is true, will forgive sins: but (it will be) the Church of the Spirit, by means of a spiritual man; not the Church which consists of a number of bishops. For the right and arbitrament is the Lord's, not the servant's; God's himself, not the priest's.⁵⁷

Tertullian stresses that the power to forgive sins belongs to God alone, in the person of the Holy Spirit. Applied to the church, “spiritual,” in this context, seems to refer to those who act in accordance with the Spirit. Obviously, *prophet* fits the bill, but so might *bishop*. Tertullian uses the rule of faith to subordinate the episcopacy to the Holy Spirit by saying that decisions about

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20-22.

⁵⁷ Tertullian, “Modesty,” 21. Emphasis in original.

forgiveness are valid only if they are decisions that the Spirit herself would make.⁵⁸ The church is not simply a hierarchical institution; the church is, in a certain sense, “the Spirit,” herself.⁵⁹

Cyprian later emphasized Tertullian’s stress on the power of the Holy Spirit to forgive sins, which he seemingly incommensurately joined to an emphasis on the episcopate.⁶⁰ His pastoral reasons for doing this stem from the Decian persecution, when some Christians, who had offered sacrifice, presented martyrs’ letters to the clergy that demanded immediate reconciliation to the church on the promise of their intercessions on behalf of the lapsed. Laxist presbyters, who readmitted the lapsed, challenged both the authority of the bishop and the unity of the church between the faithful and fallen. Cyprian reunited the church and reasserted his authority over it, by arguing that this side of heaven the power of forgiveness lay not with the martyrs but with the college of bishops in good standing with the catholic church.⁶¹ After all, Jesus had breathed the Holy Spirit into the apostles, and with her the power of forgiveness, saying, “*And what thou shalt bind upon earth shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever*

⁵⁸ This interpretation makes sense in light of what Tertullian says about martyrs a little further in his argument. It seems that some, who had been guilty of a grievous sin, would make “a preconceived arrangement” with an individual who would volunteer for martyrdom. The latter would then promise the fallen Christian forgiveness. Tertullian objects that true martyrs can only act according to God’s will, not on God’s behalf. Cyprian faced the same problem, as we shall see in a moment. *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁹ The key to understanding this equation lies in the part of the above passage that says, “which the Lord has made to consist in ‘three.’” This is probably an invocation of Matthew 18.20, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” The Spirit is the church insofar as she is the one who has “combined” the faithful together. Therefore, whatever forgiveness the church might grant is only valid if it is granted in accordance with the Spirit who gathers it.

⁶⁰ For the following I rely heavily on J. Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁶¹ Cyprian also had to deal with the challenge the martyrs posed to his authority, which he did by reiterating Tertullian’s argument that a martyr could only forgive what Christ would forgive, appending it with biblical evidence of rejected petitions of martyrs, prophets, and patriarchs. Cyprian, “The Lapsed,” in *St. Cyprian: The Lapsed, the Unity of the Catholic Church*, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1957), 17-20.

thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed also in heaven."⁶² Therefore, lacking the Holy Spirit, no forgiveness could be found in a schismatic fellowship.⁶³ In saying this, Cyprian domesticated Tertullian's pneumatology in order to extend the logic of idolatry to schism. To sacrifice to an idol was not simply to break trust with Christ, but to become ritually unclean – contaminated by demons.⁶⁴ The same applied to those who communed with, or sought forgiveness in, a schismatic church. To commune with an idolater was to be contaminated by his sin. Cyprian insisted on rebaptism of those converted in schism because, without the Holy Spirit, their rites were basically pagan. Thus, as J. Patout Burns writes, "Cyprian concluded that the rituals of the schismatics polluted those who received them in the same way that the rites of idolatry contaminated those who participated in them, even involuntarily."⁶⁵

The Donatists further extended this logic to ordination, whereby the Holy Spirit in the *collegia* was passed on to the new bishop. The schism began when some African bishops, who would become the Donatists, opposed the election of Caecilianus to the powerful See of Carthage, claiming that one of the bishops who ordained him had been a *traditore*. Therefore, like a laxist's baptism, this ordination was polluting. Without the power of the Holy Spirit,

⁶² In Cyprian, "The Unity of the Catholic Church," in *St. Cyprian: The Lapsed, the Unity of the Catholic Church*, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation (Westminster, Md: Newman, 1957), 4. Emphasis original. There are two versions of chapter four. According to Bévenot, Cyprian likely revised an early version that seemed to lend more support to the primacy of Peter than Cyprian intended, particularly during the rebaptism controversy. The passage in question is identical in both versions. If the translator is correct, Cyprian intended Matthew 16:18-19 to refer to the pope as a member of the *collegia*, which the apparent revision makes clear. Maurice Bévenot, "Introduction," in *St. Cyprian: On the Lapsed, the Unity of the Catholic Church*, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1957), 6-8.

⁶³ See Cyprian, "On the Unity of the Church," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J Donaldson (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), 11.

⁶⁴ The most striking example of this fact is the story of the child who was unknowingly fed a mixture of bread and wine that had been offered first to the god. Cyprian, *The Lapsed*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans., Maurice Bévenot, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, vol. 25 (Westminster: Newman, 1957), 25, also 9, 24-26.

⁶⁵ Burns, *Cyprian*, 147.

Caecilianus and those who remained in communion with him could receive no forgiveness.

Rather than “properly” re-ordain Caecilianus, the Donatists ordained their own rival bishop and said that any “so-called” Christians outside their communion were apostate. In this way, the once catholic church had become a shadow of its former glory, confined now to a pure North African “remnant.” The Donatists, from their perspective remained the true church. Everyone else, at least as far as their eternal destinies was concerned, was as good as pagan.

A final word must be said about Augustine’s response to the Donatists because it generates some controversy and because it speaks to Hauerwas and Milbank’s misreading of his ecclesiology, particularly as it relates to one of the outcomes of collapsing the kingdom into the church, to be addressed below. Augustine is sometimes chastised by contemporary theologians for calling upon the military to force an end to the schism. In Augustine’s defense, this appeal came late in his life, after many years of Donatist violence, largely motivated out of concern that Donatist laypersons who wanted to join the “true church” were being prevented from doing so by their bishops. This was not a campaign for Christian empire, about which Augustine was much less enthusiastic than most of his contemporaries.⁶⁶ He believed the church could enjoy certain benefits from having a Christian emperor, but this did not make the empire Christian.⁶⁷ One advantage was the ability to call upon the state to engage in what Augustine saw as a campaign of liberation, *not* the expansion of the boundaries of “Christendom.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ This came to Augustine late in his life. Says Markus, “Now, as an old man, he came to see clearly that what he wished to repudiate was not merely a passing mood of elation. It was nothing less than the almost universal tradition of Christian thinking about the Roman Empire during the fourth century.” R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine*, Rev ed. (New York: Cambridge, 1970), 53ff.

⁶⁷ See Augustine, V.25.

⁶⁸ Lancel, 271-304.

The Necessity of the Augustinian Distinction

Seeing how Tertullian and Cyprian contributed to the Donatist controversy reveals the necessity of the Augustinian distinction and its implications for the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God. Hauerwas and Milbank refuse ecclesial “invisibility” in order that the church might be a more concrete alternative to the secular, but we will see in a moment that Augustine’s response to the logic of Donatism deployed this distinction in a way that stressed the church’s concreteness, particularly in the power of the Spirit in the love of the saints. Augustine was able to affirm that this “messy” church was still the site of God’s salvation, not as an alternative to the world, but the prolepsis of the kingdom of God within it.

Augustine’s answer to Donatism was a Tertullianic correction of Cyprian. Tertullian could not have conceived of a mixed body. His church was a minority sect in a still largely hostile society. Cyprian still pastored the persecuted church, but one that was drawing an increasing number of converts, thus being more readily accepted into Roman society. In his acknowledgment that recommunicated apostates may yet find themselves declared “goats” at the last judgment, we find a *de facto* distinction between the “visible” church and the “invisible” church, but not in any formal or systematic way.⁶⁹ As the schism wore on, the Donatists increasingly tended toward a Tertullianic emphasis on visible purity premised on a Cyprianic understanding of the power of the Holy Spirit, whereas Augustine developed the Cyprianic acknowledgment of visible ecclesial impurity modulated by a Tertullianic emphasis on the Spirit’s freedom.

Augustine had to reject Cyprian’s view that the Spirit resided in the episcopal college because it was the same position held by the Donatists. It both “justified” and motivated the

⁶⁹ See Burns, *Cyprian*, 70-71.

schism. So Augustine went back to Tertullian to place the power of forgiveness not in the bishop but in the whole church. In one sermon, remarkable for the power it gives to the laity, Augustine talks about the “binding and loosing” both Cyprian and Tertullian addressed. For him, this power of the Spirit does not reside only in a bishop or a prophet but all the saints who (with the angels of God) together form the *totus Christus* – Head and body.⁷⁰ He extends forgiveness by interpreting Matthew 16:18-19 (“And I also say to you that you are Peter...”) to John 21 and Acts 9.4. In the first, Christ questions Peter after his denial. Augustine reasons that if Peter refers to the whole church in Matthew, then he must refer to the whole church in John. Thus Christ asks *the church*, do you love me? And *the church* answers back, “You know that I love you” (See vv. 15-17). But then Augustine questions the way in which the church loves Christ, who is in heaven. As Dostoevsky knew, in the foil of Ivan Karamazov, one cannot truly love an abstract principle.⁷¹ We can only truly love faces. Thus, the church’s love of Christ is proven in the second passage, where Christ identifies himself with the church itself (in the context of Acts, the persecuted and martyred saints). When Christ asks the church, “Do you love me?” it is the church asking this question of itself, but not in any abstract sense. The question is in the face of every sister and brother we meet: “Do you love *me*?” Love is proved in the answer, and that proof is nothing less than the church – the visible evidence of the saints’ collective affirmation of

⁷⁰ Augustine’s concept of the “whole Christ” is most apparent in his expositions on the Psalter, being the hermeneutical key whereby he was able to attribute some statements in the Psalter to the heavenly Christ, some to Christ in the kenosis of his humanity, others to Christ in his people – the church – and still others to all three at once. See, for instance, Augustine, “Fourth Discourse on Psalm 30,” in *St. Augustine on the Psalms*, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1961), 5. The translators offer a pithy explanation of this concept in Dame Scholastica Hebgin and Dame Felicitas Corrigan, “Introduction,” in *St. Augustine on the Psalms*, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1960), 9ff.

⁷¹ Ivan says, “I must make one confession...I could never understand how one can love one’s neighbors. It’s just one’s neighbors, to my mind, that one can’t love, though one might love those who live at a distance...For anyone to love a man, he must be hidden, for as soon as he shows his face, love is gone.” Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans., Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1999), 230.

each other in Christ, which is a gift of the Spirit. Salvation must be a gift because, without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to love God more than self – to love God, and others for God’s sake, with the love that God *is*. Thus, Augustine overcomes Donatism by making the “vertical” forgiveness offered by Christ effective in the “horizontal” love of the members of his body have for each other.⁷²

Forgiveness-as-love is the beginning of the difference between what we commonly call the “visible” and “invisible” church, terms I have adopted for convenience, but which Augustine’s understanding of forgiveness reveals to be not very precise. Properly speaking, the church is not “invisible,” just ambiguous. What I have been calling the “invisible” church refers to those true believers – the saints – which comprise the citizens of the heavenly city on pilgrimage, abiding for now in the fallen, empirical church.⁷³ The church is ambiguous because, while Augustine could be certain that wherever there was a catholic church, there were at least “two or three” saints in it (in keeping with the promise of Matthew 18:20), he could never know

⁷² Under the pen of the Roman pontiff, Matthew 16:18-19 is cited as evidence that Peter’s successor has the power to bind and loose. This passage reads, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” For Cyprian, the Petrine foundation of the church referred to the *collegia* (which included the Roman papacy). Commenting on this same passage, Cyprian applies it not to a single bishop but the entire episcopate, saying, “From this source flows the appointment of bishops and the organization of the Church, with bishop succeeding bishop down through the course of time, so that the Church is founded upon the bishops and every act of the Church is governed through these same appointed leaders.” Cyprian, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, ed. Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler, trans., G. W. Clark, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, vol. 44 (New York: Newman, 1984), Ep. 33. Augustine went much further! Like Tertullian, he applied this passage to the episcopate only insofar as bishops were members of the catholic church. “And what am I to say?” Augustine asks his congregation, “That it is only we [bishops] who bind, only we [bishops] who loose? No, you also bind, you also loose.” Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans., Edmund O.P. Hill, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (Hyde Park, NY: : New City Press, 2007), 229N.2. For ease of reference, when citing Augustine's sermons, I will always refer to the sermon and paragraph numbers, even in an edited collection.

⁷³ I am aware that the latter term comes with some philosophical baggage. I use it in its most basic sense to refer to the church we see and touch, a church that is “sinful” because it has sinners and hypocrites in it.

for sure which individual was a saint.⁷⁴ The ambiguous nature of the true church stems from this fact, that, on the one hand, the love of the saints for each other, and for the sinners and hypocrites in their fellowship, is what cements the empirical church together, but, on the other hand, one can never positively know, within any given fellowship, who is *truly* a saint (though heinous deeds without contrition might show who is truly a sinner).⁷⁵ Thus Augustine could point to any catholic church and say, “There is the true church!” He just could not say for certain, “And that person is in it!”

Forgiveness-as-love undermined the perpetually-schismatic logic of Donatism in two ways. First, making salvation the gift of love (the gift of a pure heart rather than the work of a pure bishop) undermined pretensions to visible purity. If what saves us cannot be seen – love, “poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom 5:5) – then there can be no boasting about the church being a concrete alternative to Rome or (in the case of the Donatists) to the catholics.⁷⁶ In the second place, stressing “invisible” love ironically foregrounds the empirical church. Contrary to what seem to be the concerns of Milbank and Hauerwas, love does not leave the church without “substance.” The church was still able to offer a critical word to the world, but also (perhaps especially) to itself. This, because love as the standard of forgiveness means that, although we cannot always be certain when the true church is present in the world,

⁷⁴ One poignant example of Augustine’s awareness of the importance of intention comes from *On Virginit*y. Dedicated virgins had a high status in the church. Yet Augustine warns that this outward dedication is not a clear indication of inner-intent. In a way, virgins are in greater danger because they might become proud of the esteem others bestow on them. See Augustine, “Of Holy Virginity,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), 33ff.

⁷⁵ Augustine actually compared their love to the planks of Noah’s Ark, an Old Testament type of the church, within which abide clean and unclean animals – saints and sinners – representing the mixed body. Therefore, without the *caritas* of the elect there would be no visible church at all. See Augustine, *City of God*, XV.27. Also, Augustine, “Sermon 264: On the Ascension of the Lord,” in *Sermons*, ed. John E. Rotelle (New Rochelle, New York: New City Press, 1993), 5.

⁷⁶ See Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans., Edmund O.P. Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 5 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), VII.1.6, VIII.5.12ff, XV.5.13.

we can at times be certain of its absence. In Augustine's own case, he stressed unity as the concrete effect of loving Christ in the face of one's sisters and brothers to critique the Donatists. Their refusal of unity proved, for Augustine, the absence of charity.⁷⁷ Thus this "invisible" standard of forgiveness somewhat ironically stresses the necessity of the visible body, but in a more empirically honest way, by underscoring its brokenness. The Augustinian distinction allows one to affirm that salvation is found "in here," even if, this side of the eschaton "in here" can look an awful lot like "out there."

By focusing on the concrete effects of love, Augustine was still able to affirm that the kingdom of God is present in the church, while acknowledge the empirical fact of its fallenness. He could stress the reality of sin in the church as equally as he could stress its necessity for salvation. This allowed him to say that the kingdom of God is present in the church even if the church is not the kingdom. The way Augustine understood the kingdom to be present among the saints needs to be addressed for a moment because it further explains the relationship between the "visible" and "invisible" church, and because it shows that what makes the church the church is the kingdom of God, a point that will become more important later. For Augustine, the

⁷⁷ There is some evidence that he wanted to be more accommodating to those who were Donatist by circumstance rather than by choice. Augustine writes, "But the spiritual, or those who are steadily advancing with pious exertion towards this end, do not stray without the pale; since even when, *by some perversity or necessity among men*, they seem to be driven forth, they are more approved than if they had remained within, since they are in no degree roused to contend against the Church, but remain rooted in the strongest foundation of Christian charity on the solid rock of unity." Emphasis mine. This would seem to suggest that those who are driven from the Church by external circumstance abide in the true church because they would be catholic if they could. It may be that in this statement we are seeing here evidence of an undeveloped stream of thought, perhaps one that not even Augustine recognized, himself. Personally, I am more inclined to think that Augustine believed Donatists by circumstance were truly catholic (he is too smart not to have seen that consequence of his logic), but to say that out loud, in an unambiguous way, would undermine the purpose of the polemic, which was to bring an end to the schism. Augustine, "Baptism, against the Donatists," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), I.17.26. In a similar way he lays the foundation for what later theologians would call a "baptism by desire." In the case of the thief on the cross and Cornelius he writes, "I find that not only martyrdom for the sake of Christ may supply what was wanting of baptism, but also faith and conversion of heart, if recourse may not be had to the celebration of the mystery of baptism for want of time. For neither was that thief crucified for the name of Christ, but as the reward of his own deeds; nor did he suffer because he believed, but he believed while suffering." He is quick to add that we should be baptized. To think it unnecessary is prideful. Only necessity legitimates a baptism by desire. *Ibid.*, IV.22.30.

kingdom of God “happens” in the love of the community to which its worship testifies, especially its eucharist. In the words of Gerald Bonner, “[F]or Augustine, time intersects with eternity in the action of the Eucharist.”⁷⁸ This intersection is not something magical. Rather, it rests upon Augustine’s robust understanding of catholicity. His understanding of the power of the eucharist for the believer was an advance on the more materialistic, Greek perspective that preceded him.⁷⁹ Namely, the power of the eucharist was in the way it presented the future of the church to its fallen present.

The power of the eucharist for Augustine was love. This made it, as Edward Kilmartin says, a sacrament of “deeper insertion into the body of Christ.”⁸⁰ Communion is both a sign and a summons. The church was the *totus Christus* – Christ in heaven, extended into his earthly body. Because this connection between the ecclesial body and its head is not yet complete, the eucharist is a sign of the perfection of the church in the love of the saints, imperfectly realized in this life, and a summons to more fully embody its own future. “Be what you can see,” Augustine

⁷⁸ Gerald Bonner, “Augustine’s Understanding of the Church as a Eucharistic Community,” in *Saint Augustine the Bishop: A Book of Essays*, ed. Fannie Lemoine and Christopher Kleinhenz (New York: Garland, 1994), 50.

⁷⁹ Cyril of Alexandria is a typical example of this perspective, so too is Augustine’s near contemporary, Gregory of Nyssa. For both, the purpose of the eucharist was to replace this perishable body of the individual with the incorruptible body of Christ. Gregory Nyssen, “An Addresss on Religious Instruction,” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy and Cyril C. Richardson, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), par. 37. Cyril of Alexandria, “Interpretation or Comment on the Gospel According to John”, Calvin College http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/cyrl_on_john_10_book10.htm (accessed 19 March 2010). See also Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans., John A. McGuckin, Popular Patristics (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s, 1995), 131-32. Augustine’s perspective does not necessarily contradict this one. He understands the body in a less individualistic way than the Greeks. Nonetheless, in both cases, the communicant becomes what she consumes: the body of Christ..

⁸⁰ See Edward J. Kilmartin, “The Eucharistic Gift: Augustine of Hippo’s Tractate 27 on John 6:30-72,” in *Preaching in the Patristic Age: Studies in Honor of Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.*, ed. David G. Hunter (New York: Paulist, 1989), 165. J. Patout Burns is right that Augustine was not necessarily opposed to a doctrine of “real presence,” only it was not an essential feature of his sacramentology. J. Patout Burns, “The Eucharist as the Foundation of Christian Unity in North African Theology,” *Augustinian Studies* 32, no. (2001).

said, “and receive what you are.”⁸¹ Bonner’s language of intersection is helpful insofar as it testifies to the presence of the kingdom in the church without confusing the two. Time intersects with eternity in the eucharist, but the two do not blur. The unity of the eucharist witnesses to the presence of the kingdom in the church without confusing the church with that kingdom. In this way, one might say the church becomes an icon of its own perfection, for, like an icon, the church reveals the divine without becoming the divine it reveals (what makes an icon an icon is its non-identity to its archetype). That is what catholicity, in its most robust sense, means: the church is transtemporally and transpatially universal. When one church gathers around the bread and cup, the whole church – in all places and times; past, present, and future – gathers with it. Thus, says Bonner, “Perhaps, by a kind of paradox...for Augustine, we are fed here on earth with the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ in order that hereafter, with the angels, we may feed upon the Word Himself forever.”⁸² Therefore, in the eucharist, the mixed empirical body receives a vision, ambiguously realized in the present, of its future perfection in the life to come in the kingdom of God. The eucharistic worship of the church makes it not only a contrast to the world but also to itself. In receiving the unity that it will someday fully embody, we become aware that we have not yet reached this perfection.

The Augustinian distinction foregrounds the presently unrealized nature of the mixed church’s future purity. It thereby promotes the church’s humility with respect to itself. The Donatists insisted on a visibly pure body because they thought that sin could spread like a disease. Shifting the impetus for salvation from external causes like the episcopal genealogy of

⁸¹ We know this is a summons because Augustine adds, “Any who receive the sacrament of unity, and do not hold the bond of peace, do not receive the sacrament for their benefit, but a testimony against themselves.” This caution is an implicit command to be unified, not only in name (by being part of the empirical church) but in fact by having “*one soul and one heart in God.*” Augustine, *Sermons*, 272. Italics in original.

⁸² Bonner, “Eucharistic Community,” 54.

one's baptizer to internal intentions retained the necessity of the empirical church for salvation by protecting the purity of the true church from the effects of (empirical) sin. Salvation is possible in a manifestly fallen church because what will be the perfected body of Christ abides (ambiguously) within it. Furthermore, foregrounding the difference between the empirical church and its future purity promotes the church's humility with respect to the world. Augustine identifies the true church with the heavenly city in a proleptic sense. That is what it means to be on pilgrimage. In the eschaton the heavenly city will have been the true church, but in the meantime the mixed nature of these two cities in the empirical church requires uncertainty about the church's judgment of the world, for the reason that the world and the church are always implicated in each other. With the necessity of this distinction and its effects in mind, we turn to consider the logical alternative: what happens when Milbank and Hauerwas collapse the empirical church into the true church, demonstrating how this conflation contributes to Christian cognitive dissonance by funding Hauerwas and Milbank's respective ecclesiological extremes.

The "Invisible" Church and Postliberal Ecclesiological Extremes

As we have seen above, the Augustinian distinction is more honest about the way the church and the world really do interpenetrate each other. When I argued for the necessity of this distinction above, I said two effects of it were ecclesial humility with respect to itself and ecclesial humility with respect to the world. In the first case, the church recognizes that it can never guarantee its empirical purity because salvation is not its own work but the Spirit's. In the second case, the church recognizes that, for that reason, she cannot be excessively confident in the finality of her judgments of "the world" because the "world" is a part of her, and this side of heaven we cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. As I see it, two equally bad

alternatives occur when these facts are not taken seriously. Below, we consider each alternative in turn.

Option 1: Neo-Donatist Sectarianism

When the empirical church is the true church, the failure of the former to conform to the latter challenges pretensions to perfection. One way to meet this challenge is to do what the Donatist bishops did: ignore the facts and assert one's own empirical purity. In the face of visible impurity, "circle the wagons!" The fact that Donatism did not exactly live up to its own standards lends itself to suggest that it was defined less by what it was (i.e. the *actual* avoidance of sinful contamination) and more by what it was not (the catholic church). Thus, Donatism seems to have sustained itself over the centuries by employing what Daniel Boyarin has called the "technology" of heresiology, a term he uses to describe a movement that develops its group identity by sharply distinguishing itself from a clearly identified "enemy."⁸³ This description seems to fit Donatism especially well, particularly as the controversy progressed and Donatist bishops became increasingly entrenched in a theologically flawed and historically false tradition.⁸⁴

Donatism thus shows us the logical alternative to the Augustinian distinction. Insisting upon the necessity of the church for salvation in a way that makes the church concentric with the

⁸³ Daniel Boyarin argued that in antiquity the "technology" of heresiology produced orthodoxy (in this case by contrasting itself to Judaism). Though I take some issue with the compendious way he applies this theory to a rather complex history, thinking of heresiology-as-technology can be a useful tool if used in a limited way. He is right that some groups identify themselves principally by what they are not. See below.

⁸⁴ Lancel has noted that the location of Donatist "holdouts" suggests that being Donatist was a way of asserting indigenous African identity in the face of Roman occupation (and its "official" church). This implies a positive principal was at work in Donatism as well. And it suggests a weakness in Boyarin's application of heresiology, which I assume. Namely, it is possible to reduce everything to heresiology: being African is about not being Roman; being Roman is about not being a barbarian, etc. I think what this means is that the concept cannot be deployed too compendiously. (In other words, heresiology cannot explain *everything* or mostly everything.) One must make a judgment about the degree to which the identity of a group or movement happens by way of contrast. In the case of Donatism, given the inconsistent relationship between their justification for the schism and their own history (with a *traditore* founder), the term seems to fit. Lancel, 276, 279-80.

kingdom of God can lead to ever shrinking bodies of “true believers” that define themselves in “heresiological” counterposition to everyone else. When there is no way to protect the purity of the church from the impurity of its members, schism becomes a holy duty. The Donatists purged alleged apostates from their fellowship, lest their inclusion imply approval of such sin. Of course, the Donatists were clearly willing to “fudge” on their allegedly high moral standards, given the fact that some of their own founders were *traditores*, and, late in the controversy, bishops were more than ready to let violent bands of *circumcellions* maim and murder catholic opponents or Donatist “defectors.”⁸⁵ This inconsistency only proves the fact that they were human, and that the church they thought they were did not actually exist.

Hauerwasian ecclesiology is not much different. The difference between Hauerwas and the Donatists is only in degree, not in kind, for both are marked by this same aspiration for a visibly pure communion through the identification and exclusion of an “enemy.” Hauerwas’ ecclesiology is neo-Donatist insofar as it operates by the same “heresiological” principle. The difference between the Donatist and catholic perspectives is that, whatever grievances one party might have had with the other at the beginning of the controversy, in the end, what made many Donatists Donatist was the refusal to be catholic.⁸⁶ It is difficult to identify a positive principle around which Hauerwas organizes his vision of the church. As Robert Jenson, who offers a more-or-less favorable reading of Hauerwas, has complained, it is much easier to figure out what

⁸⁵ Ibid., 280, 291, 301-2.

⁸⁶ On that point, it is worth noting that not only is Hauerwas’ ecclesiology characterized by its self-differentiation from liberalism, but also from churches that allegedly fall under its spell. Hauerwas, says he is just as critical of “the church” as he is of liberalism. Though invocation of the church catholic in such a statement suggests that Hauerwas intends to indict all Christians equally, insofar as not all Christians are enraptured by the liberal gaze, it seems that some Christians more damned than others. Hauerwas, “Will the Real Sectarian Stand Up,” 92.

his ecclesiology is *against* than what it is *for*.⁸⁷ This is a fair assessment in light of Hauerwas' own words, "Christianity is unintelligible without enemies." Of course, this statement could be taken as one of Hauerwas' deliberately incendiary remarks, which in context does not actually mean what at first appears. To some extent that is probably true. In the same passage he does identify the enemy of the church as militarism, saying that the church, is "*an army against armies*."⁸⁸ So, to be fair, Hauerwas' ecclesiology is not heresiological to the degree that pacifism becomes something positive around which he constructs his vision of the church. Nevertheless, with no little irony, the nature of the church's own pacifism is rather militant itself. The church is against armies by developing a vigorous critique of the ideologies that fund them. So even this positive principle is turned into a point of counter-distinction. What exactly those ideologies are is not always clear. In *Resident Aliens* it was Constantinianism (the church sanctifying in any degree the deeds of the state),⁸⁹ at other times it appears to be capitalism,⁹⁰ or maybe "liberal

⁸⁷ Jenson is a generous critic. He says that he often finds himself nodding along with Hauerwas, but then wondering what he is agreeing with. Though he casts his critique in terms of metaphysics, the crux of his complaint is that Hauerwas lacks a positive ecclesiology, particularly when it comes to the relationship between the church and the world or between the church and the kingdom. Robert W. Jenson, "The Hauerwas Project," *Modern Theology* 8, no. 3 (1992): 287ff.

⁸⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, "No Enemy, No Christianity: Theology and Preaching between 'Worlds'," in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 31. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 15ff.

⁹⁰ What Hauerwas means by capitalism is not always clear. In *A Better Hope*, for instance, he claims to focus on capitalism, democracy, and postmodernity, yet the only essay in the collection that purports to be about capitalism ends up focusing on gay marriage. Hauerwas, *A Better Hope*, 47-51.

democracy,”⁹¹ all of which fall under a general aversion to the “narratives” of post-Enlightenment “liberalism,” or what I have generally labeled the *secular*.⁹² In constructing a communal identity this way, one need not necessarily be clear on the nature of one’s enemy (witness xenophobia), only that “they” are not “us.” Likewise, in Hauerwas’ case, the church is just that which tells different stories about itself. He does not exactly say what those stories are. In the end, content seems not to matter as much as the fact that these stories are *different*.

The problem with this kind of organizational identity is that it depends upon the perdurance of the other. Some Donatists held out even as the catholics became a strong majority. The tension between the two churches only began to be mitigated with the presence of a new threat (Arian Vandals).⁹³ In the same way, it is not clear what Hauerwas’ ecclesiology is without liberalism. Though pacifism is positive, Hauerwas’ own militant form of it cannot survive without the nation state to be peaceful *against*.

I do not want to suggest that Hauerwas and those who find themselves nodding along with him (among which I must sometimes include myself) are doomed to fall into schism. My

⁹¹ He writes, “I surely cannot mean that the enemy of Christianity is liberal democracy. Such societies, after all, are so wonderfully tolerant. Surely you are not against tolerance? How can anyone be against freedom? Let me assure you that I am serious. I am against tolerance; I do not believe the story of freedom is a true or good story.” The reason for this is that the narratives of alleged absolute freedom and self-determination upon which democracy is based contradict the narrative of Christianity, wherein our lives are received as a “gift...embodied in a community of people across time, constituted by practices such as baptism, preaching, and Eucharist, which become the means for us to discover God’s story for our lives.” Yet aside from the fact that we do not believe we write this story ourselves but receive it, it is not clear what makes the story of Christianity different from the story of liberal democracy apart from the peculiar things Christians do (and the fact that they are pacifist). Hauerwas, “No Enemy, No Christianity: Theology and Preaching between ‘Worlds’,” 32-33. See also Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 91-115.

⁹² See Stanley Hauerwas and Mike Broadway, “The Irony of American Christianity : Reinhold Niebuhr on Church and State,” *Insights* 108, no. 1 (1992). Stanley Hauerwas, “Character, Narrative, and Growth in the Christian Life,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham: Duke, 2001), 222. Stanley Hauerwas, “Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham: Duke, 2001), 114.

⁹³ Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 171-72.

only intent is to show that the absence of internal ecclesiological ambiguity that results from the way he relates the church to its eschatological perfection funds his tendency toward sectarianism. That is not to say that this shortcoming of Hauerwas is the only factor contributing to the way he relates the church to the secular; it is only to point out that the way he thinks about the presence of the kingdom of God in the church ends up promoting the kind of disjunction between Christian confession and practice that the last chapter linked to his ecclesiology. In other words, beneath this sectarian tendency, a major factor contributing to Christian cognitive dissonance, is a problematic understanding of the relationship between the church, the world, and the kingdom of God.

Option 2: Neo-Eusebian Triumphalism

Enacting empirical conformity to the church's eschatological perfection as an imperative of its existence is only one alternative to the Augustinian distinction rejected by Hauerwas and Milbank. The other alternative is to compromise the standards of that perfection. In other words, if the empirical reality of the church cannot match the kingdom, then make the kingdom match the empirical reality of the church. I call this Neo-Eusebian triumphalism (something I already noted Augustine's ecclesiology resists). Eusebius is sometimes *unfairly* maligned as encouraging the decline of a church tempted by imperial power, but there is something to be said for his

excessive and unChristian enthusiasm for the reign of Christ he saw manifest in Constantine.⁹⁴ One of the most troublesome displays of this enthusiasm involves the relationship between the arms of the empire and the arm of Christ. Following long-standing Greek tradition of depicting emperors as somehow divinely inspired, holding special concourse with the gods, Eusebius depicts Constantine himself as the recipient of divine revelation.⁹⁵ This qualifies him to be God's agent on earth. A better word than agent might be "enforcer," for in doing the work of the state – both legislatively and militarily – Eusebius saw Constantine doing the work of God. For that reason, in driving out the barbarians and subjugating them to the state, Constantine is actually subjugating to Christ the demons, whom the barbarians serve. Thus, the fundamental characteristic of the *Oration* that concerns us is an identification of the empire with the church and the church with the kingdom.

Such an identification is not only the result but the intent of John Milbank's ecclesiology. I do not intend to suggest that Milbank is in favor of a militant conquest of the state. Though in *Being Reconciled* he advocates a form of what might be called Christian espionage (not unlike the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, witnessed in the 1980s⁹⁶), for

⁹⁴ Probably the theologian who relies most heavily on this narrative is Jürgen Moltmann. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans., R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1974), 325. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991 [1975]), 139. Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, 161-65. In reality, the story of Eusebius is far more complicated. His infamous *Oration* was an encomium, so we should be careful to differentiate those parts of his praise that were genuine, versus those parts that were exaggerated. Therefore, I invoke him not as a Constantinian "villain," but as a typical example of the sad effects of Christian enthusiasm for the empire. Eusebius of Caesarea, "The Oration of the Emperor Constantine Which He Addressed "To the Assembly of the Saints"," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* (New York: 1890).

⁹⁵ Francis Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background, 2 V*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1966), 249-55. See also Francis Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background, 2 V*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: The Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1966), 618-19. Eusebius, 18.

⁹⁶ See Susan M. Shaw and Tisa Lewis, "'Once There Was a Camelot': Women Doctoral Graduates of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982-1992, Talk About the Seminary, the Fundamentalist Takeover, and Their Lives since Sbsts," *Review & Expositor* 95, no. 3 (1998). Stephen Libscomb, "Battle for the Minds," (1996).

the most part this conquest is intellectual.⁹⁷ He aspires once again to make theology the “queen of the sciences.”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, he shares with Eusebius a perspective that identifies the work of an earthly organization with the work of Christ. In Eusebius’ case, for Constantine to conquer the barbarians was for Christ to conquer the demons. As far as Milbank goes, only the organization has changed. He envisions theology “taking every thought captive to Christ,”⁹⁹ by which he means that no thought is thinkable without *the church*, insofar as Christ is only incarnate when he is fully incarnate in the church, which happens when theology has fully ascended to its proper place above all other forms of intellection.¹⁰⁰ Thus, in neo-Eusebian triumphalism, the conquest of the church over the secular approximates the state’s conquest of the demons. Though not actual violence, the means of rhetorical violence and Christian espionage justifies the ends of theology’s intellectual conquest over the secular. As with Constantine, subordinating the world to the church is subordinating heresy to Jesus Christ.

The danger of this triumphalism is that, as with its forebear, an empirically fallible institution is made proxy for the divine will. Without a clear distinction between the difference of the empirical church and its eschatological perfection, there is no way of judging when the actions of the church conform to the will of Christ, or when Christ is made to conform to the will of a fallen church. Milbank certainly acknowledges that the history of the church is a history of error; my point, however, is that the fundamentals of his ecclesiology have no way of accounting for such error. His refusal of the Augustinian distinction leads to confidence in the empirical

⁹⁷ In a passing remark, Milbank says, “(We need to invent a programme for seizing and subverting business and management schools in this direction.)” Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 186.

⁹⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 382.

⁹⁹ See 2 Cor. 10:5

¹⁰⁰ See Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 123ff, 268ff.

purity of the church, which makes inevitable the dissonance between, on the one hand, acknowledging the presence of ecclesial sin while, on the other hand, having no way to explain it. Thus both Eusebius and Milbank contain in themselves the dangerous seeds of the ecclesial self-justification. Without the healthy ambiguity the invisible church provides, there is no way of clearly distinguishing the judgment of Christ from the judgment of the church (which will be judged as well).

Conclusion

This chapter asked how Milbank and Hauerwas are able to sustain the strict counterposition between the church and the secular that leads to Christian cognitive dissonance. As argued in Chapter Two, if we think about Milbank and Hauerwas' ecclesiologies occupying opposite ends of a spectrum, one triumphalist and the other sectarian, their extremes meet in a shared understanding of the narthex. The above suggests that the foundations of that shared account of the church-world limen are eschatological. Collapsing the heavenly city into the visible church makes postliberal ecclesiology possible by enabling Milbank and Hauerwas to draw strict boundaries between the the kingdom realized in the church and the secular. It is what allows Milbank to identify the judgment of the church with the judgment of Christ, and it is what leads Hauerwas to relate the church to the secular heresiologically.

Insofar as the above is where the error in postliberal ecclesiology lies, it also indicates a solution by way of contrast: an alternative account of the narthex would need to prioritize the unique identity of the church while removing absolute surety about its judgments *vis-à-vis* the secular that come from the kind of realized eschaton we see in Milbank and Hauerwas.

Augustine's account of the kingdom ambiguously present in the love of the saints partly points the way toward such a constructive alternative. In the first place, we saw above that he understands the eternal to penetrate time in the miracle of love – the *caritas* that holds the empirical church together. For him, the kingdom was present in the church, which made it, for lack of a better word, “special.” This suggests that developing a viable alternative to Milbank and Hauerwas' understanding of the narthex, if it is to preserve ecclesial uniqueness in secular culture, must retain a similar sense that the church is the site of the kingdom's unfolding. However, in the second place, Augustine's doctrine of ecclesial “invisibility” suggests that this unfolding must be ambiguous with respect to its presence in the empirical church. Because the purity of the church was, for Augustine, not a matter observation but graced intention, he was able to open the church up to a certain amount of critique, both from itself and the “outside.” Donatists could accuse catholics of being sinners, and its bishops could confirm their observations. Thus, in sum, Augustine suggests that the way forward for us is to develop an account of the church-world limen that offers uniqueness without surety. This raises the question, If Augustine's ecclesiology suggests such a constructive alternative to postliberal ecclesiology, why not stop with his distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” church? Is that not enough to account for the interpenetration of the church and the secular? In a word, No.

Augustine's ecclesiology is helpful but incomplete. It also points the way forward by way of relief. The Augustinian distinction resists ecclesiological hubris *vis-à-vis* culture that comes from collapsing the kingdom into the church, but it does not preclude it entirely. It is still possible to draw not an identical but a similar boundary between the church and the secular. Only, in this case, the boundary would be invisibly present in a visible communion, like the way

Augustine denied legitimacy to the Donatists. As noted above, Augustine was not able to say which members of the empirical church were members of the heavenly city, but he did confine its membership to the visible catholic church. Though few would want to make such a case today, from an Augustinian perspective it is theoretically possible to erect an “invisible” wall between the secular and the “true” church within a visibly imperfect communion. Such would result not in Christian cognitive dissonance, but a similar kind of spiritual schizophrenia insofar as the standard of discipleship would become an impossible standard of purging oneself and the church as a whole from secular influences, with the sad acknowledgment that such purification would be incomplete this side of the eschaton. As witnessed, for instance, in some antimodernist tendencies in Roman Catholicism in the past, even a church whose empirical holiness is ambiguous could still define itself over-against its surrounding culture.¹⁰¹

The above is not the inevitable result of Augustine’s ecclesiology but one possibility, which only means that our quest for a non-cognitively dissonant ecclesiological account of the narthex cannot stop at Hippo. The Augustinian distinction points to a way beyond counterpositional ecclesiologies positively in the ways I noted above (preserving ecclesial uniqueness by seeing the kingdom present in the church and opening the church to intra- and extra-ecclesial judgment by keeping that presence ambiguous), and by way of contrast (that isolating the kingdom to a visible communion still leaves open the possibility of a theoretical counterposition between church and culture). In particular, the limits of his ecclesiology suggest the need to prevent the church from making resistance to the secular an “invisible” standard of its

¹⁰¹ This is true of any church, particularly my own Eastern Orthodox tradition, which in some circles is notorious for heresiologically defining itself against its culture and other churches. I single Roman Catholicism out, however, because, in terms of size and influence, it is the most significant church with an anti-modernist past that also owes a great ecclesiological debt to Augustine.

own perfection to be realized in the eschaton. One way of meeting this need, I propose, is not to confine the kingdom of God to the visible church, but to consider the possibility of its presence in secular culture.

That proposition brings us to the constructive “turn” in this essay. The previous two chapters have focused on analyzing a problem. I have argued that the ecclesiologies of Milbank and Hauerwas share an account of the relationship between the church and secular culture that is functionally equivalent, and that such an account would require Christians who hold such views to practice their faith as if the secular did not influence them and as if they did not support it. Then, I argued that postliberal ecclesiology’s counterpositions to the world are funded by a realized eschatology that identifies the reign of God’s righteousness with the church itself, either in a sectarian or triumphalist way. In other words, surety about the “confines” of the kingdom can create false confidence in the church’s judgments about itself and its culture.

Following the advice of Augustine (both positively and by way of contrast), the remaining chapters invite us to consider a more *symphonic* account of the church-world limen. Ultimately, I want to show how we might grant the inevitable influence of the secular on the church and the support of the secular by the church tentative legitimacy by expanding the proleptic presence of the kingdom of God to culture itself. The end goal is thus to develop a more constructive and interactive account of the church-world limen, one that allows for their mutual interpenetration in Christian life, while still retaining an emphasis on ecclesial uniqueness (like that offered by postliberal ecclesiology) and with it, the consequent potential of ecclesial critique of, and resistance to, the secular on the basis of the church’s understanding of the revealed “content” of the kingdom of God.

The Byzantine language of *symphonia* bespeaks such a dynamism. It provides the basic architecture for an account of the church-world limen like the one I just described. Therefore, as a necessary precursor to developing such an account of the narthex for our secular context, the next chapter will present the basic components of *symphonia*, as the Byzantines conceived it, elucidating its theological – particularly eschatological – conceptual underpinnings, and, through a dialogue with a few modern thinkers who anticipated the project of this essay, point toward aspects of it that hold potential for its modern re-application to the church’s present situation.

PART II

ECCLESIAL *SYMPHONIA*:

A CONSTRUCTIVE ALTERNATIVE

CHAPTER IV

SYMPHONIA:

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF THE BYZANTINE POLITICAL IDEAL

Ἐκεῖ, ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἐντὸς ὑμῶν ἐστίν.

Luke 17:21

Milbank and Hauerwas' laudable desire to stress the presence of the kingdom in a concrete, particular community, does so in a way that leaves little choice but for the church to withdraw into heresiology or to bring the kingdom of God by an intellectual or rhetorical conquest, trapping disciples into a false counterposition between the church and the secular. An ecclesiology asks too much if the promise of surety and stability in an increasingly unstable world comes at the price of Christian authenticity. As we have seen, the extremes of postliberal ecclesiology require such a kind of “virtual” faith – a faith lived *as if* the church, and not the secular, were the sole source of our formation and object of our allegiance. Having witnessed that this cognitively dissonant faith is informed by a problematic understanding of the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church, this chapter begins the process of imagining an alternative way of relating the church to the secular by considering how the kingdom might be proleptically present in both. To begin constructing this symphonic view of the church-world limen, this chapter mines the rubble of Byzantium to see how it might be possible to stress the centrality of the church in the formation, development, and negotiation of Christian discipleship, while accounting for the truly porous boundary between the church and

the secular that exists in the lives of believers. In short, the Byzantines' way of thinking about the kingdom of God in culture suggests how to relate church, world, and kingdom in a way that gives us ecclesial uniqueness without ecclesial surety. This sort of theological-archaeological expedition is the first of a three-part argument. An initial, critical trek into the way the Byzantines thought about the kingdom of God – the way it both authorized and criticized the structures of power under which people lived – will comprise the preliminary architecture for triangulating church, world, and kingdom. This chapter will not be making a case so much as it will be making observations about this triangulation. The second part of this argument, in the next two chapters, will develop the theological underpinnings necessary for this initial construct to be ported to our present context.

The Byzantines are a useful resource because they were keenly aware of the way that church and culture were inherently intermeshed. They believed that between the two there could be a *symphonia* – a harmony – wherein the church retained its fundamental commitment to the kingdom of God, while working in a provisionally constructive way with the institutions of broader society to make this fallen world a closer image of the life to come. The kingdom of God was for them, as we shall see, not only an eschatological ideal but also a missiological summons that comprised the *raison d'être* of the church itself. That is how they understood redemption. For them, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann later put it, the world was “the ‘matter’ of the Kingdom of God, called to be fulfilled and transfigured so that ultimately God may be ‘all in all things.’”¹ Therefore, this chapter offers the Byzantines as an example of the possible. They are not an example of what *should* be in the sense of a new Christian empire. Practically speaking,

¹Alexander Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 1979), 149.

Byzantium was triumphalist, possessed of a realized eschatology. Holding them up for emulation would only replicate the problem these chapters intend to overcome. In the remaining chapters, of concern is not the practice of their politics but the ideal of *symphonia* that informed it. Their worldview can inform an ecclesiology that is able to account for the interpenetrations between the church and the secular in the life of the believer as an expression of her primary commitment to Christ and his kingdom. This chapter thus begins the process of developing *symphonia* into an ecclesiology by introducing its traditional formulation, problems in the present, and the inchoate recognition of its possibilities in a post-imperial, post-Constantinian world. In particular, I intend to demonstrate that it was a faithful, albeit imperfect, response to the eschatological imperative at the heart of the gospel, reconciling the inevitable interpenetration between church and world (described above) in the life of the believer, by seeing both as *conditionally* authorized by, and thus subject to the judgment of, God's kingdom.

Developing this argument will take place in three parts. The first is archaeology: an exploration of the symphonic principle in the history of Byzantium. Because Byzantine political theology is prone to misunderstanding and misrepresentation, we will begin by clearing away a major myth about *symphonia*, followed by focusing on its eschatological components. I will argue that *symphonia* was a faithful expansion of the eschatological hope of the church for a changing cultural situation, and in the process, will highlight aspects of it that can apply to our post-Constantinian situation. The second section will lift out of the history and theology presented in the first section aspects of *symphonia* that are particularly applicable to our present context. Then, I will present the initial attempts of some modern Russian to tease out the potential within this political ideal to become a broader theory of culture. These "sophiologists"

do not yet develop *symphonia* into an ecclesiology for the narthex, but they do mark a trajectory for us to proceed by conceiving of *symphonia* in a less formal, more democratic way. Their insights thus anticipate the argument of this essay. They help distill *symphonia* down to its essential ecclesiological components, which the next chapter will develop.

Byzantine Symphonia

The modern Orthodox theologian, Fr. Georges Florovsky, once described Byzantium as “an adventure in Christian politics.”² In other words, Byzantium was an experiment, and a failed one at that! Or, as Florovsky concluded about this errand, “Byzantium collapsed as a Christian Kingdom, under the burden of its tremendous claim.”³ I daresay, a “holy kingdom” of some kind or another may be the most dangerous of all oxymorons. Earthly kingdoms are anything but holy. At best, they can be reasonably, partially just, but never holy, never righteous in the biblical sense. Only one kingdom will be holy, and it has not yet come.

Given Florovsky’s warning, the scholar who intends to offer even a marginally sympathetic reading of Byzantine political theology, like the one to follow, faces a problem. The Byzantine empire is the heir of the Constantine’s legacy, which can either be admired, maligned, or misunderstood, depending upon one’s theological prejudices. Though Florovsky’s is the dominant view among Orthodox scholars in the west, some “Eastern” theologians remain quite enthusiastic about Christendom (witness the increasingly close relations between the church and the state in modern Russia). They are inclined to ignore mountains of evidence against the

² George Florovsky, *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky: Christianity and Culture*, vol. 2 (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1974), 77.

³ *Ibid.*, 83.

“benefits” of Christian empire and give undue significance to the molehills of materials indicating imperial sanctity. On the other hand, the history of Byzantium in the west often takes the opposite approach: Constantine was “faking it,” and his successors were all theocrats. From this view, what is properly called *symphonia* by more knowledgeable Byzantine historians was often called *caesaropapism* by older western polemicists. This perspective – that the emperor ruled the church like he ruled the state – has embedded itself so deeply into the popular mythology of the western theological imagination that it seems expedient, after a brief description of *symphonia*, intended to orient us to this political theology, to offer an initial response to the common presumption that eastern Christendom was *caesaropapist*. This will be followed by a closer look at the history and theology of the Byzantine ideal. By “sandwiching” an argument against *caesaropapism* between an initial definition and then more thorough description of *symphonia*, I hope not to seem repetitive or to distract from my argument. However, since *symphonia* is so often misunderstood in the west, explaining what it is *not* is just as important to comprehending it properly as saying what it is.

An Initial Description of Symphonia

One way of explaining the Byzantine political ideal of *symphonia* is to say that, under its auspices, Byzantine society sought a “balance” between church and state. This description is more or less adequate, but it does not do full justice to the Byzantine social imaginary. Thinking of church and state as two different things is a modern phenomenon. Furthermore, though the word *symphonia* appears in Byzantine law (as we shall see in a moment), it was not so much a

codified policy as a cultural ethos.⁴ Therefore, it is easier to describe than to define. To understand *symphonia* fully, one probably should be Byzantine. With that caution in mind, I offer the following tentative definition of *symphonia*, which I intend to be a makeshift lighthouse – a point of reference – that will be made firmer by a subsequent foray into the theological assumptions and history of the Byzantine empire. In the Byzantine empire, *symphonia was a point of view wherein the church supported the work of the state insofar as the state conformed to the eschatological mission of the church, to realize God's kingdom in the world around it.*

Understanding how this balance was maintained requires stepping, as much as possible, into the Byzantines' social imaginary. They simply *knew* that all institutions were to be complementary components of one Christonormic culture. The church was not an institution within society. The church *was* society. Therefore, a citizen's commitment to the state was concurrent with, but also normed by, her commitment to Jesus Christ and his kingdom. The limited subordination of church and state to each other was fundamentally an effect of the reign of Christ being worked out in the world, particularly in the church's response to it.

Of course, the reality rarely lived up to the ideal, but that is beside the point. Florovsky was right: Byzantium was a failed experiment, but it is from failed experiments that we often have the most to learn. This requires approaching the data, as much as possible, without prejudice. Therefore, limiting the following analysis to those aspects of Byzantine *symphonia* from which ecclesial *symphonia* (*symphonia-as-ecclesiology*) will later draw inspiration, we begin by distinguishing between actual Byzantine political theology and erroneous reports about

⁴ John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Pr, 1982), 14. My term.

it, lest widely-accepted historical prejudice lead one to faulty conclusions about the applicability of *symphonia* for the contemporary church.

Symphonia, not Caesaropapism

Typically, when scholars want to define *symphonia*, they quote the *Sixth Novella* of Emperor Justinian. There he writes,

There are two great gifts which God, in his love for man, has granted from on high: the priesthood (ἱερωσύνη) and the imperial dignity (βασιλεία). The first serves divine things, while the latter directs and administers human affairs; both, however, proceed from the same origin and adorn the life of mankind. Hence, nothing should be such a source of care to the emperors as the dignity of the priests, since it is for their (imperial) welfare that they constantly implore God. For, if the priesthood is in every way free from blame and possesses access to God, and if the emperors administer equitably and judiciously the state entrusted to their care, general harmony (συμφωνία τισ ἀγαθή) will result and whatever is beneficial will be bestowed upon the human race.⁵

This is an inadequate definition of *symphonia*. Properly interpreting this *Novella* requires situating it in the context of Byzantine history and theology. Otherwise, it seems to conform to a false concept that Philip Schaff helped to popularize.

Schaff called Byzantine political theology *caesaropapist*, a term that has gained wide currency. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines *caesaropapism* thusly, “The system whereby an absolute monarch has supreme control over the Church within his dominions and exercises it even in matters (e.g. doctrine) normally reserved to ecclesiastical authority. The term is most generally used of the authority exercised by the Byzantine emperors over the E.

⁵ In John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church 450-680 A.D.* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 1989), 209.

patriarchates, esp. in the centuries immediately preceding the Schism of 1054.”⁶ In other words, the dominant view in the west is that the Byzantine church was under the thumb of its *caesar*.

This term actually reveals more about the biases of those who use it than it does the state of relations between church and empire.⁷ Thus, the Byzantine historian, Fr. John McGuckin, lambastes *caesaropapism* as “a caricaturing concept.”⁸ It is the conclusion drawn from a selective reading of Christian history by those predisposed to see it as a long slide into error (until the church was rescued by the Reformation). In short, according to this view, the Byzantine emperor ruled both church and state. In truth, however, the power differentials between *imperium* and *ecclesia* were far more complicated.

The problem with *caesaropapism* is revealed in the parts of the term itself. This theological shorthand is clearly intended more for polemic than accuracy. Fr. John Meyendorff points out that it makes two false claims. In the first place, it implies that the emperor was ordained, that he held some kind of priestly office. In the second place, it suggests that his sovereign priesthood was absolute, like a pope (so it polemicizes against Catholicism, too).⁹ But the history of Byzantium proves both claims false. The emperor was not a priest.¹⁰ No Byzantine emperor ever successfully dictated doctrine. They were responsible for calling councils and for

⁶ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3 ed. s.v. “Caesaropapism.”

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 99. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 254.

⁸ John A. McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 381.

⁹ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Legacy* 50-51.

¹⁰ Though he would present the gifts on behalf of the congregation, and receive communion first, these acts were performed as first among the laity – their representative before God. In these acts he was understood to take responsibility both for the sins and spiritual well-being of the people. John A. McGuckin, “The Legacy of the 13th Apostle: Origins of the East Christian Conceptions of Church and State Relation,” *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 47, no. 3-4 (2003): 272.

ratifying their decisions. They could even “stack” the councils in their own favor, but these imperial “tricks” were severely limited by the will of the people. Doctrines not generally approved by the clergy and the laity did not last.¹¹

Francis Dvornik, whose incredibly thorough two-volume history of Greek political philosophy also helped popularize the *caesaropapist* myth, has even gone so far as to suggest that alleged Byzantine *caesaropapism* has pagan roots, indicating that a kind of divine right might have predated Romans.¹² The ancient Greeks tended to view their king not as a god, but as a divinely-appointed emissary – a mediator between heaven and earth – who had, if not conference with the gods, at minimum, a special status before them. His job was to represent the people before the gods and to enact their will among the people.¹² The emperor was *like* a human god to his subjects, tasked with organizing political life into a harmony that reflected the divinely ordered harmony of nature.¹³ When Christianity came to prominence, says Dvornik, Christians simply replaced the Greek pantheon with Jesus. Thus, he concludes, Byzantine political theology was basically, “Hellenistic ideology in Christian garb.”¹⁴

Dvornik’s analysis is half-right. There are probably some pagan roots to *symphonia*. After all, Christianity is inherently syncretistic. We despoil the Egyptians, often kleptomaniacally, so that we are only half aware that we are doing it. And, if we get caught, we make all kinds of

¹¹ Roland Herbert Bainton, *Christendom; a Short History of Christianity and Its Impact on Western Civilization*, Harper Torchbooks. The Cloister Library (New York,: Harper & Row, 1966), 107-8.

¹² We can see this sort of thing at work in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*. As the play opens, the suffering people of Thebes supplicate their ruler not, “because we regard you as equal to the gods,” they say, but because Oedipus is a man who has “divine support.” Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans., Bernard M. W. Knox (New York: Pocket Books, 2005), 6-7.

¹³ Dvornik, *Byzantine Political Philosophy 1*, 249-55.

¹⁴ Dvornik, *Byzantine Political Philosophy 2*, 720.

excuses, trying to explain how what we stole was really ours the whole time.¹⁵ But our theft always involves a baptism of the object before it is incorporated into our (albeit mismatched) church decor. Obviously, this is not a perfect process. The baptism of the pagan does not always bring about the promised transformation. We have examples, like Eusebius, of individuals who fit Dvornik's rather rigid mold quite well, but we have an equal number of examples of those who got the "balance" right, such as the five-times-exiled Athanasius, the martyred John Chrysostom, and a slew of rioting monks.¹⁶ Dvornik ignores such cases, says McGuckin, because he approaches his sources with a Harnackian bias, presuming the history of the church is one of gradual decline, owing to a Greek perversion of the original teachings of Jesus.¹⁷ That is why he highlights evidence of pagan corruption, and ignores that which suggests that maybe the emperor is not a Byzantine pope after all.¹⁸

¹⁵ Thus, following Philo, Justin Martyr claims that Plato got his ideas from Moses. Justin Martyr, "Horary Address to the Greeks," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997), 20. Gregory of Nyssa makes spoiling Egypt a Christian duty. He says, "Our guide in virtue commands someone who 'borrows' from wealthy Egyptians to receive such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the Church, since these things will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason." Gregory Nyssen, *The Life of Moses*, trans., Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1978), par. 115.

¹⁶ Edward Siecienski has recently suggested that theologians need to pay more attention to the tradition of "holy disobedience" in the history of the church, especially when it came to monks. Edward Siecienski, "Holy Disobedience: Resistance to Secular and Ecclesiastical Authority in the Orthodox Tradition," in *The Third Annual Conference of the Sophia Institute: Power and Authority in Eastern Christian Experience* (New York: 2010).

¹⁷ Harnack says the essence of Christianity (the original title of his book: *Das Wesen des Christentums*) is found in the religious consciousness awakened by the teachings of Jesus, embodied in the first Christians, mostly centering around the kingdom of God (understood as the rule of God in the heart of the individual Christian), God and human dignity, and universal love. Paul inadvertently contributed to the adulteration of this essence by spreading this teaching to the Gentiles, where it began to be translated into the terms of Greek philosophy. In itself this is not a problem, until the "alien accretions" of Greek mythology and polytheism made their way into the church, producing the chimera of Roman Catholicism and "Greek Catholicism," only later to be purified by the Protestant Reformation. Thus, it would seem, that Christianity all but disappeared in the Middle Ages, until it was rescued by Luther. Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans., Thomas Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), 33-34, 51-74, 197-281. Quotation is taken from p. 269.

¹⁸ McGuckin, "The Legacy of the 13th Apostle," 259ff.

History and Theology of Symphonia

In actuality, the Byzantines saw their emperor neither as a divine emissary nor a pope. He was more like king David. If the Byzantines did inherit a concept of divine right, *symphonia* subsumes it under the theology of covenant, an understanding of power that went a long way toward limiting the king's authority. His sweeping power of the administrative affairs of the church – the appointment of bishops and enforcement of clerical discipline – derived from his divinely ordained vocation. The same thing applied to his enforcement of orthodoxy as the law of the land. Making church law state law was his way of being obedient to God in the station in which he had been placed.¹⁹ The Byzantines, like most Christians until fairly recently in our history, *knew* that the duties of a monarch could not be separated from the duties of a Christian, in the same way that the righteous kings of the Old Testament were expected to abolish idolatry

¹⁹ Asterios Gerostergios presents a highly favorable picture of the piety of the emperor and the limits to his authority (in this case Justinian). He points out that from the Byzantine perspective, the enforcement of orthodoxy was a matter of national security because the success of the empire depended on divine approval. Gerostergios' book is intended to show that Justinian's imperial policies were an expression of his own deep devotion to God, not opportunistic attempts to gain and keep power. Gerostergios deserves credit for raising a possible explanation for Justinian's policies against Jews, pagans, and heretics that is less cynical than what one might find in much modern scholarship. However, in the end, his case is unconvincing. Though he presents a wealth of primary material balanced by modern commentary on it that does not agree with his own thesis, when there are two ways of interpreting an event, the author always comes down on the side of the more generous reading. Thus he dismisses the negative reports of the *Secret History* of Procopios, upon which modern scholarship relies for information about Justinian's policies, as intending to defame Justinian. Gerostergios acknowledges that Justinian involved himself in internal Jewish affairs, but he says this is because the Jews dragged him into their squabbles. He attempted to coerce rather than force a conversion. His policies against Samaritans and Manichees were harsh, but only because he saw them as a threat to the empire. His policies against pagans were severe, but were not strictly enforced. It was a "big stick" designed to get them to convert to the true faith. But the major strike against his thesis is the methodological approach to the material. Gerostergios seems to think it is possible to look back into the past and read the personal intentions and piety of an individual with a fair amount of certitude. Personally, psychologizing the dead is a practice I find highly questionable. Asterios Gerostergios, *Justinian the Great: The Emperor and Saint* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine & Modern Greek Studies, 1982), 65-154, 202. Nevertheless, Gerostergios is probably correct about the relationship between piety and national security. Justinian probably believed what everyone else in his empire believed: operating with a social imaginary in which exclusion of the divine was unthinkable, they all *knew* that the security of their empire and the success of their military depended in large part on the piety of at least some people (in particular monastics). John Moorhead, *Justinian* (New York: Longman, 1994), 118.

and enforce Torah law.²⁰ But in the case of biblical monarchs, divine appointment was a sword that cut both ways. The same was true of the Byzantine king. He could be a David, or he could be a Saul, maybe even a Manasseh (2 Kings 21). Seeing the Byzantine king as a type of Old Testament king put biblical strictures on his authority, making obedience to the emperor depend upon his obedience to the Heavenly King. As McGuckin writes, “When God chooses a king, so the Byzantines learned from their scripture, God can also ‘unchoose’ him. Although it is true, therefore, that Byzantine religious philosophy afforded the emperor the role of prophetic priest-king, its model was the Davidic one that heavily underlined the ‘tentative’ nature of this sacred role; not its absolute force.”²¹

This principle of cooperation conditioned on obedience – on conformity to a divine standard – is the heart of the symphonic ideal. The authority of a king came from God, insofar as the king was godly. Otherwise, obedience required resistance.

There is a popular myth that prior to Constantine the church was more or less a pure community with a tightly controlled discipline, a persecuted minority whose eschatological hope sustained it in a hostile culture. When Constantine came to power, so this myth goes, the church was tempted by the promise of imperial prestige, so it traded the kingdom of God for 30 pieces of silver, fancier vestments, and few extra churches. Constantinianism spelled the end of New

²⁰ Some might wonder at my preference for the term *Old Testament* over *Hebrew Bible*. I agree that the term implies supersessionism, and I lament that fact. I wish the tradition had settled on a different way to designate the division in its canon. That said, however, I see an equally disagreeable problem with calling the first half of the Christian Bible the Hebrew Bible, for it implies that the Old Testament and Tanakh are equivalent when they are not. The Old Testament books end with Malachi, which foretells the coming of John the Baptist and the Messiah. The Tanakh ends with the return from exile. Christian Bibles tends to give the Old Testament a Christian interpretation, whereas the dominant translation of the Tanakh (from the JPS) tends to make a deliberate effort to prevent Christians from finding predictions of the Messiah in the Prophets and Psalms. Suggesting equivalence between the two can be a more dangerous kind of supersessionism by blinding Christians to the dogmatic differences between themselves and their Jewish friends. This can lead Christians to interpret Judaism according to the dictates of their own faith. At least preserving the terminological distinction foregrounds the difference between these sister religions.

²¹ McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 382. Emphasis mine.

Testament Christianity and its hope for the kingdom, which it now identified with the empire.²²

At least, that is the story. The problem with this myth is its idealization of “primitive”

Christianity (which only knew an imperial ideology, just of Christ) and its presumption that

Constantinian Christianity could be characterized by such radical discontinuity with its past.²³

There is certainly some truth to the Constantinian narrative. After Constantine, many in the

church did tend toward a realized eschatology. (On this point, we have already seen the

enthusiasm of Eusebius.) Nonetheless, the fact that the emperor’s authority was conditioned by

adherence to the Heavenly King suggests that perhaps Byzantine eschatology was not so realized

as we are sometimes led to believe. The history shows (as we shall see momentarily) that the

kingdom of God remained a standard against which earthly kingdoms, even Christian ones,

could be judged.²⁴ This suggests that the Byzantines did not wholly abandon the eschatological

hope of the early church. *Symphonia* was the name they gave this hope for a new social situation.

For all its practical shortcomings, *symphonia* was an honest attempt to respond to the biblical

²² This story has become so widely accepted that it is hard to know whom to cite in support of it. Harnack. Justo Gonzalez. Moltmann. Hauerwas. Peter J. Leithart’s well-researched account of the life of Constantine, his conversion, and the pagan-Roman milieu that shaped his and the consciousness of every one of his contemporaries (a consciousness that understands religion to be what we would probably call superstition) convincingly calls into question this narrative of the fall of the church in the fourth century. In all probability, Constantine’s conversion, though gradual, was legitimate by the standards of the day. Nor did it bring about a *radical* shift in the practice of Christianity. Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010). Though it is probable that many entered the church for opportunistic reasons (which are only abhorrent by *our* definition of what makes for a “legitimate” conversion), Christian faith was not necessarily any less pure in the in the fourth century than in the first. Assuming the Pauline Epistles give an accurate account of New Testament Christianity, then members of the church were prone to factionalism (1 Corinthians 1:10ff), idolatry (10:14-22), classism (11:17-22), and incest (5:1-8).

²³ In a recent paper, George Demacopoulos pointed out that the narratives of Christianity assume an imperial context. Demacopoulos calls for coming to terms with this fact, not necessarily because imperialism is undesirable so much as it is impracticable. The point, however, is that Christianity did not come to think of itself in imperial terms with Constantine. Prior to Constantine they just imagined the kingdom of God as another kind of empire. All of the Bible was written during a time when empire was the norm. It is naive to think that Christianity would not have adopted the imagery and concepts of its culture, even if it transformed them. George E. Demacopoulos, “Rethinking the Papal-Imperial Relationship During the Tenure of Gregory the Great,” in *The Third Annual Conference of the Sophia Institute: Power and Authority in Eastern Christian Experience* (New York: 2010).

²⁴ The epistles of Paul suggest that we have no grounds for placing halos on the heads of New Testament Christians. They were, more or less, as pure as Christians today (See, for instance, 1 Cor. 5, 6, 10, and 11).

message of the kingdom of God in a setting wherein the church had gone from being a persecuted minority to the official religion of the empire.

According to Vigen Guroian, the church after Constantine tried to understand and reinterpret the New Testament faith in the light of what seemed like new revelation.²⁵ As he says, “The Byzantine and Russian political theologies have come and gone without changing significantly Orthodox theology or the Church’s understanding of its mission.”²⁶ *Symphonia* was how the church lived its eschatological mission in a context wherein it was increasingly enmeshed with culture. Prior to Constantine, the church thought of itself as the proleptic embodiment of the kingdom of God. It was not the kingdom itself but a “foretaste” of the life to come, striving to be in the present what God would one day make it in the future. The ascension of Constantine expanded the scope of this purpose for the church’s existence (i.e. proleptically to embody the kingdom in itself). Now, so far as it was able, the church would make the world itself into a prolepsis of the kingdom as well.²⁷ In the persecuted church, Christian social teaching focused on the non-compatibility between the kingdoms of God and caesar, but this was not because Rome was inherently evil (witness Romans 13). Rather, the church resisted Rome because Rome resisted the reign of Christ, pretentiously claiming to be the embodiment of a perfected social order. But when prideful Rome bent its neck to Christ, in the Christian emperor

²⁵ This claim is pretty remarkable given some of Guroian’s affinities with Hauerwas. See Vigen Guroian, “Tradition and Ethics: Prospects in a Liberal Society,” *Modern Theology* 7, no. 3 (1991). Vigen Guroian, “Human Rights and Modern Western Faith : An Orthodox Christian Assessment,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 26, no. 2 (1998). Vigen Guroian, “Liturgy and the Lost Eschatological Vision of Christian Ethics,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20, no. (2000): esp. 230ff. On the whole, it seems that Guroian is a moderate supporter of the “free church” theology of Yoder and Hauerwas (which he seems to conflate). He notes that they offer an “important critique” of Constantinianism, even if he finds their view of the history a bit too “dim.” Vigen Guroian, *Ethics after Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 22.

²⁶ Vigen Guroian, “Notes toward an Eastern Orthodox Ethic,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9, no. 2 (1981): 237.

²⁷ Vigen Guroian, “The Problem of an Orthodox Social Ethic: Diaspora Reflections,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21, no. 4 (1984): 713-15.

Constantine, the church was invited to apply its intra-ecclesial mission more broadly, “to make the Kingdom of God present by redeeming and transfiguring the world,” says Guroian.²⁸ As the people of God had sought to sanctify themselves, they now sought to sanctify society itself through the cooperative interactions of church and government.

This covenantal perspective on the Byzantine monarchy helps us properly interpret the meaning of the *Sixth Novella* (quoted above). Modern scholarship may give the *Novella* too much weight. Fr. John Meyendorff points out that it is actually a preamble to a rather mundane document about the behavior of priests. The history of Byzantium reveals far more about the “balance” the people tried to achieve between the affairs of church and the affairs of state than a few hastily written lines about “harmony.” Nonetheless, the *Sixth Novella* does offer a couple of important insights into some presuppositions behind the Byzantines’ symphonic worldview.²⁹ In the first place, it clearly does not support a *caesaropapist* interpretation of imperial power. Justinian does not claim absolute authority over the church. He actually writes, “Hence, nothing should be such a source of care to the emperors as *the dignity of the priests*.” His power extends not to the whole church, just the priestly part of it. Given Meyendorff’s observation about the nature of this pre-amble, Justinian is probably referring to his responsibility to ensure that the priests are “free from blame” in order that their prayers might be more effective. His concerns thus have more to do with national security than theology.³⁰ Secondly, the emperor’s limited authority is “granted from on high.”³¹ Consistent with McGuckin’s claim about conditional

²⁸ Guroian, “Notes toward an Eastern Orthodox Ethic,” 237.

²⁹ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Legacy*, 48-49.

³⁰ See Moorhead, 118-21.

³¹ In Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 209-10.

imperial authority, the emperor's power is not absolute but, like all authority, is subordinate to its source.³² We can also see a third presupposition informing this worldview: there is no religiously neutral space. A prophet, priest, and even a king could be used by God for the betterment of society. Thus Justinian elaborates on the *Sixth Novella* in the *Seventh Novella*, "The priesthood and the imperium do not differ very greatly. Nor are sacred things so very different from those of public and common interest."³³ This passage refers not to a similarity of operations but of ends. Sacred and civic affairs could work together for the common welfare. Justinian is not claiming the priesthood for himself anymore than he is saying that the state serves a "sacramental" function. His point is that God works through both.

The history of Byzantium shows how *symphonia* worked "on the ground," so to speak. Harmony was an effect of good governance. It was a sign of the state's service to the kingdom of God. The absence of harmony proved imperial overreach – the failure of the emperor to be obedient to the source of his authority. Thus Leo III passed an edict to eliminate the veneration of icons. Under the *caesaropapist* interpretation of Byzantine polity, this legislated dogma, accompanied by the deposition and appointment of bishops, and the convoking of an iconoclastic council, should have been final. Instead, it led to about 100 years of fierce resistance from clergy and laity alike, often under the threat of force. Interestingly, the empresses Irene and Theodora used the same formal procedures as Leo to reinstate icons. The reason their procedures worked

³² McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 382.

³³ In *Ibid.*, 394.

and Leo's failed is that their actions conformed to the will of the people, who in this case were the mouthpiece for the will of God.³⁴

A similar phenomenon was twice repeated a few centuries later, during the Unionist controversies of Lyon and Florence (in the 13th and 15th centuries, respectively). Threatened by ever-advancing Turkish armies, Byzantine emperors convoked councils with their Roman counterparts, negotiating and affirming reunification with the Catholics in exchange for military assistance. In the case of Florence, the Greeks not only acknowledged papal supremacy, but also compromised on other significant doctrinal matters. However, in both cases, the councils were effectively ruled non-canonical, mostly by the laity.³⁵

These two episodes conform to my initial description of *symphonia* as conditional cooperation between church and state as two aspects of one Christian society. They show that the emperor's supposed authority depended upon his obedience to the will of Christ, which was ultimately revealed by the people under him. Though this "ethos" was somewhat chaotic, *symphonia* was still, in the words of Meyendorff,

an authentic attempt to view human life in Christ as a whole: it did not admit any dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the secular, the individual and the social, or the doctrinal and the ethical, but recognized a certain polarity between "divine things" – essentially the sacramental communion of man

³⁴ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christian Tradition, V2: The Spirit of Eastern Christendom, 600-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 91-133. Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, trans., Anthony Gythiel and Elizabeth Meyendorff, vol. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 1992), 107-17.

³⁵ Pelikan, 271ff. Sergei Bulgakov discusses the doctrinal debates of these councils in great detail. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans., Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 109-49. One might wonder how the refusal of unity might be an expression of God's will, but that is beside the point. Like most things in life, whether or not anti-unionism conformed to God's will remains to be seen. The point is what this episode says about the power differentials between the emperor and the people he ruled as God's alleged "agent." Theologically, this episode shows that the people are were also the agents of God, understood to represent God's will when the emperor was believed to have fallen short. In particular, Sergei Bulgakov cites it as an example of the Orthodox "twist" on conciliarity. Orthodox church polity, witnessed in these two episodes, is not hierarchical but conciliar. This means more than just "rule by councils." It means that a council's decision is binding only to the extent that the laity binds itself to that decision. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, trans., Lydia Kesich (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 1988), 61-67.

with God – and “human affairs.” Yet between the two there had to be a “symphony” in the framework of a single Christian society in which both Church and state cooperated in preserving the faith and in building a society based on charity and humaneness.³⁶

The quotation from Meyendorff is helpful insofar as it expresses that *symphonia* was ultimately a kind of worldview. It was a non-compartmentalizing way of looking at life, relating both civic and ecclesial matters to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The above episodes also show how far *symphonia* fell from its ideal. Viewing “life in Christ as a whole” is a laudable objective that could not be realized in a fallen world with a fallen political system. Leo and his iconoclastic successors *were caesaropapists* in practice.³⁷ Though the symphonic corrective won in the end, it did so at a high cost to the integrity of the visible church, closely allied as it was to political power. Though the “holy rioting” required of *symphonia* may be the only alternative to accepting oppression in the absence of modern, democratic institutions, it hardly suggests the realization of a single, christonormic reality. Nonetheless, the fact that the church could resist *caesaropapist* emperors demonstrates that its eschatology was not entirely realized. Otherwise, the emperor’s word would have been as good as the word of Christ. *Caesaropapists* counted on the eschatological failures of the church, and they were always disappointed to find that the church could still disobey its earthly king in the name of its Heavenly King.

³⁶ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 214-15.

³⁷ It is also important to remember that *caesaropapists*, contrary to Dvornik’s thesis, did not exactly fall under the spell of paganism, either. For individuals like Eusebius, the Christian syncretism to the Hellenic was accomplished with the help of biblical prophecy and eschatology. It is hard to argue against the idea that for Eusebius the ascension of Constantine was not the beginning of the reign of God on earth. He speaks of Constantine’s support of the church as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy about the end times, saying, “In accordance with a prophet’s prediction, which mystically signified beforehand what was to be, there came together bone to bone and joint to joint, and all that in riddling oracles the scripture infallibly foretold.” Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History of the Church*, trans., G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1965). X.3

Guroian rightly says that the eastern church retained its pre-Constantinian sense of vocation – to sanctify itself until the *parousia* – even as it became the official state religion. If it is true that the eastern church retained its pre-Constantinian sense of vocation then the church did recognize a difference between the empire and the kingdom of God. If the empire still needs to be perfected, then the kingdom of God has not yet come. Thus Meyendorff, as critical as he is of the practical effects of *symphonia* in the political realm, rightly describes it as the “aspiration” to make the empire like the kingdom.³⁸ This sense of *symphonia* as an eschatological *telos* to be realized as much as possible in the realm of culture is the promise it contains for the contemporary church.

Triangulating Church, World, and Kingdom

If, as Guroian says, the ideal of *symphonia* was the church adapting its eschatological ideal for a new situation, then there is potential to adapt *symphonia* to our situation as well. *Symphonia*, as we have seen, attempted to subordinate a human kingdom to the kingdom of God, a subordination manifest in the capacity of Christians to mobilize and act against their “divinely appointed” monarchs. The king was also authorized by the kingdom of God. Though this authority was conditional, it does help explain why, as a political theology, *symphonia* was almost a complete failure: it was up to the people to try to figure out when their apparently divinely authorized king was acting rightly, and when he was not. Being divinely authorized, his word was not equal to the word of Christ, but it could be confused with the word of Christ. That, together with the absence of modern political institutions, is why resistance to imperial

³⁸ Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 209.

incursions against the God's reign, which the church struggled to embody, most often took the form of a kind of holy rioting. Angry bands of monks causing mayhem in the streets of the capital is probably not the harmony Justinian had in mind.

The problems that plague political *symphonia* raise the question of its value for the contemporary situation. Given that our situation is not imperial, does it not make better sense simply to return to the early church's hope for the coming kingdom rather than this Byzantine version of that hope? I grant that returning to the ethos of the "New Testament church" has a certain appeal, particularly in an American context, which has known all manner of Christian primitivism over the years, but this question also forgets that just as our situation is different from the Byzantines, it is also different than that of early Christians. We are no longer a minority sect in a pagan culture. We actually have more in common with Constantine's society insofar as Christianity has indelibly marked our culture and remains the majority religion in the United States. Being formally secular, modern, and democratic also precludes some of the more unpleasant aspects of *symphonia* as a political ideal. Fortunately, *symphonia* does not have to be a political theology. It works best as – and perhaps always was – an ecclesiology. This suggests that this same ideal can be adapted to a new secular reality, for as the circumstances of the church change, the church's commitment to the kingdom does not change, only its expression.

We will consider in a moment how to lift *symphonia* from the rubble of Byzantium and adapt it to our own context, but this first requires sorting out its essential building blocks, thus taking stock of the above history by focusing on aspects of *symphonia* applicable to our contemporary secular situation, particularly in response to the problem of Christian cognitive dissonance. In particular, *symphonia* combines some of the better aspects of postliberal

ecclesiology (such as its emphasis on Christian identity) with an honest recognition of the church's implications in culture. I propose we see *symphonia* as coordinating a provisional triumphalism and situational sectarianism, regulated by the reign of God's righteousness. Again, the point here is the ideal, not its mostly failed expression.

Faith in the kingdom of God is the source of the church's *provisional* triumphalism. As noted above, the Byzantine church, possessed of an eschatological imperative to sanctify the world in the sanctification of itself, saw the kingdom of God as the criterion of its dealings with the state. In other words, the church had a mission, and it could justifiably engage the institutions of the state to help it fulfill that mission. Because this triumphalism was not the triumph of the church over the world but the triumph of Christ, it bears little in common with Milbank's desire for a new Christendom. It was confidence that Christ was working through extra-ecclesial institutions, not the triumph of the church over those institutions. Nor am I suggesting that the Byzantines were particularly good at restraining the many excesses of their triumphalist impulses. When one sees conquest of the barbarians as conquest of the devil, there is clearly a problem! However, for the purposes of adapting *symphonia* to the contemporary church, the principle matters more than the failed reality, and the principle to pay attention to here is that of the possibility of constructive engagement with society, so long as it is conditioned by God's reign. Provisional triumphalism, seeing Christ over and in the world, precludes erecting strict boundaries between the church and the world.

Because the actions of the church in society were judged by something other than the church itself, the Byzantines could also be *situationally* sectarian. The church did support the empire, often to terrible excess, but the history also shows instances wherein the church was able

to withdraw into its own particularity to bear critical witness to the state. Such resistance was too few and far between, admittedly. Nor should we ignore the fact that the Byzantines left much to be desired when it came to considering what the reign of God had to say about social welfare, the economy, war, education, the rights of women, and so on (but the Christian Greeks *were* far more equitable and just than their pagan forebears). Again, however, of concern is not historical failures but the principle itself. The eschatological ideal that *symphonia* represented could still realize the early church's sectarian resistance of Rome (that which is the standard of the church's faithfulness all the time, according to Hauerwas' ecclesiology). When the empire had gone too far, the church had the capacity to withdraw into itself and to witness, so to speak, "against the nations."

In sum, *symphonia* works sometimes with society and sometimes against it. In it, we find the beginnings of an initial response to postliberal accounts of the narthex. I said before that a consistent account of the narthex in a secular context requires stressing ecclesial uniqueness without erecting an imaginary wall around the church. Byzantium bespeaks the possibility for such a dynamic relationship.

This perspective may not seem immediately portable to our own. In Byzantium, church and state were formally concentric, whereas in our society church and state are formally separate. A theological argument for their partial convergence under the kingdom will be made in the next chapter, but to make an initial case for the relevance of *symphonia* today, and to indicate how to engage the secular symphonically, we turn now to some more recent thinkers who saw the potential of this ideal to help the church relate to a new, more modern situation (not yet our own, but like it). Though not yet an ecclesiology, their versions of *symphonia* as a kind of theory of

culture suggest how we might dust off the elements of this Byzantine ideal and build a narthex out of it.

Symphonia as a Theory of Culture: The Russian Sophiologists

As stated above, the twofold purpose of this section is to look at models that anticipate adapting *symphonia* to a secular context, which simultaneously serve as an *apologia* for its applicability. The three Russians to be discussed in a moment – Vladimir Solovyov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Fr. Sergei Bulgakov – were only marginally successful because of certain limits their history, culture, and life circumstances placed upon them, yet they share in common a remarkable ability to expand the domain of *symphonia* beyond the political (not to exclude the political but incorporate it into a larger vision of the world). Because the concern of this section is lessons we can learn from these figures for adapting *symphonia* to a more modern context, I will focus more on relevant points where their ideas overlap. Therefore, I will present the thought of each, singly, drawing joint implications in a concluding subsection.

Vladimir Solovyov: Symphonia as “Theonomy”

It may seem odd to suggest that Vladimir Solovyov, a 19th century Russian philosopher and mystic, indicates how *symphonia* might operate absent imperialism, but Solovyov, though a Slavophile (generally considered a conservative movement) was also something of a reformer. His context was imperialist, but he also expanded *symphonia* for a more modern, and in some sense pluralistic, situation somewhat like our own. He advocated for what he called “free

theocracy.”³⁹ For the record, though it is hard to think of a more misleading term in the history of modern political philosophy, Solovyov actually did not mean anything like the rule of the church – a “clericocracy” – we commonly associate with that word. He tried to indicate this by putting the inadequate adjective “free” in front of it, but his clarification was less than helpful. To understand his meaning, and how this was a re-envisioning of *symphonia*, we need to know a little something about the worldview behind it.

Solovyov was a mystic. When he wrote, he sometimes believed he was channeling the World–Soul, he called Sophia (a concept to which we shall return later).⁴⁰ In one of these writings, a dialogue, the character “Sophie” declares, “[I]n order to be that which it is, it [the infinite] must...be the union of itself and its opposite.”⁴¹ This quotation expresses the conviction at the heart of Solovyov’s philosophy, namely that divine transcendence does not compete with divine immanence. Therefore, all that is good in the world is, in a certain sense, God. The universe exists within God, who is also the basis of human personhood and its aspirations. Says Solovyov, “[T]here is God in man.”⁴² Believing the cosmos was a manifestation of God’s own inner–divine life, his philosophy is thus characterized by a refusal to separate the natural from the supernatural. Humans are potentially divine by virtue of their creation *imago Dei*, which bespeaks an inherent capacity for deification. Anticipating the work of John D. Zizioulas,

³⁹ Paul Valliere, “Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900),” in *The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witte Jr and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 515.

⁴⁰ Deutsch Kornblatt has thankfully preserved Solovyov’s own margin notes in her collection of his essays. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Ithica: Cornell, 2009).

⁴¹ Vladimir Solovyov, “The Sophia: A “Mystical-Theosophical-Philosophical-Theurgical-Political” Dialogue,” in *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Ithica: Cornell University, 2009), 128.

⁴² Vladimir Solovyov, “‘At the Dawn of Misty Youth’: A Semiautobiographical Short Story,” in *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Ithica: Cornell University, 2009), 243.

Solovyov believed that “person” is a word that can be applied with equal accuracy both to God and human beings, because there is no formal difference between them.⁴³ Thus Michael Meerson writes that for Solovyov, “The main vestige of the Trinity is not the world, but the human person.”⁴⁴ This conviction – about the potential divinity of the human person – is the basis for the way Solovyov and those who came after him conceived of the intersection between church and society. We are, he says, temporal, intellectually blind creatures with an innate desire for eternal life and absolute knowledge. As such, the human being is a breathing contradiction. Not unlike Augustine, this internal conflict is, for Solovyov, the cause of human behavior, both good and bad.⁴⁵ It is both what traps us in our egoism and that which the divine engages to rescue us from it. We begin, Solovyov says, to transcend our egoism in communion with other individuals. This communion has two primary contexts: the church and the state. The former is the divine initiative and cause of this transcendence; the latter, consistent with Solovyov’s theological anthropology, is the human response to it.⁴⁶ Therefore, he concluded, civic affairs need the spiritual guidance of the church because politics is an inherently spiritual discipline insofar as we

⁴³ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 1985), 27-122.

⁴⁴ Michael Aksionov Meerson, *The Trinity of Love in Modern Russian Theology: The Love Paradigm and the Retrieval of Western Medieval Love Mysticism in Modern Russian Trinitarian Thought (from Solovyov to Bulgakov)* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998), 39. I am dependent upon Meerson for the above comparison to Zizioulas. See *ibid.*, 39-42.

⁴⁵ John Cavadini succinctly explains how the love of God and the love of self give rise to passions, in particular sexual passions, which is one of the best places to look for an ancient theologian’s theological anthropology. God is the source of the soul and thus its only true good. However, in its fallen condition the soul is pleased with itself more than God. Fallen self-love is nagged by the restless heart at the base of human existence. These two desires – one for the Good, the other for lesser goods – are in conflict. Out of this conflict a kind of autonomous excess of desire arises, feeling to the prideful soul as if it is coming upon it from some source outside itself. John Cavadini, “Feeling Right: Augustine on the Passions and Sexual Desire,” *Augustinian Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 201. See also Augustine, *Confessions*, trans., Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), I.i.1, VIII.v.10.

⁴⁶ Vladimir Solovyev, *God, Man and the Church: The Spiritual Foundations of Life*, trans., Donald Attwater (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1974), 1-34, 137-89.

are inherently spiritual people. Likewise, politics has implications for the life of the spirit. By working with others for the good of the whole, we learn self-transcendence.

This brings us to Solovyov's adaptation of *symphonia*. He said church and state need to work together because the spiritual and material always intersect each other. In *The Justification of the Good*, he indicates his ideal for this relationship. The following passage is highly symphonic.

The normal relation, then, between the state and the Church is this. *The state recognises the supreme spiritual authority of the universal Church, which indicates the general direction of the goodwill of mankind and the final purpose of its historical activity. The Church leaves to the state full power to bring lawful worldly interests into conformity with this supreme will and to harmonise political relations and actions with the requirements of this supreme purpose. The Church must have no power of compulsion, and the power of compulsion exercised by the state must have nothing to do with the domain of religion.*⁴⁷

Though Solovyov is redeveloping *symphonia* insofar as he proposes a cooperative relationship between church and state, he appears not to be proposing a policy but an ideal relationship, one that, according to Paul Valliere, has much more in common with Paul Tillich's "theonomy" than "a vicariate of some kind."⁴⁸ Solovyov is advocating for a culture wherein its artifacts are rightly recognized as "vessels of a spiritual content."⁴⁹ In a way, this reproduces Justinian's *Seventh Novella* (which stated that civic and ecclesiastical affairs are not so different) in an updated form by saying that church and state need each other because material and spiritual concerns are interrelated. His approach to this harmony also bears the marks of modernity insofar as it is democratic and pluralistic, which he indicates by stressing both the freedom of individual

⁴⁷ Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, trans., Nathalie A. Duddington (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 394. Emphasis original.

⁴⁸ Valliere, 551.

⁴⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans., James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), xvii.

conscience and the “*universal Church*,” which could refer to Orthodoxy, but most likely indicates a broad catholicity – a *sobornost* of all true believers, everywhere.⁵⁰

One other important way this updates *symphonia* for a more modern context needs to be mentioned. Though it may not be obvious at first glance, free theocracy is a response to Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God in the gospels. As Valliere helpfully observes,

Besides his Constantinianism, Soloviev's theocratism was a response to the idea of the kingdom of God in the gospel. By recognizing the centrality of the kingdom in the Christian message, Soloviev was ahead of his time. The majority of Christian theologians and ethicists in the nineteenth century were tone-deaf to the theocratic theme in the gospel. For them, Jesus preached an inner, spiritual kingdom that was to be sharply distinguished from the supposedly crude, nationalist theocracy of the Jews. Soloviev rejected this one-sided spiritualizing of the gospel along with its anti-Semitic implications. In this he anticipated Albert Schweitzer and others who rediscovered the Jewish apocalyptic roots of Christianity at the turn of the century. He also anticipated twentieth-century

⁵⁰ And there is some reason to believe that his pluralism went even further (his tendency toward theosophy and mysticism). Solovyov believed that not only the Orthodox Church was the church. The universal church was the church of sobornost – of a spiritual family of all true believers everywhere. This means that, even though talks about the importance of the church for society, contrary to Knox’s fears, he does not mean one church in particular, nor does he seem to be proposing an actual political program. He simply did not naively believe that “the church” would make society run more smoothly (after all, being Russian he was quite familiar with an official state church). For the history of the church also reveals a capacity to promote or ignore human suffering, not only in the life of the spirit but the body as well. Having inherited from the Enlightenment (interpreted through Genesis) a belief in the fundamental dignity and integrity of the human person, Solovyov knows that true religion cannot be forced. That said, Solovyov did not simply adopt wholesale the Enlightenment belief in human dignity. He acknowledged the good in it, but he added that it was insufficient to liberate human beings from the egoism that lay at the root of human injustice and oppression. True religion, he said, is able to recognize not only the divine rights of human beings but also their divine content (not only what he would call their Sophianic foundations but also their universal kinship in the body of Christ and the image of God in them). Vladimir Solovyov, *Vladimir Solovyev's Lectures on Godmanhood*, ed. Peter P. Zoubof (Poughkeepsie, NY: Harmon, 1944), 93. Nonetheless, he also recognized that Christianity had failed fully to do this. The church, he said, had not “actualized this affirmation [about human dignity] in a sufficiently concrete way.” Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 148. When it comes to other religions, it is difficult to tell exactly how Solovyov felt about them. Chances are he was a Christian inclusivist. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, “Who Is Solovyov and What Is Sophia?,” in *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Ithica: Cornell, 2009), 12-15. In his *Lectures on the Divine Humanity*, Solovyov more or less reproduced the Hegelian taxonomy of religions and their development. Religion moves in three stages. First is nature religion, then an attempt to get beyond nature, culminating in the integration of God and nature. To his credit, this was a rather open inclusivism. Various nature religions, Buddhism, Platonism, and Judaism were all on their way toward Christianity, but even Christianity was not a finished product. It had further to go. Though it had arrived at stage three in the God-human, Jesus Christ, the full-implications of the Incarnation had not yet been worked out, which is what Solovyov’s project was trying to do. His sophiology was an attempt to conceive of how God and the world were related, and what that meant for the organization of society. Vladimir Solovyov, *Vladimir Solovyev's Lectures on Godmanhood*, ed. Peter P. Zoubof (Poughkeepsie, NY: Harmon, 1944), 89-127.

theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, and John Howard Yoder, who demonstrated the political seriousness of the gospel.⁵¹

Solovyov has thus placed society under God's reign in a way similar to his Byzantine forebears without requiring it to be some kind of policy. The reign of God is something individuals can freely choose to live into.

Fyodor Dostoevsky: Ivan Karamazov's Symphonic Society

A similar emphasis on the relevance of the kingdom of God for modern society appears in Fyodor Dostoevsky, who replicates Solovyov's "free theocracy" from another angle, adding a more deliberate emphasis on its eschatological aspects. In a passage of *The Brothers Karamazov* that receives far too little theological attention, Fyodor Dostoevsky proposes a similar ideal of church state relations that suggests a somewhat democratic revision of *symphonia*.⁵² It is a little known fact that Solovyov and Dostoevsky were friends; they even pilgrimaged together to the Optina monastery, upon which the monastery in the book was based. While it is impossible to know if the following episode was based upon a real conversation between Solovyov and Dostoevsky, the ideas presented in it bear the marks of Solovyov.

In this particular episode, the Karamazovs (excepting Dmitri) and a few other characters are gathered in the cell of Fr. Zossima. Ivan (uncharacteristically) argues for the church to take a more active role in jurisprudence. This is only the formal topic of conversation. As the debate progresses between Ivan's camp (which includes himself and some priestly supporters) and a

⁵¹ Valliere, "Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900)," 549.

⁵² I am highly dependent on Paul Valliere's reading of this passage. Ibid., 536ff. See Dostoyevsky, 67-75. Wendy Wiseman has argued that Solovyov's sophiology was inspired by Dostoevsky. Though her evidence for the eternal feminine in the novelist is compelling, in the end I do not believe it can support a theory of dependence, one way or the other. But there is a remarkable harmony of perspective between the two. Wendy Wiseman, "The Sophian Element in the Novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1-2 (2005).

secularist also present, Miusov, it becomes clear that the real issue is the role of the church in society.⁵³ Miusov the secularist compartmentalizes. He says that church must have no say in how criminals are punished because its concerns are fundamentally spiritual. Like Solovyov, Ivan objects that so-called spiritual matters have material consequences. In the case of crime, punishing the criminal in a utilitarian manner – by depriving her of freedom – only reinforces her own utilitarian attitude toward society, which is what motivated her crime in the first place. Thus, the material consequence of ignoring the spiritual component of crime is more crime. Ivan and those in his camp counter that the only way to reduce crime is for the discipline of the church to confront the criminal with the consequences of her action. He is talking about excommunication, an idea which tends to grate against our modern sensibilities. However, it is important to note that Dostoevsky focuses on its redemptive purpose, which is in keeping with the biblical prescription about it (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, wherein the purpose of excommunication is to bring about repentance). In sum, like Solovyov, Dostoevsky has pointed to a matter-spirit continuum when he talks about crime and punishment. Society receives material harm when it fails to nurture the spiritual lives of its citizens, and it receives a material benefit when its policies see its citizens as bearers of the image of God.

A final exchange in this passage between Miusov and Ivan presents the gist of the latter's position. The argument boils down to how each perceives the church and culture should relate to

⁵³ Technically, Miusov is a *Westernizer*, as opposed to a *Slavophile*. Briefly, the debate was about whether or not Russia should embrace modern, European liberalism. In many ways, it was an attempt by Russian intellectuals to orient themselves to the reforms of Peter the Great, to determine whether or not they were ultimately good for Russia. Westernizers wanted a wholesale embrace of European liberalism and secularism. Slavophiles tended to be more nationalistic, wanting to preserve Russian cultural uniqueness in its national institutions and tradition. Solovyov was a more moderate Slavophile. He saw the benefit of some liberal reforms, but he also realized that Russia was not Europe. Some aspects of modernity were incompatible with Russian culture, whose roots ran deep. He also believed that modern individualism and self-interest could be a danger to social cohesiveness. For a summary of the debate between “Westernizers” and “Slavophiles,” see Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*, trans., Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (New York: Oxford, 1975), 399-455.

the kingdom. For Miusov, “the Church is a kingdom not of this world.”⁵⁴ State recognition of the church, he says, would surely lead to a new Christendom like that in the Catholic west (a powerful accusation in Russian Orthodox polemics)! But a new Christendom seems to be the furthest thing from Ivan’s mind. He is actually quite critical of Russia’s “Constantinian” heritage, saying,

[D]uring the first three centuries Christianity only existed on earth in the Church and was nothing but the Church. When the pagan Roman Empire desired to become Christian, it inevitably happened that, by becoming Christian, it included the Church but remained a pagan State in very many ways. This was bound to happen. But Rome as a State retained too much of the pagan civilization and culture, as, for example, in the very objects and fundamental principles of the State. The Christian Church entering into the State could, of course, surrender no part of its fundamental principles – the rock on which it stands. It could pursue no other aims than those which have been ordained and revealed by God Himself, among them *that of drawing the whole world* and therefore the ancient pagan State itself *into the Church*. In this way (that is, with a view to the future) it is not the Church that should seek a definite position in the State, like ‘every social organization,’ or as ‘an organization of men for religious purposes’ ... On the contrary, every earthly State should be, in the end, completely transformed into the Church and should become nothing else but a Church, rejecting every purpose incongruous with the *aims* of the Church. All this will not degrade it in any way or diminish its honor and glory as a great State, nor lessen the glory of its rulers. All this will only turn it from a false, still pagan, and mistaken path to the true and rightful path which alone leads to the eternal goal.⁵⁵

A return to Constantinianism was not Ivan’s goal. He calls Christendom “false, still pagan, and mistaken.”⁵⁶ Clearly the *symphonia* he had in mind was nothing like the ecclesiological triumphalism rejected earlier. If ecclesial domination of the state were the purpose of the church, then the kingdom of God would have come with Constantine. Instead, he sees Constantinianism as part of an ongoing process – the sanctification of life by the conversion of the state –

⁵⁴ Dostoyevsky, 69.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 69-70. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70.

provisionally adopted “with a view to the future.” In his apparent advocacy of church discipline to complement state punishment of crime, Ivan calls not for doing away with the institution of the state or subordinating the state to the church but letting the “aims” of the “Kingdom of Heaven” guide both.⁵⁷ This is comparable to the matter-spirit continuum undergirding Solovyov’s theonomic vision of culture, except it is a little more overtly eschatological. This is also a remarkably progressive vision of church-state relations, considering its context in “Holy Russia.” The presumption that most people in society are Christian somewhat limits the degree to which Ivan’s intended subordination of church and state to the kingdom can be applied directly to our context, but in a way his proposal boils down to the expectation that Christian individuals in a society behave as if their commitment to Christ’s kingdom mattered beyond the walls of the institutional church. Such an expectation does not seem out of the question, irrespective of the official position of the state toward religion.⁵⁸

Fr. Sergius Bulgakov: Symphonia in Western Exile

We turn finally to Sergei Bulgakov because he partly applied Solovyov and (in the character of Ivan Karamazov) Dostoevsky’s expectation to a more or less formally secular context, indicating to us the contours of the mutual interpenetration of church and secular absent imperialism or Christendom.⁵⁹ Bulgakov completes the transformation of *symphonia* from a

⁵⁷ Ibid., 69-70.

⁵⁸ This portion of the exchange exactly mirrors what Vladimir Solovyov had said about the relationship between church and state in his Second Lecture on the Divine Humanity (right down to the anti-Catholic polemic). Solovyov, “Lectures on Godmanhood,” 90-91.

⁵⁹ Bulgakov indicated dependence on the free theocracy of Solovyov and the work of Dostoevsky in Sergius Bulgakov, “The Soul of Socialism,” in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 257.

political theology to something that is closer to, though not completely, an ecclesiological account of the interpenetration of church and culture. We will turn to the way Bulgakov coordinated church, world, and kingdom theologically in the next chapter. It is first necessary to consider the formal elements of this arrangement.

The circumstances of Bulgakov's life prevented him from spending too much time explicitly developing a political theology. In particular, it is worth remembering that Bulgakov was not always a theologian. His career was quite colored. For a time he was a Marxist economist, an idealist critic of Marx, then a member of the Russian Duma, winding down his life as an ecumenist theologian in Parisian exile.⁶⁰ By the time he really devoted himself to the systematic study of theology, he was spending much of his time working to educate a nascent community of Russian diaspora. Nevertheless, like his intellectual forebears, when Bulgakov did wax political, he invoked the symphonic ideal. We can best see how to apply this ideal to our secular context by juxtaposing an early and later version Bulgakov developed, one while serving in formally Christian Russia, the other in Paris.

Early on, Bulgakov thought of *symphonia* as a democratic corrective to the effects of Russian imperialism. During the Pan-Russian Church Council of 1917-18, Bulgakov played a major role in authoring a statement that said the church should support the work of the state insofar as the state conforms to the laws of the church.⁶¹ The idea that the state should take

⁶⁰ The relative novelty of Bulgakov to an American audience means that nearly every book about him is accompanied by a sometimes quite thorough biography. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 227ff. Rowan Williams, "Introduction," in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999). Catherine Evtuhov shows the relationship between the personal and intellectual biographies of Bulgakov in *The Cross and the Sickle*. Lev Zander, a student of Bulgakov, offers an account of Bulgakov's personality as well as his theology. Lev Zander, "Memoir," in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (London: SPCK, 1976).

⁶¹ One may rightly see the influence of Bulgakov on my own definition of *symphonia* given earlier in this chapter.

account of canon law may be a little off-putting, but we should remember the context. This synod met in a Christian state, and its job was to develop and interpret church law (Russia was the self-proclaimed heir to Byzantium – a Third Rome – and, in a manner of speaking, the last of Constantine’s line). The content of the document suggests that Bulgakov intended the church to stand on the side of the powerless, such as the Russian peasant. Expanding upon Dostoevsky’s thoughts about jurisprudence, he proposed that church and state officials meet periodically so that the church might help guide the policy decisions of the state in order to make them fairer to those at the bottom of society. He seemed to realize that the moral authority of the church could apply not only to the criminal but also – perhaps *especially* – to those in power. Russia was not a democracy, and those without power had little chance of being heard. In this document Bulgakov was calling for the church to be *their* voice.⁶² Thus, the potential of the church to hold *all* its members accountable to their professed commitment was the genius of *symphonia*.

In the 1920s and 30s Bulgakov was exiled by the Bolsheviks as an irreformable enemy of the state.⁶³ For the first time in his life, he found his church to be just one of many religious institutions in a modern, western democracy. Absent formal recognition of the church, in which his own tradition was virtually non-existent, a wiser, more experienced Bulgakov rethought his earlier political theology. Never a fan of the institutional Russian Orthodox Church,⁶⁴ in Paris he proposed that *symphonia* works better in a secular state (mentioning the United States,

⁶² See Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890-1920* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 189-206.

⁶³ This could have something to do with the fact that Bulgakov and Lenin were intellectual opponents. See Rowan Williams, “Introduction to ‘Heroism and Spiritual Struggle,’” in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 64-65.

⁶⁴ Williams indicates that the timing of his ordination says a lot about how he felt about the state church, for he put off fulfilling a call to the priesthood he felt almost immediately after his conversion until 1918, after the revolution, when the church could not longer be so easily corrupted by proximity to imperial power. Williams, “Introduction to Bulgakov,” 13.

specifically).⁶⁵ Bulgakov realized that the separation of church and state was not a separation of church and life. Any formal cordoning off of the church from society at large “remains exterior and not interior” to the church.⁶⁶ The practical genius of this statement was the insight that the distinction we draw between church and state – or let us say church and secular – institutions was only virtual. The fact that Christians were in the state meant the church was in the state, and *vice versa*. Therefore, some kind of “official” transformation of life by cooperation between church and state, traces of which we find in the writings of Solovyov and Dostoevsky, did not matter. More important, Bulgakov said, was the “transformation of the state by the interior energies of the Church,” not, “outside, from above, but from within, from below, from the people and by the people.”⁶⁷

Collective Analysis of Solovyov, Dostoevsky, and Bulgakov

To sum up the above and draw a collective conclusion from the Russian thinkers we have discussed, it is fair to say that Solovyov, Dostoevsky, and Bulgakov desired to transform culture into a theonomy, by inviting members of the church to orient their lives in the institutions of society toward the “aims,” as Ivan would say, of the kingdom of heaven.⁶⁸ For all three thinkers *symphonia* boils down to a non-compartmentalizing consistency. This expectation is identical to

⁶⁵ Thus he writes, “The ‘Christian state,’ while assuring the Orthodox Church a ‘dominant’ situation, was at the same time an impediment, an historic obstacle to its free development.” Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, 161.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶⁸ One might object that Ivan does not invite so much as enforce conformity to these aims, but this would be to misunderstand the intent of excommunication, both generally and in this episode. The purpose of excommunication, as Ivan describes it, is not to punish but to call the “sinner” to reflect upon whether or not his actions conform to his confession. It is an invitation, albeit a forceful one, to live in a way that conforms to one’s stated values. This is what *symphonia* boils down to for all three thinkers: a non-compartmentalizing consistency. Such an objection is also a red herring because the point for all three thinkers is not policy but principle – to live in the light of the kingdom of God wherever one is

that of the Byzantines, who presumed the possibility of “legislated” Christianity. The more modern and democratic version of *symphonia* these Russians offer is closer to a theory of culture than political ideal because, even though they rejected *secularism* as a way of looking at the world, their statements about the importance of individual religious freedom in instituting a new *symphonia* suggest they pined for a more formally secular context like our own. This, as Bulgakov later realized, is of great advantage to a symphonic engagement with culture because if the point of *symphonia* is to make the world below an image of the world above, then what was required was not laws or their enforcement but true piety among individuals in society, which required freedom of conscience and presumed a modern sense of pluralism. Such is not yet the modern secular but necessary presuppositions for it, which suggests that some version of *symphonia* could work well in a context like ours. *Symphonia*, as the above thinkers conceive of it – coordinating church and world under the kingdom of God in the lives of individual Christians – is possible without formal recognition of the church because it boils down to the way the church thinks about *itself* and the world around it.

Conclusion

The way that Solovyov, Dostoevsky, and Bulgakov adapted the Byzantine ideal they inherited provides us with the architecture needed to develop an alternative to postliberal ecclesiology and its concomitant cognitive dissonance. As Augustine helped show us, a more consistent understanding of the influence of the secular on us and our support of the secular needs to account for the presence of the kingdom of God both in the church and society at large. This recognition was further confirmed by the example of the Byzantines. They did not show us

how to coordinate the three terms of church, world, and kingdom theologically, but, in the way they recognized the kingdom of God at work in extra-ecclesial institutions, they provided us with a template whereby we might later develop a doctrinal account of how constructively to engage the secular on the basis of *its* conformity to the kingdom of God. They show us the possibility of an engaged ecclesiology that stresses the identity of the church as the unique body tasked with proleptically conforming the world to the revelation of God's kingdom through the tactical methods of provisional triumphalism and situational sectarianism. The Russians we discussed above suggest the possibility of such engagement beyond the limits of Byzantium, particularly in a formally secular society. Solovyov, Dostoevsky, and especially Bulgakov saw that individuals can freely exercise the church's ministry of the kingdom non-institutionally and unofficially, the "interior energies" of the church, as Bulgakov said, affecting culture through the dissemination of the members of the body of Christ in it.

Yet the above examples have only given us a form for relating the presence of the secular in the church and the church in the secular, not the substance. One might rightly object that the constructive argument so far has compared apples to oranges. Byzantium and "Holy Russia" were still officially Christian. For the church to engage the state was for the church to engage part of itself. In other words, it is one thing to see the kingdom of God at work in a Christian society; it is quite another to suggest that the kingdom of God is at work in a formally secular society. I have yet to address the problem at hand. Thus, so far, the counterpositional narthex of Milbank and Hauerwas stands.

The next chapter begins to respond to that objection, getting us partway toward moving *symphonia* from a political to an ecclesiological register. It will justify ecclesial engagement with

the secular as internal to the church's own commitment to the kingdom of God by offering a way of seeing aspects of the secular itself, along with the church, as the prolepsis of that reign. To accomplish this task, I engage the sophiology of Sergei Bulgakov. Given the nature of Bulgakov as a controversial theological figure (in some circles), coupled with his penchant for the esoteric, it might be good at this point to remind the reader that this essay's method of argumentation is not so much to make a logical case *for symphonia*, but to offer an internally consistent alternative to a problem I see with one way of relating church to culture. In other words, there are possibly other ways to account for this interaction (such as liberalism, which also offers an internally consistent, non-cognitively dissonant way of relating church to culture), but the one I offer below "works." The next chapter does not recommend Bulgakov but uses his theology as a starting point for a more coherent way of thinking about the church-world limen than that provided by our foil. Sophiology can help us to do that, initially, insofar as it attempted to expand the cultural aspects of *symphonia* discussed above into a theological *system* that attempted to reconcile the eternal God to human historic developments in order to justify the church's engagement with modernity (at least, this was one of the objectives of his broad and ambitious project). I will make a case for seeing the kingdom realizing itself "unconsciously" in the secular, assisted by the "conscious" midwifery of the church. Though ultimately, the next chapter will move beyond the Sophia metaphor, it serves as a useful "springboard" to begin to go beyond the counterpositional ecclesiologies of Milbank and Hauerwas.

CHAPTER V

HISTORY AS *BASILEIA* FOR AN ENGAGED CHRISTIANITY

...in earth, as it is in heaven.
Matthew 6:10, KJV

The intent of the last chapter was not to call us back to Byzantium but to see if something of their political theology could be applied to our churches today. This requires moving *symphonia* into an ecclesiological register, which is not out of the question, given that *symphonia* was the imperial response to the early church's eschatological imperative to proleptically embody the kingdom of God in their fellowship. The Russians we looked at gestured toward a possible solution for us: it is possible to engage the secular in a way that is transparent to the kingdom of God without any kind of formal recognition of the church, because the church already penetrates secular society through the extension of the body of Christ in its members. This chapter offers a provisional theological rationale for such engagement, which is necessary

to account for a context that is not formally Christian. The fundamentals of this rationale will be provided by Sergei Bulgakov.¹

But first, since the purpose of this chapter will be to indicate how *symphonia* can operate as an ecclesiology, it is prudent at this point to offer an initial definition of *ecclesial symphonia* that the remainder of this essay will fill out. Under the Byzantine model, the church supported the work of the state insofar as the state conformed to the church's own eschatological ideal. Ecclesial *symphonia* is formally similar but substantially different. Under ecclesial *symphonia*, *the church supports the secular insofar as the secular conforms to the church's vision of the kingdom of God and resists the secular insofar as the secular resists God's reign.* The kingdom

¹ Some may question my use of Bulgakov in this chapter for a couple of different reasons. Namely, there are people in my own tradition who consider him a heretic, whereas Milbank considers him an ally (so he might wonder at me invoking Bulgakov against him). Little can be said to the first group that has not already been demonstrated by others. Bulgakov is cleared of heresy, not just on a technicality (being convicted in absentia), but because only the most prejudiced reader can conclude that Sophia is a fourth person of the Trinity (the charge leveled against him). Furthermore, my own reading of Bulgakov is not uncritical. Even if he were a heretic, that would not preclude panning for gold in the stream of his thought. For a concise history of the heresy charges laid against Bulgakov and his exoneration, see Bryn Geffert, "The Charges of Heresy against Sergii Bulgakov: The Majority and Minority Reports of Evlogii's Commission and the Final Report of the Bishops' Conference," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1-2 (2005). Also, a recent essay by Antoine Arjakovsky and Michael Plekon can be read as a defense of Bulgakov against contemporaries who consider him a heretic, insofar as their essay is an apology for its modern applicability. Antoine Arjakovsky and Michael Plekon, "The Sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov and Contemporary Western Theology," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1-2 (2005). For an account of the original charges, see Paul M. Count Grabbe, Isaac E. Lambertsen, and Joachim Wertz, "Concerning the False Teaching of Archpriest Sergius Bulgakov," *Living Orthodoxy* 16, no. (1994). As for Milbank, this is not the place to discredit his reading of Bulgakov, who is probably far more "liberal" than Milbank realizes. For one, I do not wholly agree with Bulgakov, so such an argument would be superfluous. It would also be superfluous because Milbank's reading of Bulgakov stresses the "theurgic" aspects of his thought, whereas here I am focusing more on the way sophiology legitimates the secular. Of course, Milbank would certainly object that Bulgakov does any such thing. He would be correct that Bulgakov opposed the "secularization of life," but he had no problem with certain "Enlightenment" values, such as the separation of church and state. Bulgakov does not do the kind of genealogies one finds in Milbank. However, when he traces the roots of secularism, he attributes them not to Kant but to the church's continued emphasis on individual morality in the face of a new modern social consciousness. In other words, secularism is a result of the church's failure to keep up with modern social-scientific insights. Sergius Bulgakov, "Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology," in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 275-78. Finally, not only do Milbank and I read Bulgakov differently, but in this chapter we are reading different parts of his corpus, so to speak. I invoke the most practical aspects of sophiology in order to construct an alternative to Milbank's ecclesiology, whereas the latter seems more fascinated by Bulgakov's esoterica, which I both critique and, to a certain extent, avoid. Milbank pays little direct attention to the ecclesiological aspects of Bulgakov's thought, but seems to draw upon Sophia as a means of conceptualizing the creature's unmediated participation in God. Milbank, "Sophiology and Theurgy." See *ibid.* Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xix, xxvii (note 46). Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 113, 128., Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri De Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural*, 104.

of God, we shall see, both justifies and regulates our engagement. This chapter is not yet directly dealing with the practical impact of the kingdom of God on contemporary church life, but makes a case for the secular partly corresponding to it. From this perspective, separation of the church and secular as different institutions is only virtual – a heuristic device. There is really only the kingdom of God and the way it extends itself into the church and the world around us.

Our ultimate challenge is to explain how our supportive interactions with that which intends not to conform itself to God's reign can in any way be an expression of our fundamental commitment to it (that reign). This is where Bulgakov can help us. His unique theological vision enabled him, and so can enable us, to see possibilities in the secular to which many of his contemporaries were blind.² As Bulgakov stood on the shoulders of Solovyov and Dostoevsky, in this chapter I want to see if we cannot scamper onto the shoulders of Bulgakov, to see both with and beyond him, uncovering the theological foundations of his vision of *symphonia* and making them our own. His sophiology can help us account for the interpenetration of church and secular in the narthex of Christian life in the way it sees God at work in culture. But in the end we will move beyond Bulgakov for reasons that will become clear later. Ultimately, I intend to demonstrate that seeing the foundation of the world not in Sophia but in Jesus Christ can ground a conditionally constructive engagement with the secular by reckoning to the secular the same desire the church has, whether it knows it or not, to realize God's kingdom. Bulgakov gets us partway to this goal. My thesis in this chapter is that the Sophia metaphor rightly, though

² This probably also owes something to Bulgakov's personality, namely, the trace of the young Russian radical who remained deep within him, even after his conversion and ordination. Valliere notes that Bulgakov's conversion was part of a wave of Russian intelligentsia returning to the church, yet still retaining, like Bulgakov, their radical ideals about individuality, democracy, and religious freedom. He writes, "The drama of the conversion of unbelievers to religious faith makes it easy to overlook the fact more was going on than a return to tradition. The intelligentsia did not arrive at the household of faith with empty bags, but with a load of liberal and reformist values which they had no intention of surrendering. The encounter between modernity and Orthodox tradition was dynamic: it operated in both directions." Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 243.

ultimately incompletely, helps mitigate the tension between the church and society by stressing the universal presence of God in the world, guiding the historic development of human culture toward its eschatological culmination.

I will develop this thesis first by showing how his sophiology was the theological rationale for Bulgakov's symphonic vision of society, discussed earlier. In a word, it was the attempt to find a theologically consistent and constructive way of relating the church to its environment. The second section explores the theology that justified this interactive relationship in greater detail, considering its potential to handle the problem that concerns us. To keep this presentation of Sophia, which can be a rather convoluted concept, as straightforward as possible, I focus on the way she is an extended metaphor for the integral interrelationship between God, creaturely becoming, and their eschatological consummation. Next, I trace the implications of this interrelationship for the church, both positively and negatively. Positively, this interrelationship proposes that the church open itself to developments of culture insofar as they may be "unconscious" prolepses of God's kingdom. Negatively, it lacks a concrete enough standard for ecclesial engagement with the secular, leading either to paralysis or even complicity in the face of human sinfulness. This critique anticipates a more christocentric account of the church-world limen offered later.

The Foundation of Symphonia in the Secular

In this section I intend to show how Bulgakov deploys his theology of Holy Wisdom to justify ecclesial engagement with culture in general. This will give us insight into how we might account for the secular in the narthex today. In the first place, I will connect *symphonia* to

sophiology by arguing that the latter intended to be an expansion of the former for a new, modern era. Then, I will offer an initial perspective on just how Bulgakov justified culture and its artifacts in his early philosophy. Looking at this early work is essential to understanding the role the church plays in his later, more dogmatic, sophiology.

Sophiology as Symphonia

In a speech he delivered in 1934, Bulgakov indicated that he understood sophiology to develop upon the *symphonia* tradition. Speaking to an American audience, he felt the need to explain Russian Orthodoxy's teaching about the place of the church in the world and its responsibility to it, or its "social teaching." In other words, he intended to explain, as clearly as possible, how Orthodoxy related the church to society. To meet this end, he spoke about three different ways of negotiating this relationship, each of which corresponds to the three main branches of Christianity. The following descriptions Bulgakov presents are imprecise caricatures, but significant for what they say about different ways of inhabiting the narthex.

First, he talked about Roman Catholicism's attempt to dominate the world institutionally. He described this approach as clericalization. According to Bulgakov, not only is this perspective overly-pessimistic about the world, but it also confuses the rule of the church with the rule of Christ. Next comes the Protestant approach. He seems to have in mind what we might think of as 1930s mainline Protestantism, which involved the privatization of religion. This is a compartmentalizing perspective wherein one wears different "hats" depending on what the situation calls for. From this angle, what one believes may or may not have any bearing upon what we actually do. A good citizen is expected to fulfill certain responsibilities whether or not

they come into conflict with one's religious commitment. This approach basically hands the world over to Gog and Magog.

These descriptions helpfully show how Bulgakov understands the social teaching of his own tradition to combine both a sectarian and triumphalist impulse in an alternative suggestive of *symphonia*. Neither the Catholic nor the Protestant approach to society is wrong *in itself*, he says. Protestant privatization is a somewhat twisted form of primitive Christian indifference – what Bulgakov calls asceticism – towards society. It is to focus on one's relationship with Christ at the expense of whatever the world might be doing. Likewise, Roman clericalization is a faithful attempt to live out the reign of God under the conditions of Christendom. The trouble arises when these approaches are isolated from each other. When the church tries to dominate culture, so Bulgakov knew from his history, it does not make culture better. Nor should the church think to remove itself completely from so-called secular concerns such as “the state, culture, and economics.”³

Bulgakov offers a symphonic alternative in his own Orthodox tradition, which he says strikes a balance between early Christian asceticism (i.e. a sectarian tendency to withdraw from society) and the aspirations of “Holy Empire” (i.e. the triumph of Christ in society).⁴ Admittedly, Bulgakov does not use the word *symphonia*, but he clearly seems to have this ideal in mind, especially insofar as he describes this Orthodox way of looking at the world as the foundation of a “Christian Sociology”⁵ or “social Christianity,” by which he means a theological account of

³ Bulgakov, “Social Teaching,” 278.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 275.

society. His alternative suggests a re-imagining of the Byzantine ideal presented in the last chapter.

Bulgakov connects *symphonia* to his sophiological project when he adds that this Christian theory of society is an undeveloped doctrine, a *theologoumena* that has been the focus of “Russian religious thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and is now being seriously dealt with by our forward-looking theologians and philosophers.”⁶ This project which has occupied the cutting edge of Russian religious and philosophical scholarship, he adds later, is about the “self-revelation of God” in God’s “Wisdom.”⁷ In short, the symphonic ideal is an undeveloped Christian sociology that requires the explication sophiology can provide.

He thus called this new sophiological *symphonia* an as yet undeveloped “dogmatic postulate”⁸ that

opens a new way of life for Christian life and for Christian history. It gives to it not only a negative but a positive sense, *it includes the creativity of man in the means of his salvation*. It does not deny Christian freedom from the world and the value of a spiritually ascetic way, or the fight against sin in the life of every man, but it calls all to work also for this world. ... The glorified body of the Risen Christ was transparent for the spirit, was a spiritual body, being at the same time no spirit but a body which could be touched, and this transparency was its glorification and beauty.

The same ideal of the transfiguration of the inert and dark matter of the world, its obedience and transparency for the spirit of man, is the final task of the creativity of man, who is called by God to have dominion over the world. *The world must become in this sense the subject of the art of man, who is the true artist.*⁹

⁶ Ibid., 278.

⁷ Ibid., 279.

⁸ Ibid., 282-83.

⁹ Ibid., 283. Emphasis mine.

In this passage, Bulgakov states that the intent of sophiology is to find a way of incorporating human “creativity” into our understanding of salvation by transforming the world itself, making it transparent to the spirit. The comparison of this social Christian work to the resurrection also suggests that this human creative project is eschatological. Spiritualizing the world helps it realize the kingdom. More needs to be said about whether Bulgakov intends to propose that the church brings the kingdom, but the point for now is not to focus too closely on things that Bulgakov says “are not to be defined other than symbolically.”¹⁰ It is to see how the above passage envisions the attitude of the church toward the world. Here we stand, extroverted and engaged, brush in hand, with culture our canvas.

A Culturally Engaged, Creative Christianity

Looking at what Adrian Pabst called Bulgakov’s attempt to describe “a Christian theory of cultural activity” that inspired the above speech can provide insight for an ecclesiological account of the secular.¹¹ This theory is provided by *Philosophy of Economy*, which intends to critique and offer a coherent alternative to Marxism and positivism. Both schools of thought, he says, possess an unfounded eschatological mythos about human progress – one the golden age of science and the other a communist Utopia.¹² Bulgakov posits a counter-eschatology, of sorts, to these views. He sees humanity oriented toward a future without death, the full flourishing of life,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider, “Introduction: Transfiguring the World through the Word,” in *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word*, ed. Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 4.

¹² See Catherine Evtuhov, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy of Economy: World as Household* (New Haven: Yale, 2000), 9. Sergius Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, ed. Gary Saul Morson, trans., Catherine Evtuhov, *Russian Literature and Thought* (New Haven: Yale, 2000), 278ff. The following presentation of Bulgakov’s economic thought focuses on Ibid., 123ff.

in the process of economy. Economy, as Bulgakov uses the term in this book, refers to the sum total of all human cultural, scientific, and other productive activities. In the struggle to expand the domain of life through acts of production, says Bulgakov, we glimpse a desire for something beyond ourselves, for we want not merely survival but a kind of flourishing that bespeaks the eternal. Bulgakov believed economy thus testified to a collective desire for resurrection. Like Gilgamesh, we produce because we desire to overcome our own mortality. Economy, says Bulgakov, is thus the collective work of making this world like the world to come. This desire for transcendence of the limits of material existence, *in the material*, points toward a transcendental subject of our collective work, a subject Bulgakov called Sophia.

In this early foray into what would later become his life's work as a theologian, Bulgakov invoked Sophia as a metaphor for expressing the inherent unity and historic continuity in the "pleroma," so to speak, of human economy oriented toward everlasting life. We can see how this continuity works by observing the way it combines aspects of Hegel and Marx. Hegel said that Absolute Spirit develops through a process of sublation in the advancement of human ideas.¹³ Marx turned this idea on its head, so that the move from thesis through antithesis to synthesis does not drive material production, but material production yields new theses.¹⁴ Bulgakov considered himself an idealist, but he incorporated materialism by seeing human ideas and cultural productions as two gears turning each other.¹⁵ A scientific discovery or poem is just as

¹³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans., J. B. Baillie, (the Phenomenology of Mind) (Digireads.com, 2010), 306ff. Kindle Electronic Edition. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans., R. F. Brown et al., vol. III (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), esp. 249ff.

¹⁴ Thus, says Marx, "My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans., Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 102.

¹⁵ Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 231.

much a product of economy as a loaf of bread. Each stands in a continuum of products that happened before it and will come after it. Actually, a web would be a better metaphor than a continuum, for a hypothetical scientific insight – let us say an equation of some sort – is produced not only by the equations that came before it but a network of economic products concurrent with it, in anticipation of work to be done after it. It is a discovery made possible by conversations with colleagues, papers in journals, and even bad cups of coffee quickly swallowed in the wee hours of the night. These nodes on the nexus of economy compress to produce, in a moment in time, a new insight that, as soon as it is born, has already begun to move beyond itself.¹⁶ Sophia is this nexus.

Bulgakov says Sophia is also divine and human. She is human insofar as we create and we discover. She is divine insofar as she is ideal – the mind of God to which our truths and facts and beautiful creations aspire. Like a kind of primordial pleromic logos, she works herself into culture and its artifacts at every level of society. She is thus the inspiration of the holy prophets and the pagan poets, the muse of Homer and the genius of Heisenberg. Sophia is the “world soul” that funds our universal struggle for self-transcendence in economy.¹⁷ Stretching our minds toward the God, who is the source of our ideas and our products, economy is thus a union of the ideal and material in imitation of the eternal.¹⁸

¹⁶ One of the pithiest accounts of this nexus remains Leonard Read’s tract (first published in 1958), *I, Pencil*. In it, he effectively demonstrates that even the simplest of products cannot be produced independently of other tangentially related economic acts (though I do not share his enthusiasm acceptance of the fairness of the free market). Leonard E. Read, “I, Pencil: My Family Tree as Told to Leonard E. Read”, Foundation for Economic Education <http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/rdPnc11.html> (accessed 1 February 2011).

¹⁷ Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, 131. See also Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans., Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 79ff. Bulgakov, *Comforter*, 213ff.

¹⁸ Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, 68ff.

The significance of this early stage of Bulgakov's thought is the way that what happens in culture is a divine work, whether culture knows this or not. The fundamental characteristic of Byzantine *symphonia* was its provisional legitimation of the empire – the church in society and society in the church. They could justify such engagement on the grounds that the empire was conceptually concentric with the church. In a post-imperial context, Bulgakov's early sophiology justifies constructive engagement with culture on the basis of a shared eschatological impulse. Conscious awareness of this impulse is inconsequential. This vision of economy already gestures toward the potential for a new *symphonia* insofar as it locates God in culture. It suggests that, though the secular and the church do not have the same operations, they have the same end. This more reconciliatory account of the church-world limen is promising, but not yet complete. Overcoming Christian cognitive dissonance requires not simply *placing* God in the secular as a kind of invisible hypothetical, but really *finding* God there. Suggesting that *what happens in culture reveals a desire for the divine* only points toward a constructive coordination of church and secular, but it does not yet provide an integral account of their interpenetration in Christian life. For a more specific account of this shared objective between church and society which the foregoing account suggests, we must delve a little more deeply into the particulars of Bulgakov's more mature theology.

God, Encompassing the World for the Kingdom

The previous section showed how Bulgakov expanded the Byzantine balance with the state to include culture itself. This section intends to fill out that account by exploring Bulgakov's theology in order to consider how it incorporates the foregoing account of culture

into a comprehensive understanding of the church. Bulgakov's later work, with which this section is concerned, is a theology of God and the world together that provided the rationale for his new *symphonia*, his social Christianity. We shall appropriate this rationale in a way that tries to avoid much of Bulgakov's esoterica by focusing on the way he conceives of Sophia as three interrelated metaphors for God, the world, and the culmination of their union in the kingdom. This summary serves the objective of this essay by offering us a way to account for the church and the secular that unites them under the unfolding of God's kingdom in history. Though, we shall see, this account is incomplete, this section presents Bulgakov's theology without judgment, saving analysis and critique for the next section.

Metaphor 1: Sophia as the Divine Nature

Seeing how Bulgakov justifies culture in God requires first understanding how Bulgakov conceives of God. When it comes to a doctrine of God, Rowan Williams says, "Sophia *is* the divine nature."¹⁹ For all intents and purposes, that is correct. We can identify her with God's *ousia*. But Bulgakov tends to say, "Sophia is *like* ousia."²⁰ He refers to Sophia, which also he calls God's "Wisdom," God's "Glory," and the "Divine world," to indicate that God's nature is not a thing but an activity. The divine *ousia* is how the Trinity co-equally relates to itself.²¹ Sophia, Bulgakov says, is *ousia* "in its self-revelation."²² To understand the way in which Sophia is God's nature revealing itself, we must first ask what is being revealed. In other words, what is

¹⁹ Williams, "Eastern Orthodoxy," 576.

²⁰ Sergius Bulgakov, "Hypostasis and Hypostaticity: Scholia to *the Unfading Light*," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1-2 (2005): 43. Emphasis mine.

²¹ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans., Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 117.

²² Bulgakov, "Hypostasis and Hypostaticity," 43.

God? With all due respect to St. Anselm, Bulgakov would say, “God is love” (1 John 4.8).²³ Of course, this answer is only a beginning because it does not tell us anything if we do not ask ourselves what is love, and thus what God is doing when God is loving.

Adapting an analogy from Aidan Nichols can help answer this question. He tried to describe Sophia by comparing human self-knowledge to divine self-knowledge. In the case of human beings, he says, there is always a gap between who we are and what we know about ourselves, a gap that does not exist in God because God is a Trinity. Therefore, God’s self-knowledge is always immediate to Godself.²⁴ Since Bulgakov himself describes Sophia as an explication of divine *self-loving* (and only self-knowing as a function of self-loving), it is more appropriate to go beyond Nichols’ interest in divine knowledge to focus on divine love.²⁵ Augustine recognized that human beings can only love themselves in God.²⁶ Because God is our highest good, loving a lower good is a violation of the ground of our existence. That is what

²³ Bulgakov would agree with St. Anselm that God is “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” In fact, he presumes this to be the case throughout his theology, in particularly his doctrine of creation. Anselm, “Proslogium,” in *Proslogium; Monologium; an Appendix in Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilon; and Cur Deus Homo* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1954), II.

²⁴ Aidan Nichols, *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov* (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2005), 12-32.

²⁵ See Bulgakov, “Hypostasis and Hypostaticity,” 25-27.

²⁶ Augustine, *The Trinity*, VIII.V.12.

makes human self-love the root cause of original sin.²⁷ Not so for God! God is triune. Therefore, divine self-love does not close God off to the love of others because divine self-love is always *selfless* love, fulfilled in the Holy Trinity. This makes the Trinity an inherently “open system” that is always also complete in Godself. Says Bulgakov,

Begetting the Son, the Father goes forth to him by love in the life-giving Spirit, and the Spirit, as a living Hypostatic love of the Two between themselves, locks in triunity the reciprocity of love, whereby the disclosing of the nature of the Absolute Subject, the manifestation of the nature and power of *I* through *thou* and into *we*, appears as realised: *I* as triune *We*, in whom each hypostasis is revealed through another, *I* through *thou* and into *we*.²⁸

An axiom of Trinitarian theology is that the three *hypostases* act together as one. Because this is not a virtual acting – three persons acting as if they were one (by agreeing with each other) –

Bulgakov says we can rightly speak of three *hypostases* as one subject. When we say “God,” we do not mean just the divine essence or one hypostasis but all three hypostases together; we refer

²⁷See Augustine, “On Free Will,” in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J. H. S. Burleigh, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), III.xxiv.71. I know as an Orthodox theologian I am expected to say “ancestral sin,” but I do not think it is very elucidating, or helpful to a spirit of ecumenism, to pretend that the western and eastern ways of talking about human fallenness are mutually exclusive. The distinction is a very modern polemic, resulting from post-colonial and diasporic Orthodoxy. Unfortunately, the modern Orthodox mission to the “new world” of the west has sought to protect its numbers and draw new converts by a kind of self-Orientalism, over-stressing what are actually more subtle distinctions between the eastern and western traditions. Thus John S. Romanides locates everything that goes wrong with the western theological tradition in the pessimistic anthropology of St. Augustine’s, in particular the inherited guilt of Adam. See John S. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin: A Comparative Study of the Sin of Our Ancestors Adam and Eve*, trans., George S. Gabriel (Ridgewood, NJ: Zephyr, 2002). I do not necessarily dispute the facts of Romanides analysis, just his conclusions. Augustine did say children inherit the guilt of Adam. Augustine, “A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and on the Baptism of Infants,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Albany, Or: Ages Software), I.9-10. However, some Orthodox Christians have also held this view. St. Innocent said that every infant is “born in sin” and contains a “seed of sin” even before she knows good from evil. St. Innocent, *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1999), 6. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans., Thomas Allen Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009 [1927]), 23-29. Even if Orthodox Christians insist that infants are born innocent, insofar as sin is self-love, just give the infant a few seconds and she will be just as guilty as her parents. The difference is that we do not believe God holds children accountable for their sinfulness until they are able to understand their sin and its consequences. We Orthodox are not Pelagians. We agree with Augustine that salvation is impossible without the intervention of divine grace (even if we do not let that logic lead us to Augustine’s doctrine of limited election). Therefore, the fundamental difference between so-called ancestral versus original sin comes down to whether or not we think infants are guilty of sin from birth or a few minutes after it. On the significance of Romanides work, see Christos Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West: Hellenic Self-Identity in the Modern Age*, trans., Peter Chamberas and Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross, 2006), 275-77.

²⁸ Bulgakov, “Hypostasis and Hypostaticity,” 21. Emphasis original.

to the three in the singular. From a Christian perspective, the Bible indicates the singularity of the triune God by referring to the one image of God in the plural (Genesis 1:26). God's *us* is one *I*. Divine unity, therefore, is self-emptying love that is always fulfilled – never lacking anything – in its hypostatic return.

Sophia is the divine essence insofar as she is this loving. She is not the three *hypostases* themselves but the *act* of pouring themselves out into each other and being returned by each other. Thus, Bulgakov calls her the “love of Love, the preeternal object and content of the love of God.”²⁹ He once compared her to a fourth *hypostasis* in what may be the most misguided simile ever deployed by a Christian theologian, but his intent was to express the idea that Sophia is an eternal “moment” of self-embrace within the triune God – God's threeness apprehending God's oneness – embracing and loving all that they are in each other.³⁰ Sophia is thus the human abstraction of God's essence, made “virtual,” which is necessary for us consistently to realize that God is not two parts: one *ousia* and three *hypostases*, but that the one *ousia* of God is the co-

²⁹ Ibid.: 25.

³⁰ See Sergius Bulgakov, “The Unfading Light,” in *Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 135.

incidence of the three *hypostases*, engaged in an eternal, kenotic dance, God not only loving, but loving the fact that God loves all that God is.³¹

Metaphor 2: Sophia as Creation

Sophia is the abstraction of God's essence from a human perspective, but for God, Sophia is always concrete: she is the creation itself (in this aspect she is called creaturely Sophia).³² Insofar as God is pure self-abnegation without loss, the Trinity "others" its essence in humanity. The Godhead apprehends the totality of itself in the cosmos. Creaturely Sophia is God's essence distended into time. From the perspective of the above, this means that God loves Godself by loving us.

In a sense, we might say God *needs* the world, a statement that only offends orthodox sensibilities if we forget that some needs arise not out of lack but fullness. God "needs" the world in the same way that a loving couple "needs" a child, because the two of them, in a certain

³¹ Thus Anthony Baker and Rocco Gangle say that, "the Godhead together desires unity as if it were an extradivine being." This description is half-right. It is right that Sophia is an abstraction, but wrong in that it is not an abstraction for God but for us. Baker and Gangle seem to stress the mediatorial aspects of Sophia like one finds in *The Unfading Light*, with the world on one end, God on the other, and Sophia in between. But Sophia mediates only insofar as she is knowledge (i.e. to know the world is to begin to grasp something of the mind of God) and love (i.e. to love the world with the love whereby God loves the world). At this point, we are beginning to get into some of the weaknesses of sophiology (that it is a metaphor that, in the end, Bulgakov makes work far too hard). The point is that Baker and Gangle seem to be reading Sophia through the Christological poetics of Milbank, which is not exactly how Bulgakov intended it. Anthony D. Baker and Rocco Gangle, "Ecclesia: The Art of the Virtual," in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 272. See Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 123ff. Thus, I read Joshua Davis' critique of sophiology in Baker and Gangle as a critique of one way of interpreting this metaphor (not to say that he does not raise other valid points about the ambiguity of Sophia). Joshua Davis, "A Critique of the Metaphysics of Ontological Poesis: Responding to Theology and the Political," *Political Theology* 10, no. 1 (2009): 157-61. In footnote 29, Davis suggests that Sophia can be read in a more 'Romantic' way, expressing the evolutionary drive of creatures, or the "*whence* of our *Gefühl* of absolute dependence" in Schleiermacher. I agree with Davis about the limits and potential of Sophiology in this Romantic direction, and add that this is actually how, I believe, Sophia is supposed to be read. This difference of reading may explain why Paul Valliere finds what radical orthodoxy would only see as perplexing correlations between the work of the "liberal" Paul Tillich and Bulgakov. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 236. For Bulgakov, as for Tillich, God is the answer to the creature's existential desire for self-possession and self-awareness. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University, 1980), esp. 155ff.

³² For a complete presentation of Bulgakov's doctrine of creation, see Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 119-56. Bulgakov, *Comforter*, 189-218. Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 33-146.

sense, cannot contain the fullness of their love. The same is true of God. True love expands itself. Like Gregory of Nyssa's *epectasis*, it is an ever-fulfilling, never quenched desire for the other.³³ Bulgakov thus posits creation as the object of God's eternally expanding self-desire. The merits of this proposition aside, this idea is important because it makes the universal integral to God's own life. It thus synthesizes often competing trends in a doctrine of creation in a panentheistic vision of the God-world relationship. Modern theology tends to go back-and-forth between a Hegelian or Barthian point of view. Either the world is a manifestation of God's own self-development, making it necessary to God's being, or God is completely free vis-à-vis creation, meaning that this world need not have been.³⁴ From Bulgakov's perspective, both sides are incomplete because they forget that love is beyond either the necessity of Hegel or the freedom of Barth. Love is a "free necessity," a compulsion that does not limit because it arises from within oneself.³⁵ If God created out of love, then Barth is right – God was not obligated to create the world – and Hegel is right – the word must be. God thus acts according to the dictates of God's own nature, in neither an arbitrary nor limited way.

³³ Nyssen, *Life of Moses*, 219-55.

³⁴ Of course, the above is a popular caricature of these two positions, but getting too far into the similarities and differences between Barth and Hegel would distract from the matters at hand. Still, it is worth noting that Bulgakov's doctrine of creation is fairly Barthian. Barth *is* much more inclined to stress that creation is an act of divine freedom, proceeding from the divine will. However, he also says that the covenant is the "aim of creation." This implies that God creates not simply by an act of divine fiat but as an expression of his own nature as love – a free expression, to be sure – but one that Barth seems to think was not exactly arbitrary. He stresses divine freedom more than Bulgakov (possibly in reaction to Hegel), nonetheless he describes the "free love" that motivated creation as an act of "divine necessity." Interestingly, like Bulgakov, he describes the creative act as the revelation of God's glory. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, trans., J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight, vol. III.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 26, 60, 230. For Hegel, see note 13 in this chapter.

³⁵ As an example, a mother who jumps in front of an oncoming car to save her child is not forced to, nor does she simply choose to. She loves her child. So the proper course of action seems obvious. Love is beyond freedom and necessity. To switch metaphors, love does not limit our horizons, restricting freedom. If anything, it expands our vision, freeing us from an aimless wandering. By giving us a direction – a range – in which to travel, love opens up paths of understanding our aimless curiosity would never have allowed us to discover. Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 128.

As the expression of divine love, the world, says Bulgakov, exists within God. He argues that panentheism contradicts the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* only if we take “nothing” literally, which would be a mistake. The doctrine of creation out of nothing must not be the description of a process but an affirmation of divine sovereignty. Otherwise, God would not be God because God would be limited by the “nothing” that surrounds the divine being. In fact, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was a response to Platonic understandings of creation out of pre-existent matter, meaning that it intended to affirm only that God needs nothing but Godself to create. Therefore, says Bulgakov, for God to create out of nothing is to create out of Godself. “Nothing” is but theological poetry intended to refer to the room God makes for creation within the inner-divine life, the creation God gives us freely to reciprocate the love that is the foundation of our existence.

This panentheism grounds the optimistic view of culture Bulgakov offered in *Philosophy of Economy*, for it means that creation is filled with Godself. When it comes to the content of creation, this must, in a certain sense, “pre-exist” within God as a kind of Platonic archetype.³⁶ Because creaturely Sophia is the distention of divine self-love into creaturely becoming, then those archetypes are realized in creation over time, both in nature and human events.³⁷ This point of view smudges a strict boundary between special and general revelation by reckoning human products the result of a deep desire to reciprocate the love that is the ground of our existence.

³⁶ I place quotes around that word to indicate its imprecision. It is heresy only insofar as it subjects God to time by placing God at the beginning of a sequential process, like a First Mover. We can think of pre-existence in a loose sense as referring to the eternal omniscience of God who knows, from a humanly perspective, what will be before it is. Ibid., 22.

³⁷ I distinguish between natural and human events reluctantly for the sake of convention. Bulgakov understood, and I agree with him, that human beings are part of the eco-system. Human events produce natural ones and natural events impact human societies. The history of humanity is therefore inseparable from the history of the natural world. Ibid., 237ff.

Our products insofar as they are unsullied by human sinfulness, reflect the divine mind and strive to return divine love. In this way, Bulgakov tries to combine Plato and Aristotle by making the distention of divine love into creaturely becoming constitute nature's *entelecheia*.³⁸ Thus, the self-fulfillment of creatures is found in a Godward journey that is both beyond and more fully into themselves. As O'Donnell says, "The world grows toward the divine archetypes."³⁹

Metaphor 3: Sophia as the Kingdom of God

Insofar as Bulgakov will help us respond to Milbank and Hauerwas, a word must be said about the way he identifies Sophia with the kingdom of God. This point will be very brief because the kingdom of God is not fully developed in Bulgakov's theology. He says a lot about eschatology in general (the universal resurrection, the *parousia*, and the fates of the just and the damned), but very little about what we today would recognize as the reign of God's righteousness, particularly in the way that scripture deploys the term.⁴⁰ He does explicitly say that Sophia is the kingdom of God in his essay "Hypostasis and Hypostaticity," in which he identifies her with the final triumph of sin and death to take place in the universal resurrection. This identification of Sophia with the kingdom is consistent with what Bulgakov said earlier about the motive force behind economy. Again, though incomplete, it suggests that a maturer Bulgakov recognized that culture and its products are inspired by the kingdom of God that is

³⁸ Ibid., 182.

³⁹ John J. O'Donnell, "The Trinitarian Panentheism of Sergej Bulgakov," *Gregorianum* 76, no. 1 (1995): 33.

⁴⁰ Though the political component of the kingdom of God is underdeveloped in Bulgakov's thought, he did anticipate many later developments in eco-theology. See Myroslaw Tataryn, "Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944) : Time for a New Look," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 42, no. 3-4 (1998): 321.

breaking into the world through them. This means that that which inspires culture is the focal point of the church's own life.

The significance of this metaphor lies in the way it is coordinated with his doctrine of creation. Bulgakov says Sophia is the “the *ground* and *goal* of the creation of the world.”⁴¹ Insofar as Sophia is identified with the kingdom of God as well as the cosmos, this statement means to show that the destiny of the world is somehow written into it, in embryonic form, from the beginning. The kingdom, as Bulgakov understands it, is not just an irruptive moment within history but in some sense internal to its own processes. In his own words, “The transfiguration of the world is...simultaneously immanent to and transcendent to the world.”⁴² We might thus say, for Bulgakov, that creation is marked by what Sarah Coakely has called, in another context, an “eschatological longing.”⁴³ This longing has implications for the church which must be addressed.

What Sophiology Means for the Church

The above suggests that creation contains within itself seeds of the kingdom of God, so to speak. Bulgakov would not exactly put it in those terms, but this expression is consistent with his thought. The seeds of Sophia develop in time toward their full flowering in the eschaton. Their partial flowering gives us partial glimpses into God's reign. It is thus that he says Sophia is the

⁴¹ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 470. Emphasis mine. I am indebted to Robert F. Thompson and Brandon Gallaher for helping me make this connection.

⁴² Ibid., 426. Sergius Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, trans., Patrick Thompson, Library of Russian Philosophy (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1993), 95.

⁴³ Sarah Coakley, “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God,” *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (2000): 61.

creation and the kingdom of God. The following discussion draws out both the positive and negative implications of the way Bulgakov coordinates these two terms for the church.

The Positive Implications of Sophiology for the Church: Our Eschatological Mission

The positive implications of Sophia for the church, insofar as she is the embryonic presence of the world's future in the present, is best expressed by first reflecting for a moment on a couple more images of Sophia. I am aware that so far I have spent a great deal of time looking at metaphors for Sophia, but that is because Bulgakov thinks about Sophia metaphorically. Still, the following images are less about what Sophia is in herself than what she means for the God-world relationship as it relates to the being and purpose of the church. They come not so much from Bulgakov's theology as from his own life (though he does offer theological reflection on their meaning). Bulgakov had two epiphanic encounters of Sophia. These were not literal visions like the kind Solovyov had but emotionally charged moments that illustrated to Bulgakov a shared desire between God and the world. At various points in his life, he saw Sophia in the Caucasus Mountains and in a painting of the Madonna.⁴⁴

Mountains testify to the aspirational character of creation (creaturely Sophia). They are an inexplicable summons to transcend our own limits, to rise with the earth beyond ourselves. The mountaineer can give no more reason for climbing than the command within her, the small voice that echos like a thunderclap in her soul, calling her to ascend. Likewise, the poet, scientist, or laborer is similarly inspired to pursue her craft not as an end in itself but as a call from

⁴⁴ See Evtuhov, *Cross and Sickle*, 38-39, 44. Bulgakov observes that he was still a committed atheist at the time, yet on both occasions God "ambushed" him, so to speak, in spite of himself, forcing out of his hardened heart prayer and admiration for beauty divine. Sergius Bulgakov, "My Conversion," in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (London: SPCK, 1976), 10-11.

somewhere beyond herself. Such inspiration, Bulgakov would say, is the summons of God in Sophia. Mary, on the other hand, testifies to the full extent of kenosis in the divine Sophia. Not one on a list of eligible virgins tucked somewhere beneath Gabriel's angelic robes, the incarnation *depended* on one teenage girl's answer to a request to bear a burden probably any adult would immediately reject.⁴⁵

These two images together testify to the dance of God and creation in time. God descends! We rise! History unfolds itself like a transcendent tango – a synergism of God and creature oriented toward an eschatological consummation. This synergism does not mean we bring the kingdom, only that by God's grace we must work for it. We work with God toward the kingdom not because God needs our help but because God loves us. The salvation of the world, Bulgakov is fond of saying, is not a *deus ex machina*. God waits upon creation to be ready for the kingdom, which, by God's grace, already stretches out beyond itself to receive God's reign.⁴⁶

The church inhabits this dance in a unique way. Bulgakov says, "Christ left the world in His ascension to heaven...because the creaturely world was incapable of receiving and encompassing His presence in glory. But His departure was temporary, and the world had yet to *ripen* to receive Him anew."⁴⁷ The church, he goes on to say, is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. As such, we occupy the space between the ascension and *parousia* to help this world realize realize the fulfillment of its perhaps unperceived eschatological desire. Just as the

⁴⁵ Were that the case, says Bulgakov, the Incarnation would be "a miraculous coercion over man's nature...a *deus ex machina*." Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 206. Of course, the fact that Mary was selected because of the excellence of God's grace upon her, to which she freely responded, together with her own personal sinlessness (though she was subject to original sin) means that her refusal of the angelic request was not a "live option," so to speak. See also Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 35-44.

⁴⁶ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 426. Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 95. See also Sergius Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Forerunner*, trans., Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁴⁷ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 403. Emphasis mine.

first coming of Christ happened in “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4) the second coming will take place when the world is ready to receive him. Like John the Baptist, we exist to prepare the way. The church has an eschatological mission: we are creation’s gardner.

That does not mean the kingdom of God *depends* on the church. The world can ripen without the direct involvement of the church, by the power of the Spirit who continues to hover over the waters of creation (Genesis 1:2).⁴⁸ She will work in the world with or without the knowledge of the people of God. “The wind blows where it wishes” (John 3:8). The world also ripens within the church itself, this in two senses. There is a mystical sense to Bulgakov’s sacramental theology; he believes the power of God that transforms bread and wine into body and blood, and the blessings of other material objects in the church (water, oil, grapes, etc.) does have a real effect on the world. Through its natural cycles the redeeming energy of God wends its way into the ecosystem, quickening it.⁴⁹ In another sense, we can also speak of this transformation happening in the church in the lives of its members. As they begin to be transformed by embedding themselves more deeply into the life of the church, living with a particular people toward the coming reign of God, the world is transformed in them. After all, the lines we draw between the church and the world are only virtual. Both church and world are us. This is probably something of what Bulgakov had in mind when he spoke (in the previous chapter) of transforming society by the “interior energies” of the church, which does not mean that the world would be transformed only in the church. The light from a candle illumines more than the person holding it. What happens within the church diffuses beyond its walls as the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 397-408.

⁴⁹ Sergius Bulgakov, “The Holy Grail: (an Attempt at a Dogmatic Exegesis of John 19:34),” in *The Holy Grail and the Eucharist*, ed. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1997).

members of the body of Christ extend themselves into their societies. Given that sophiology intends to offer a theological rationale for the Christian sociology described earlier, it is fair to say that the church helps the world ripen by its constructive engagement with culture. The church transforms society by bringing the world's wisdom into itself and finding on it the fingerprints of Sophia.

This latter sense of the church's eschatological mission is helpful for us insofar as it makes the kingdom of God the motive force behind an open attitude of the church toward society. The unconscious longings of creation for the kingdom, and their partial fulfillments in cultural products, warrants a constructive relationship between the church and the world. Bulgakov spoke of the need for a creative church in order to indicate this openness. As noted in the foregoing presentation of *Philosophy of Economy*, what happens in society is potentially insight into God's own mind and therefore, in light of the mission of the church, a partial and proleptic instantiation of God's kingdom.⁵⁰ This openness owes to Bulgakov's conviction about the unfolding of divine revelation in history. Since creation is the content of the divine life itself, its desire for the kingdom gradually being realized in the course of history, any new social or

⁵⁰ On this constructive relationship between church and culture, it is worth noting the comeback Bulgakov has had among some Orthodox theologians, who find in him the potential for to bring their sometimes culturally isolated and reactionary theological traditions into closer contact with the modern world. It is thus that Miroslaw Tataryn sees Bulgakov as an Orthodox version of Henri de Lubac or Karl Rahner, doing for Orthodoxy what they did for Catholicism. He funds a shift from a "classicist" to an "historicist" perspective because of the way he opens the church to the creative insights of its culture. Tataryn also sees some parallels between Bulgakov and Lonergan. Myroslaw I. Tataryn, "History Matters: Bulgakov's Sophianic Key," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1-2 (2005): 203. According to the author, Bulgakov shares Lonergan's insistence that in creation is "an immanent source of transcendence." Mark D. Morelli and Elizabeth A. Morelli, eds., *The Lonergan Reader* (Buffalo: University of Toronto, 1997), 292. Both attribute this "imperative" to a desire for absolute knowledge which is closely connected with "a dynamic state [of loving] that prompts and molds all our thoughts and feelings, all our judgments and decisions" as the "first principle in our living." Bernard Lonergan, "The Future of Christianity," in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S. J.*, ed. William F. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 82.

scientific insight may be the unfolding of revelation about Godself, as a glimmer of fullness of that life in the kingdom to come.⁵¹

The open attitude toward culture present in Bulgakov's understanding of the mission of the church already bears implications for this project, for it suggests that erecting an ecclesiological wall between the church and the secular (even if that wall does not really exist) may violate some aspects of that mission. The Byzantines presented the possibility of resolving or at least mitigating the effects of Christian cognitive dissonance by coordinating church and society under the shared reality of God's reign. Bulgakov's sophiology suggestively addresses how to do that by locating the nascent and unconscious presence of the reign of God's righteousness in culture. However, development of our alternative account of the church-world limen cannot stop here because there is a conceptual weakness in sophiology that keeps it from fully accounting for the contemporary church's engagements with the secular. That weakness relates to the need to preserve ecclesial uniqueness in the face of some of the disintegrating effects of the secular. This emphasis, it has been shown, is necessary for a viable alternative to postliberal ecclesiology, and the related need to preserve the possibility of critiquing culture, which the symphonic ideal implies. Put simply, this conceptual shortcoming is the opposite of that which the third chapter criticized in Milbank and Hauerwas. They collapse the kingdom into the church. Sophiology has the *potential* to collapse the kingdom into the world.

⁵¹ As Tataryn says, "The reason for this positive assessment of human science and other areas of human creativity, is that this process, although undertaken in freedom, has the force of the Holy Spirit behind it." Tataryn, "History Matters," 211.

The Negative Implications of Sophiology for the Church: Sophic Ambiguity

Few theological metaphors work as hard as Sophia.⁵² Bulgakov says she is the essence of the Godhead abstracted. She is also the goodness abiding in this presently fallen world. She will have been the ideal world in the eschaton. She is glory, beauty, truth, and wisdom. The trouble with these descriptors is that when Sophia becomes practically everything, she risks becoming practically nothing, dissolving into incomplete and contradictory abstractions. Sticking with the concern above and the metaphors of Sophia mentioned in the previous section, we turn now to one major point of critique that arises from two conceptual ambiguities surrounding all the implications of the Sophia metaphor.

The first point of critique relates to the nebulous status of Sophia within the Godhead. Bulgakov introduces this term to try to emphasize divine unity. On the whole, his trinitarian theology rightly stresses that God is not two interrelated parts – *hypostases and ousia* – but that God’s *ousia* is the ever-kenotic, ever-fulfilling love of the *hypostases*. Still, one cannot help but ask if introducing yet *another* theological term into our vocabulary (Sophia) does not underscore but undermine divine unity? Despite what Bulgakov tries to say about Sophia within the

⁵² In general, I salute the intent behind sophiology. I even agree with some of its conclusions, and even more of its insights. It is not unlike Barth’s Christological revolution applied to the Trinity, itself. No, Barth certainly would not have agreed with Bulgakov’s feelings about the relationship between special and general revelation, and certainly not his panentheism! God touched human history, said Barth, at a tangent, leaving only a crater behind. However, behind Bulgakov’s sophiology is a Barthian insight. Barth realized that the absoluteness of God did not preclude the Incarnation but made it possible, for a truly absolute God would not be limited by the creation, but could enter into it. See Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*. Like Barth, Bulgakov also realized that divine transcendence does not compete with divine immanence. Thus, a number of commentators have suggested that Bulgakov’s theology is a grand application of the Definition of Chalcedon to every other doctrine; the Incarnation testifies to an original correspondence between God and creation. Unfortunately, the content of sophiology violates the intent that funded this insight in the ways noted below. For Sophia as a development of Chalcedon see Tataryn, “History Matters,” 205-6. See also, Myroslaw Tataryn, “Sergei Bulgakov: Eastern Orthodoxy Engaging the Modern World,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 31, no. 3-4 (2002): 316. Arjakovsky and Plekon: 222. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 292-93. Rowan Williams, “Introduction to the *Lamb of God: On the Divine Humanity (1933)*,” in *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 168-69.

Godhead, this term makes it more difficult *not* to think of God as *three* interrelated parts: *ousia*, *hypostases*, and Sophia. Rightly resisting this urge, the mind ends up not quite sure what to make of her, rendering her a kind of quasi-hypostatic, non-person existing forever within the Godhead. In other words, apart from vague and lofty nouns, it is never clear what Sophia is, positively, in herself (so to speak).

The nebulous status of Sophia within the Godhead carries over into creation. For the record, some aspects of Bulgakov's understanding of creation are compelling, particularly his interpretation of the *creatio ex nihilo* and the way it reconciles divine freedom to divine necessity in divine love. That said, his panentheism is problematic in its literalism and materialism. To be fair, there is some ground in scripture and tradition for poetically speaking of the world in God. Paul described Christ as he in whom "we live and move and have our being" in order to convey the way that God is *for* us (Acts 17:28). Likewise, St. Augustine asked in *De Trinitate*, "What, after all, is not in God, of whom it is divinely written, *for him and through him and in him are all things* (Rom 11:36)? So of course if all things are in him, what can things that live live in and things that move move in but in him in whom they are?"⁵³ But Augustine would also find Bulgakov's panentheism conceptually clumsy and problematic in its implications for a consistent doctrine of God, particular when it comes to what to make of evil. To explain his panentheism, Bulgakov likens God to an infinite, shoreless ocean, encompassing the cosmos.⁵⁴ This image almost perfectly mirrors an idea for which Augustine condemned himself.

I conceived your creation as a single vast mass differentiated by various types of bodies...I visualized you, Lord, surrounding it on all sides and permeating it, but

⁵³ Augustine, *The Trinity*, XIV.iv.16. I am not suggesting that Augustine was a panentheist, only that creative reappropriation of the tradition could potentially justify panentheism.

⁵⁴ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 44.

infinite in all directions, as if there were a sea everywhere and stretching through immense distances, a single sea which had within it a large but finite sponge; and the sponge was in every part filled from the immense sea. This is the kind of way in which I supposed your finite creation to be full of you, infinite as you are...⁵⁵

Augustine goes on to reject this vestige of his early Manichean habits of thought on the grounds that it both doled parts of God out unevenly to different creatures and, more problematically, implicated God in the evil done in creation by subjecting God materially to creation.

Independently, the above are problems for sophiology, but together they risk implicating the church in the evil of this world either actively or by complicity. From our perspective, Sophia is the essence of God abstracted. Admittedly, the Wisdom tradition in the Bible reveals some aspects of Sophia, but for the most part she is only concretely present to us in creation's truth, goodness, and beauty (generally speaking). Whether or not such Platonic ideals as truth, goodness, and beauty exist forever in the heavenlies, this world is fallen. The criteria by which we recognize truth, goodness, and beauty are invariably skewed both by our limited, finite perspective and, more importantly, by our own sinfulness. She may be the goodness within fallen creation, but this is a goodness we sinful creatures must discover, and so, with little else but a few scattered verses and a vague feeling about the presence of Sophia in the world, we risk finding her in falsehood. We risk invoking her to justify our own sinfulness. In other words, despite all the lofty names Bulgakov heaps upon her, the absence of clear criteria by which we might recognize her, other than our subjective opinions about what truth, goodness, and beauty are, means that there is little to prevent Sophia from becoming a kind of inverted Feuerbachian projection, whereby she becomes not a repository of our ideals against which to judge and act

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.v.7.

against creation's evil, but a means to self-justification by projecting our collective evil into eternity.

The need to excise the good in created Sophia coming mostly from creation itself, this aspect of sophiology asks us to think in a circle. To be clear, this is more a conceptual problem, but it has practical implications, particularly for the eschatological mission of the church to help ready the world to receive the kingdom. This sophic ambiguity may not lead to horrific acts like genocide or infanticide or other such atrocities, but if we are constructively to engage culture where we find glimpses of divine wisdom in it, without being surer about what makes worldly wisdom divine, the church risks complicity with, or complacency toward, aspects of culture that *seem* wise, but should be rejected insofar as they do not conform to what will be the reality of God's reign. In an extreme example, a church without a clearer picture of when to reject what happens in society risks repeating in some form the actions of Russian Christians who joyfully turned in Jewish neighbors to the *Einsatzgruppen*. Or it might lead us to conclusions of those like Teilhard de Chardin (who bears a great deal in common with Bulgakov), to see world events like Hiroshima and Nagasaki as all part of the plan.⁵⁶ This risk of self-justification makes Sophia a sufficient ground for engagement with the secular, but not critique. For the latter, Bulgakov proves insufficient.

At this point, one might ask, If Sophia unfolds prolepses of the kingdom of God in society – even secular society – then do not the criteria for ecclesial action in it come from the church's understanding of God's reign? Indeed, they do! The trouble is that, insofar as ongoing

⁵⁶ I do not wish to suggest that Chardin is flippant about atom bombs. He is keenly aware of both the perils and the promises of nuclear energy, but he comes down, in my opinion, a bit too far on the capacity of human beings to shape their destinies as an expression of their common spiritual vocation. See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, trans., Norman Denny (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 140ff.

human history is part of Sophia, and thus included in the self-understanding of the church, the content of the kingdom of God still remains somewhat open this side of the eschaton. This is the right question to ask, but there is not enough in Bulgakov's theology to answer it.

In sum, the problem of sophic ambiguity calls into question the applicability of the Sophia metaphor fully to provide an account of the kingdom of God in the church and the world that also meets the need of preserving ecclesial uniqueness. My concern to preserve the potential of ecclesial critique of the secular is not motivated by a desire somehow to maintain the visible purity of the church. That is impossible. My concern involves the self-understanding of the church in the secular. Bulgakov shows the church how to be open to its society. From the above perspective, even that which formally precludes consideration of God need not immediately be prohibited from influencing the church, for there is good in it that comes from God. There are insights of the secular that can and have influenced the church in a positive way (such as the liberation of women and a greater concern for human rights). For that reason the church also should not worry about supporting those aspects of the secular that correspond to the coming reality of God's reign. That said, to prevent or mitigate Christian cognitive dissonance in a way that still allows us to stress the identity of the church in a way comparable to Milbank and Hauerwas, we need not just openness to the secular but the possibility to withdraw from it, to assert our own narratives in the face of it, and to stress the judgment of the kingdom of God against it. While there is much in the secular from which the church has done well to learn, there is much in it that should be rejected (such as capitalist deprivation of the two-thirds world and a utilitarian attitude toward individuals and the earth, to mention what should be a few

uncontroversial examples). In a word, sophic ambiguity makes such judgment, at minimum, rather difficult.

Conclusion

At this point it would be good to pause and take stock both of where we have come and where we shall go. Challenged by postliberal ecclesiology to develop a comparable account of narthexical space that explains the presence of the secular in the church (influencing it) and the church in the secular (supporting it), we have seen that the way to address this challenge focuses both on preserving a distinction between the kingdom of God in the church (though not denying that the church is a proleptic experience of the kingdom) while also locating the kingdom in society. The Byzantines offered us a model for doing that in their ideal of *symphonia*, which responded to the partial presence of the kingdom in society by conditionally supporting it or critiquing it, as circumstances dictated.

In this chapter, we took a closer look at Bulgakov as providing the initial dogmatic content for the Byzantine architecture presented in the previous chapter. Such is justified on the grounds that he understood his philosophical and theological project to undergird a newer version of the symphonic ideal, which he called social Christianity. Philosophically, he focused on the creative potential of the church to engage culture on the basis of the presence of Sophia guiding and directing its historic development. The theology he later developed to explain this work of Holy Wisdom focused on a panentheistic relationship between God and the world that was oriented toward its culmination in the eschaton. Though when it comes to the kingdom of God, Bulgakov's eschatology is somewhat undeveloped, we *can* rightly say that he sees the

kingdom nascently unfolding in world-historic process, which includes not only what we think of as nature but also human history as well. This justifies the secular to the church by making the kingdom of God the driving force of the life of the world, with or without the direct involvement of the church. His ecclesiology tied the church to this understanding of the world by conceiving of it as the kingdom's gardener, so to speak, working in the world to ready it to receive Christ in the *parousia*. Constructive engagement with the secular, nurturing the seeds of the kingdom it contains, is why we exist.

This conception of the church thus partly responds to the Christian cognitive dissonance of postliberal ecclesiology by conceiving of our inevitable support of the secular not by denying or ignoring it but by incorporating it into our *raison d'être*. Our commitment to the kingdom thus requires commitment to the world. At minimum, this point of view makes the boundary between the church and the secular permeable by seeing the kingdom of God at least partially present in both. However, we have also seen that a full response to Milbank and Hauerwas' account of the narthex requires stressing ecclesial uniqueness. Despite his best intentions, it was argued that Bulgakov's sophiology makes such an emphasis problematic because the content of Sophia, and thus the kingdom of God (with which he identifies her), is too nebulous. She funds our engagement with the world, but her concrete content comes from the world we engage. This conceptual weakness in Bulgakov means we cannot end at sophiology. As helpful as this metaphor has been for conceiving of how to reconcile the church to the development of human culture and society within the kingdom of God, Sophia provides insufficient ground upon which to construct a fully symphonic account of the church in the secular.

Thus, the next chapter will respond to this shortcoming by, in a sense, filling out the content of the kingdom of God in order to provide the church with more concrete criteria for its engagement with the secular, both constructively and critically. To do this, we will continue the above discussion in order to emend Bulgakov's theology in a way that uncovers more stable ground upon which ecclesial *symphonia* must be based: the presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER VI

ECCLESIAL SYMPHONIA: FINDING IDENTITY IN THE NARTHEX

“To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”
Luke 13:20-21

The last chapter offered a provisional definition of ecclesial *symphonia* as constructive engagement with the secular on the basis of the kingdom of God’s proleptic manifestation in it. The sophiology of Bulgakov helped us see how culture may unconsciously contain these prolepses insofar as it is the kingdom that drives its development. We further saw that, inhabiting the space between the ascension and the second coming, the church exists to prepare this world to receive the reign of God’s righteousness both in itself and in its engagement with culture. For us, this means that the secular cannot be *ipso facto* precluded from the self-understanding of the church but is actually incorporated into it. We exist to engage. This openness gets us halfway to a symphonic alternative to the counterpositional views of Milbank and Hauerwas, but a viable alternative to their ecclesiologies must also stress ecclesial identity, which is something we saw sophiology is unable to sustain. The absence of concrete content for the kingdom of God within the Sophia metaphor complicates ecclesial judgment of the secular (the provisional sectarianism conforming to the Byzantine model), thereby impeding the eschatological work of the church. Sophiology thus makes our support of the secular, and to a limited extent even our withdrawal, “thinkable” in a hypothetical way, but not actually. For that reason, we must move beyond

sophiology to a more traditional and orthodox way of conceptualizing God's relationship to the world: Jesus.

I do not mean to suggest that Bulgakov does not care about Jesus. Though sometimes one walks away from his books wondering if this is how Augustine must have felt about the Platonists,¹ Bulgakov does have a christology.² Sophiology was, among other things, an attempt to unpack the logical implications of the Definition of Chalcedon.³ Nevertheless, sophiology remains abstractly metaphysical, unable to provide us with a clearer vision of not *whether* but *how* to engage the secular, because Bulgakov resists directly connecting Sophia to the man Jesus Christ. Sophia, he says, is hypostasized in Jesus.⁴ She is the Word of God in the act of creation.⁵ But he breaks with what is, to my knowledge, universal patristic consensus that equates Wisdom with the second person of the Trinity.⁶ This chapter argues that the revelation of the kingdom of God (not in Sophia but) in the incarnate Word – the man Jesus Christ – is how the church today both recognizes and responds to prolepses of that reign in the secular.

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.xxi.27.

² Bulgakov has written a remarkable christology from which contemporary theology would do well to learn. It is important for the way that his presumption of a noncompetitive relationship between God and the world allows him to develop an account of the divinity and humanity in Jesus that persuasively combines Alexandrian and Antiochene christological emphases, as well as for a fairly Moltmannian reflection on the triune experience of the cross. Still, he often favors abstract dogmatic issues over the concrete figure of Jesus Christ presented in the gospels. His argument is most persuasive when it is most biblical. See Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*.

³ *Ibid.*, 51ff.

⁴ See *ibid.*, 107-17. Bulgakov, *Comforter*, 184, 200-1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 191-92. Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 129.

⁶ Typically, one must be cautious about making totalizing claims such as this. Surely, there must be some ancient church mother or father who did not identify Sophia with the Son. However, try as I might, I cannot come up with a single example of someone who did not see Old Testament Wisdom referring to the Son. Were there such a person, Bulgakov would likely have referred to him or her. He does not, which suggests at minimum that Bulgakov could not come up with any examples either. All he can do is observe this connection in patristic theology and critique it in some way or another. Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 15-19.

I first develop this thesis by substituting with the Word the function Sophia serves in Bulgakov's theology. For an account of the Word providing the content of creation, my archetypal instance of the tradition is Athanasius because of the way his understanding of the incarnation overlaps with Bulgakov. However, my intent is not simply to return to an older way of thinking about the God-world relationship but to allow Bulgakov's understanding of Sophia revealing herself over time to help bring the tradition into the present. His modern sense of history augments the tradition by allowing us to think of an historicized Logos, whereby we occupy the outer edge of the ongoing distention between the foundation of the world in the Word and the work of God in Jesus Christ. The second section turns to that work. Jesus Christ, to apply Bulgakov's language, is not only the "ground" of creation but also its "goal."⁷ Looking at three different but related accounts of the presence of God's reign in Jesus Christ – in politics, economy, and community – will provide us with some reasonably concrete criteria for recognizing and responding to prolepses of the kingdom in the world around us. Thus, this section will be the answer to the problem of sophic ambiguity critiqued in the last chapter, showing how we draw criteria for engagement with the secular not from the world itself but the presentation of Christ in the gospels, which poke their way through the soil of secular society. Obviously, neither these criteria nor their application will be exhaustive. Indeed, talk of application will be fairly general, but *symphonia* is not about knowing what to do in every circumstance. We can never know that! It is about living life in the light of God's reign. This side of eternity, that light is never bright enough to illuminate all the twists and turns of life, but it can point us in the right direction. Finally, we complete the process of moving *symphonia* into an

⁷ See *ibid.*, 470. Emphasis mine.

ecclesiological register by noting how the first two sections place the church in a dynamic relationship to its culture, and drawing implications therefrom. Jesus Christ is the foundation of the world, incarnate in time, partly revealing a future that has yet to arrive. Thus, the full impact of his work is yet to be determined but is partly read to us by the ongoing story of the world around us. This does not divest the church of its identity as the body of Christ or the anticipation of God's reign but incorporates the "situation" into that identity. It means that for the church to exist for God's kingdom is also to exist for the world. Who we are is found in the conscious incorporation of our context into our identity through a constant return to the presence of Christ in word and worship, thereby guiding the eschatological longing of the secular toward a future it does not yet know it desires.

Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of God

This section offers not simply a christological corrective to Bulgakov but aims to use his sense of the revelation of God in Sophia partly to update the patristic tradition. On the one hand, I will dispute his refusal to identify Sophia with the Word of God by addressing his major argument against it. Having dispatched his objection to this identification, I will further argue that nothing essential from Bulgakov's theology is lost by attributing to the Word the major functions Bulgakov assigns to Sophia. The result is something of an historicized understanding of the Logos, revealing himself in the ongoing story of creation, climaxing in Christ, and proceeding from him toward the culmination of creation in the kingdom. Not only does this synthesis not take away from Bulgakov's understanding of the integral relationship between God and the world in history, but it also overcomes the problem of sophic ambiguity (addressed at the

end of the previous chapter) by establishing some narrative boundaries (to be addressed in the second section) for recognizing the proleptic presence of the kingdom of God in the world.

Why Wisdom was not the Word

Fairness to Bulgakov requires that, rather than simply asserting that we should see Wisdom as the Word, we give attention to why he objected to this identification. He was not ignorant of the fact that he was breaking with tradition by separating Old Testament accounts of Sophia from the Son.⁸ Bulgakov did say that precursors to his own unique take on Sophia could be found in the speculations of Origen and the energies of Gregory Palamas.⁹ He also felt that his sophiology was anticipated in certain church buildings and feasts unique to Russian Orthodoxy.¹⁰ That said, his insistence that his sophiology was not dogma but doctrine – an unfinished *theologoumena* – suggests that he knew he was mostly innovating. Or, since innovation is sometimes code for “heresy” among some of Bulgakov’s more conservative church kin, let us say he knew that he was “creatively re-appropriating” the tradition. Bulgakov justified his exegetical raid and revision of the tradition by insisting that it is necessary to free Sophia from captivity to the Logos if we are to hold a consistent doctrine of the Trinity. Otherwise, he said, we divide God into parts by implying that, since the Son is Wisdom, the Father and Spirit are not wise.¹¹

⁸ Bulgakov quotes Proverbs 8:22-31. Bulgakov, “Social Teaching,” 279-80.

⁹ Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 108, note 14. Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 15-19. Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 1-12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

¹¹ See Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 110-11, note 16.

Bulgakov's concern about dividing the persons of the Trinity according to function is valid. This is something we risk whenever we apply human terms and concepts to attempt to express divine reality. Nonetheless, his objection is, frankly, perplexing both in its literalism and in its inconsistency with his own theology. Beginning to consider how Bulgakov's objection does not square with other aspects of his doctrine of the trinity will also shed light on its odd literalism.

When it comes to pneumatology, Bulgakov follows the lead of Augustine (which is to his credit, given the way the Orthodox often polemicize against him). He says that the Holy Spirit is the love that holds together the Father and the Son in the Trinity.¹² Yet this assertion contradicts the logic whereby he refuses to identify Wisdom with the Word. Were we to extend that logic to his pneumatology, we could argue that calling the Spirit "love" means that the Father and the Son do not have love. This contradiction either means that Bulgakov cannot rightly call the Spirit "love," or that he *can* call the Word "Wisdom."

This example illuminates the befuddling literalism in Bulgakov's argument. It seems fairly clear that to say that we cannot call the Spirit "love" for the reason I mentioned violates an apophatic consensus in trinitarian theology that our language about God is extremely limited. Our words will always only gesture toward the divine reality, never capture it. Relatedly, a corollary of this recognition is that the persons of the Trinity are what they are only in each other. Each *hypostasis* completes the others but is not incomplete without the others. Therefore, to say that the Spirit is love is not to say that the Father and Son do not have love, but it is to recognize that they have love in the Spirit. Similarly, it seems reasonable to insist, against Bulgakov, that

¹² Bulgakov, *Comforter*, 66-67.

there is no reason why we cannot say the same of the Son. The Father and Spirit possess wisdom in the Word. Otherwise, we risk reducing God to a collection of attributes that must not only be equally but identically possessed by all.

Seeing the Word as Wisdom

Having dispatched Bulgakov's main objection to identifying Sophia with the Son, we turn now to consider how attributing to the Word what Bulgakov applies to Sophia helpfully reconfigures his sophiology in a way that resolves the ambiguity that comes from making the world itself our standard for engaging the world, while still preserving the church's openness to the historic development of human society as proleptically and partially revealing God's reign. What follows is not only a patristic "correction" of Bulgakov (through Athanasius) but a Bulgakovian expansion of the tradition.

St Athanasius makes a good interlocutor for Bulgakov because of a remarkable degree of overlap in the way each relates divine immanence to divine transcendence.¹³ Well before Bulgakov, Athanasius attempted to express the non-arbitrariness of the world for God in a

¹³ Bulgakov was by no means unfamiliar with Athanasius' identification of Wisdom with the Logos, to which he objected on the grounds that such an identification would subordinate the Logos to the Father (by identifying the Logos with the world). *Ibid.*, 25 (note 21). In a lengthy excursus in *The Burning Bush*, Bulgakov discusses Athanasius' understanding of the Logos in more detail. There he cites Athanasius as an intellectual forebear. Both Arius and Athanasius believed that Sophia in Proverbs referred to the Son, which the former used as proof that the Son was a creature (see Proverbs 8:22ff). Athanasius countered that the creatureliness of Sophia in that passage referred to the economy of the Son. Thus, says Bulgakov, Athanasius anticipated sophiology by distinguishing between a divine and creaturely wisdom. Unfortunately, Athanasius sees the creation as an event that takes place "outside" God, which suggests that God is somehow supplemented by the cosmos. See Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush*, 146-49. On the latter objection, Bulgakov's seeming need to apply prepositions to the relationship between God and creation creates the problem he intends to overcome. Athanasius' assertion of divine freedom *vis-à-vis* the creation does not require supplementation. Indeed, a passage which I will quote at length below suggests quite the opposite – that Athanasius does think God provides all the content for creation. As for the charge of subordinationism, this seems to derive from a materialistic way of thinking about the God-world relationship that Bulgakov apparently finds impossible to avoid. To locate the content of creation in the Logos need only subordinate the Logos if we identify him with the creation, that is, if we resort not to panentheism but pantheism. Then he would be less than the Father inasmuch as creation is less than the Father, but I see no reason why insisting that the Son sustains creation requires any kind of hierarchy within the Trinity.

consistently trinitarian way (such as it was at the time). Like Bulgakov, he accomplished this objective by positing an original correspondence between God and the world. To see how he did this, we should examine what he says about the Word in an important passage from *On the Incarnation*. Responding to those who believe that the Word is too transcendent to become incarnate, Athanasius writes,

All things derive from the Word their light and movement and life, as the Gentile authors themselves say, “In Him we live and move and have our being.” Very well then. That being so, it is by no means unbecoming that the Word should dwell in man. So if, as we say, *the Word has used that in which He is* as the means of His self-manifestation, what is there ridiculous in that? *He could not have used it had He not been present in it*; but we have already admitted that He is present both in the whole and in the parts. What, then, is there incredible in His manifesting Himself through that in which He is? By His own power He enters completely into each and all, and orders them throughout ungrudgingly . . . Does not the mind of man pervade his entire being, and yet find expression through one part only, namely the tongue? Does anybody say on that account that Mind has degraded itself? Of course not. Very well, then, no more is it degrading for the Word, Who pervades all things, to have appeared in a human body. For, as I said before, if it were unfitting for Him thus to indwell the part, it would be equally so for Him to exist within the whole.¹⁴

The Arians were among those who believed that divine transcendence precluded divine immanence. The majesty of God meant God could not touch creation. As the above passage suggests, Athanasius seemed to realize that transcendence that precluded immanence was not really transcendence (because it was limited by something). Rather, true transcendence includes and makes possible immanence. He thus hit upon the same insight as Bulgakov, but without recourse to Bulgakov’s understanding of Sophia.

Like Bulgakov, Athanasius posits an original correspondence between God and creation, but he locates this correspondence in the Word, who can enter creation and become a part of it,

¹⁴ St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans., A Religious of C.S.M.V., Popular Patristics (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 2000), §42. Emphasis mine.

on the basis of none other than himself. As the foundation, internal logic, and sustainer of creation, the Logos can enter the world as that “in which He [always] is.” Still, Athanasius’ perspective is somewhat limited and can be helpfully amended by Bulgakov. The former was not able to see all the implications of the incarnation for history. That is not to say that Athanasius thought the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ were inconsequential, but that his consciousness of history itself was limited by his context. For Athanasius, it is incredibly important that Jesus Christ overcame death in the flesh and founded the church, enabling those after him to be equally fearless in the face of death, but the effects of this work on history were more indirect and limited to the general change Christ makes possible in human nature and the ongoing expansion and influence of the church.¹⁵ Bulgakov’s greater historical consciousness enabled him to develop the implications of this connection between God and the world for human society more broadly. In terms of Athanasius’ theology, we can thus say that Bulgakov allows us to see how the foundation of creation in *the Word* moves history toward the incarnation in anticipation of the kingdom of God. The incarnation – which includes the entire arc of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection – thus ripples beyond its time, place, or even the church itself to affect the entire course of human history. Jesus Christ “happens” in the perfect tense because the world is a process – a story whose meaning is not clear until the final period on the final page.

Seeing creation founded in the Logos, incarnate for our salvation, and moving kingdomwards preserves the interrelationship of the three metaphors for Sophia outlined in the previous chapter (that she is the *love of God abstracted* into the *creation* on the way toward the *kingdom*). Nothing essential is lost by replacing Sophia with the Word. In the first place, though

¹⁵ Ibid., §27-32.

it would not be correct to say that Jesus Christ is the abstracted essence of God, as the object of the Father's love, we can continue to say that God loves creation in loving the Son. More importantly for our purposes, seeing creation founded in the Son does not change the fact that the destiny of creation is written into the world from its foundation. It does not negate the eschatological longing that drives historic process. Rather, assigning to the Word what Bulgakov assigned to Sophia yields a synthesis that overcomes sophic ambiguity by focusing our understanding of what it means for history to drive toward its culmination in the kingdom on Christ, for the reign of God's righteousness has already appeared in the flesh among us. "[W]e beheld His glory" (John 1:14). Thus, the eschatological longing of creation is given a new focus. From the church's perspective, that for which creation pines has become incarnate for our salvation. The kingdom of God has arrived ahead of time in Jesus.

As we fulfill our eschatological mission of working with the secular, teasing out of it the embryonic prolepses of the kingdom present in it by virtue of its foundation in the Word, we are guided in that work by the presence of the kingdom in Jesus. He is the inner logic of creation, not only the Alpha and Omega but all the letters in between. The world, we now know, is not a static deposit but a story of evolution, growth, and development. Seeing history shot through with Christ, insofar as it grows toward the incarnation and the *parousia*, preserves the openness of the church toward the world made possible by Bulgakov's view of the presence of God in the development of culture. This view of the world distended between Christ – as its foundation and culmination – not only allows but requires a certain amount of engaged openness toward the secular insofar as it is part of a history, the crest of which we ride, that will at least partly have been the reign of God's righteousness.

Because Jesus Christ, to whom our Scriptures bear witness, is the presence of God's kingdom, we also have some boundaries that norm our engagement with the secular, both positively and negatively. Conceptually, this perspective fulfills the first requirement of developing a viable alternative to the postliberal account of the narthex. Since the kingdom of God is not only proleptically present in the church but also society, we can now engage the secular insofar as aspects of it will have been the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus. However, this world (which does not exclude the church) is corrupted by sin. We also look to him to recognize and react to this fallenness.

Insofar as the intent of this essay has been to develop such an account of the church in the world, we can almost stop here. Seeing history moving toward the kingdom, we are positioned to look for glimpses of God's reign in the world around us. Locating the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, to whom the Scripture bears manifold witness, we have some sense of what to look for. This is a "sense" because the kingdom of God is a person, which means it cannot be reduced to a clear set of prescriptions that apply in every circumstance. When we find seeds of the kingdom in the secular, we can work as God's gardner, tending to the green shoots of God's reign until Christ returns, and we can see the ways this world resists God's reign, which gives the church some understanding of how and when to struggle against the secular. Thus, the foregoing has outlined the basic dynamic of *symphonia* in a secular context by indicating how we can reconcile ourselves to the secular in the narthex of Christian discipleship. But, so far, this is only an outline. There is a difference between offering the church an ecclesiology (limited such as this one is) and offering the church a tactic. So far, the description of this symphonic dynamic with the secular has only amounted to some kind of stratagem or maybe a coping mechanism. Thus,

the preceding is not yet robust enough to stand as a viable alternative to postliberal ecclesiology, in part, because it does not fully conform to the reason for the church's existence. *Symphonia* as we saw, is more than a tactic but the expression of the church's eschatological ideal in Byzantium. Insofar as we are our commitment to the coming reign of God's righteousness, called to embody it in and through the world, a complete picture of *symphonia* in a secular context requires expressing what it is we think we are embodying. For this, once again, we turn to Jesus – the kingdom of God in person.

Jesus Christ: The Presence of the Kingdom

To say that Jesus Christ is the foundation of the world and the cause of its historic development in human culture means that God's revelation in the life of Christ recorded in the scriptures norms our *symphonia*. This section thus intends to fill out the framework of the symphonic dynamic between the church and the secular by considering concretely the way the kingdom of God is present in both. In other words, we can think of how the kingdom is present in the secular, but that still does not tell us how to recognize and thus respond to it. Therefore, in this section, we point toward the presence of the kingdom in the secular, as well as its absence (so to speak), offering some initial criteria for ecclesial engagement (either constructively or critically) by looking briefly at the life of him in whom the reign of God's righteousness was made manifest.

The following presentation will be limited for two reasons. In the first place, it cannot be an exhaustive account of the kingdom of God revealed in Christ because such an account would require a thorough christology, which, given the fact that I have already pulled together a number

of different strands from the Christian theological tradition in many times and places, would make the remainder of this argument both long and unwieldy. In the second place, I do not believe an exhaustive account of the kingdom of God in Christ is possible. Exhaustive accounts (in the plural) are possible, just not one story. This, because the Bible itself, in a manner of speaking, is conscious of its own internal diversity. It offers us at least somewhere between four and seven different versions of Jesus (if we count Revelation, parts of Isaiah, and the Psalms). Therefore, a single presentation of God's righteousness in him, no matter how many scriptures it quotes, will be unbiblical and must, therefore, be rejected as the new *Diatessaron* it is. The most biblical way to draw criteria for recognizing the presence of the kingdom of God in the secular is to offer a few *different* perspectives on how it was made manifest in him.

Therefore, we will look below at three variform but overlapping pictures of the kingdom of God in Jesus, keeping things manageable and relevant by focusing on its presence in three aspects of life – the political, economic, and communal – in the work of Jürgen Moltmann, M. Douglas Meeks, and John Howard Yoder, respectively. Obviously, each theologian is concerned with all of those things, and more. They are offered below not as objects of thorough study and analysis but heuristic illustrations to serve as jumping-off points for reflecting on the presence of the kingdom in the secular today. That is why I have chosen to focus on the kingdom's presence in the economic, political, and communal, for at the opening of this essay I noted that two children of the secular to keep in mind are the state and the market. Looking at them will help us get a clearer picture of how the church can concretely respond to the presence of the kingdom in the secular. Thus, the following summaries will be capped off with a set of observations that

draw the presence of Jesus from scripture into our context, and, through Yoder, gesture toward a way for the church faithfully to respond to that presence.

Jürgen Moltmann: The Kingdom of God in the Political

Among other things, Jürgen Moltmann presents the cross of Christ as a clash between two different regimes: the reign of God and the reign of Pilate (which represents hierarchical and repressive political systems that provide luxury and security to the few at the suffering of most). Moltmann stresses that God is not unaffected by what is happening in the world but, in the cross, shows the Trinity to be for those at the margins of society – the fodder of the Roman Empire. The triune God is an inherently relational and thus inherently loving being, and so capable of suffering both in Godself and with those who suffer.¹⁶ Thus, in the cross, God not only suffers the sundering of Godself as the Father forsakes the Son, who is justly condemned by the state and the law, but God suffers with all who suffer. This is because the resurrection is the affirmation of all that God became in the cross. Therefore, in Christ, God not only accepts but embraces and affirms the outsider, the poor, the abandoned, and the Godforsaken.¹⁷

The crucifixion, says Moltmann, happened because, “The gospel of Jesus and his public behaviour were political in the extreme.”¹⁸ It was a threat to the false peace of the *pax Romana*, a hierarchy of the divine emperor, citizens, slaves, and foreigners, funded and authorized by an equally hierarchical pantheon of deities who favored and secured the established order of society

¹⁶ Moltmann says that our ability to suffer is proportional to our ability to love. Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 222.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

(if they were properly revered).¹⁹ As Messiah, Jesus preached a kingdom that inverted the Roman social order. It was a reign in which the poor would be blessed, the hungry filled, and the sorrowful masses would rejoice. Those who made their living at the expense of the poor, the gluttons, and those who extravagantly celebrated their status would find their fortunes reversed when his kingdom arrived (Luke 6:20-26). Mockingly underscoring Pilate's "defeat" of this rebel, and thus the presumed preservation of the old social order, he hung a sign over the head of this naked and dying revolutionary (Luke 23:38), proclaiming him the king of the Jews. The resurrection begins the overthrow of Rome. In solidarity with the abandoned and Godforsaken fodder of society, it announces that, "There is no 'outside the gate' with God...if God himself is the one who died outside the gate on Golgotha for those who are outside."²⁰ The margins are made central to God's own life in the resurrection, giving them hope for a new future of God's "liberating love."²¹

Though I do not agree with every aspect of Moltmann's christology, he rightly says that the cross and resurrection challenge the politics of hierarchy and subjugation, be they Roman aristocracy or American plutocracy. As an illustration of this point we might consider Jesus' statement, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:16). We often associate children with innocence, but in Jesus' day a child was one who was without status. Nobody was more vulnerable than a child. The vulnerability of the Son on the cross shows the triune God to be on the side of those without status. Criminals were not the only ones carried out of the city. Trash was also dumped outside the gates. In Moltmann's

¹⁹ Ibid., 143-44.

²⁰ Ibid., 249.

²¹ Ibid., 252.

delightfully Alexandrian way, we can rightly say that God becomes and vindicates the garbage of oppressive regimes of all kinds. In the cross and resurrection of the Son, the triune God lifts up that which we dispose, proclaiming that the “darkness” of the old order of things – an existence without hope, where one’s life depends on the whim of others – is “passing away” (1 John 2:8).

M. Douglas Meeks: The Kingdom of God in the Economy

In *God the Economist*, M. Douglas Meeks applies Moltmann’s juxtaposition of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Pilate to political economy (as distinct from the science of economics). In particular, Moltmann’s view that our concepts of God have political implications is essential to Meeks’ argument, which extends the former’s point to say that our God-talk also has economic implications.²² In particular, Enlightenment Deism, which has so thoroughly impressed itself on the modern American imagination, has given us God-talk that makes our economy of scarcity possible, whereas a biblical view of God as Trinity – who identifies with “the weak, the foolish, the low and despised” – enables an economy of gift and abundance.²³ Our modern economy thus tends to conceive of God’s freedom in terms of the market, whereas Meeks calls us to re-think the market in terms of God’s freedom. The market depends upon belief in an aloof deity, who cannot suffer, and who is unconcerned with human affairs; the Bible shows the triune God to be engaged with God’s people, capable of suffering, with concern for the weak and powerless.²⁴

²² Ibid., 69, 317ff.

²³ Meeks, 92.

²⁴ For a synopsis of Meeks’ thoughts on the economy of God versus the market economy, see M. Douglas Meeks, “The Economy of Grace: Human Dignity in the Market System,” in *God and Human Dignity*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

Meeks thus offers the history of God in Scripture as a challenge to the god of the market. Moltmann above juxtaposed Christ to Pilate, focusing on the cross as the clash of two political systems. Meeks is not unconcerned with the cross (insofar as he assumes much of Moltmann's soteriology), but also places great emphasis on what the life of Christ reveals in the context of the history of Israel (a shift in Moltmann's theology visible in *The Way of Jesus Christ*). Thus, Meeks juxtaposes "God's *basileia* economy" to Pharaoh's slave economy, which not only serves as a foil for Meeks to develop the content of God's economy but is also proxy for all economies that perpetuate the luxury of a few through the deprivation of the masses (i.e. scarcity economies). The Exodus indicates God's compassion for slaves and desire for their liberation. The gift of God's manna in the desert not only confirms this compassion but is also something of a prophetic pronouncement of God's intention for human economy: that nobody takes more than she needs so that everyone is able to survive the day.

This subordination of the market to the needs of people challenges "market society," which Karl Polanyi defined as "a whole society embedded in the mechanism of its own economy."²⁵ A market society is impossible without the logic of commodification, which today allows not only for the exchange of goods and services but people (i.e. the labor market) and nature (i.e. land and housing), fueled by the invention of money (which requires faith). The modern market is intended to be a perpetual motion machine, like Paley's watch.²⁶ It is premised on the belief that fairness requires our limited resources to be distributed not according to need, but according to those who best understand how this machine works. Such a system is

²⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Livelihood of Man*, Studies in Social Discontinuity, ed. Harry W. Pearson (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 9. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon, 2001 [1944]), *passim*.

²⁶ See William Paley, "Natural Theology," in *The Works of William Paley* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1828).

unthinkable from the perspective of God's economy. The God of the Bible is one who intervenes. On Sinai, God establishes the Torah, which contains rules for the care of the poor and the foreigner, as well as a system of regular debt relief and redistribution of resources, called the Jubilee, to ensure that those who have much do not have too much and those who have little do not have too little.²⁷

Jesus thus inherited from his people a long tradition of concern for the poor and the suffering of captives. Like his heavenly Father, he shows us the possibility not of an economy of scarcity that encourages hoarding, but an economy of gift and abundance. He does this in the miracle of feeding the 5,000, which in a way repeats the manna in the wilderness, anticipating a future economy where the needs of all are met.²⁸ He does this in the life he lived with his disciples, having a common purse and eating common meals. He does this in himself, on the night of Jesus' betrayal, exemplifying that the currency of the kingdom is in giving. There, masters serve, giving not just their resources, so the eucharist confirms, but themselves for the lives of others.²⁹

The feasibility of such an economy is beside the point. Meeks does not seem to intend to institute a new economic system but to offer a critical alternative to the current one. Certainly, some aspects of his history of God have implications for modern economic and social policies. Though I do not want to say prematurely what will be addressed in more detail below, the kingdom's economy of sharing has implications for taxation, welfare, and bankruptcy laws, to name but a few, but more importantly than an economic system, Meeks offers a vision for a way

²⁷ See Meeks, *God the Economist*, 75-97.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

of life. We work to help realize aspects of God's economy in this world, but we also live lives of economic abundance, giving, and service in the midst of our economy of scarcity. Choosing to live an economy of abundance and gift in the midst of such an economy – denying the false belief that there is not enough for all to flourish – is already partly to realize God's kingdom ahead of time.

John Howard Yoder: The Kingdom of God in Community

This brings us to the work of John Howard Yoder, who attended to the political as well as economic implications of the gospel, but focused especially closely on their embodiment in the Christian community. I say “community” and not “church” out of deference to Yoder's anabaptism. Naturally, he talked about the church, but he did not have in mind the grand institutions that we so commonly associate with that word. He meant a society of the faithful, “the believing community.”³⁰ Thinking about the church as a community stresses that following Jesus is not to join an institution but to commit to a way of life. This refusal of the church as an “house of authority” (to use Edward Farley's classic term) is, ironically, a conviction present in the symphonic ideal as well.³¹ The power of the church, for Yoder, is principally in the way the kingdom of God is miraculously present in it, not institutionally, but through a re-definition and re-configuration of things that are quite ordinary toward the kingdom.³² The following summary

³⁰ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 21.

³¹ Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 165. I recognize the irony in comparing a critic of Constantinianism to the Byzantines. See John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 135ff.

³² See *ibid.*, 80-101.

of how Jesus establishes a community to continue the work of the kingdom will necessarily repeat some points he shares in common with Meeks and Moltmann.³³

Yoder says the cross is “the confrontation of *two social systems*” and a “clash between two *regimes*.”³⁴ These terms illustrate a communal emphasis in Yoder’s christology. It is true that the cross is what happens when the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Pilate meet, but the threat of Jesus, he adds, was not the man himself but his community. Yoder points out, “New teachings are no threat, as long as the teacher stands alone; a movement, extending his personality in both time and space, presenting an alternative to the structures that were there before, challenges the system as no mere words ever could.” Thus, says Yoder, in the crucifixion of Christ, Rome declared war not just on a single individual but an entire way of life: the “new social reality” of the Christian community that began to gather around him.³⁵ The kingdom of God may be present in Jesus Christ, but that does not mean it is confined to him. It naturally extends itself beyond this single individual to attract a group of people – the first disciples and now us – who begin to live the life he embodied.

Yoder’s ecclesiology thus takes shape as a kind of eschatology *via negativa*. The church comes into conflict with its society insofar as its society resists God’s righteousness. The church is the community of the faithful who set up the tables of their *agape* feast at the foot of the cross. Its uniqueness is not in its doctrines or worship but its adherence to Christ. Stressing this identification of the church with the crucified Christ explains the counter-cultural nature of Yoder’s ecclesiology. He does not oppose culture for its own sake but, like Meeks and Moltmann

³³ For the following see Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 21ff.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 44. Emphasis mine.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

above, stresses the way the kingdom of God, present in Jesus, brought him into conflict with the authorities of his day. The church that gathers around the cross will be equally threatening to powers that hierarchically establish themselves through domination and violence.

The church is unique not because of anything it does but because of its adherence to Jesus. This point is especially prominent in *Body Politics*, where he more or less rejects the notion that the church is something mystical. That is not to deny the need for grace or the Holy Spirit, but to underscore the point that our identity is dependent upon Christ, who challenged the powers of his day precisely by his lowliness. In the desert, Satan tempted Jesus to be more than a peasant-teacher, to gather crowds by putting on a show, and to demonstrate his power. In resisting these temptations Christ shows his power is in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9) and his wisdom is foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:18). To say that the identity of the church comes from him means that the church is equally weak and foolish. Its power is in repeating his way of life. In new contexts, we refuse the ethic of violence and domination that led to the crucifixion, and so we receive the same treatment Rome gave Jesus. Likewise, as Rome imposed its will from the top down, the Christian community rejects such assaults on the divine image hierarchy perpetuates.³⁶ In Rome we are called to account for our debts and our offenses. The Christian community forgives debtors and goes even further by extending to its members God's own forgiveness in its fellowship.³⁷ Rome forces its will upon others. Christ did not force but enticed. He called, and people either freely followed him or they did not. Accordingly, (for Yoder) baptism repeats this free invitation to commit oneself to the kingdom, becoming a

³⁶ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

member of a society in which all are welcome, regardless of sex, class, or race.³⁸ Gathering together in his name in love and communion makes him present in the eucharist once more.³⁹ Yoder's description of a sacrament underscores the power of the church to embody Christ in seemingly ordinary things like non-hierarchical and non-violent relationships. Yoder says a sacrament is a *human actions in which God acts*.⁴⁰ The church is unique in this sacramental sense: we commit ourselves to a way of life that Christ makes possible.

Yoder's view that the power of the church is in the habits Christ creates in it is correct. Though I do not share his juxtaposition between the ordinary and the miraculous when it comes to the sacraments, he is right to see the church as the continuation of the "ethic" (so to speak) of the kingdom into the present. Actually, there is a great deal in common between Yoder and the symphonic perspective. His basic understanding of the Christian community and the Byzantine ideal see conflict with society as a function of eschatology – culture's conformity to the kingdom. Yoder happens to possess what we might call different ecclesiological "prejudices" (a term I do not mean pejoratively but in the sense that one's background shapes how one views history), which lead him to see a greater degree of conflict between church and society than this essay assumes. Yoder will come up again in a moment, as we see how *symphonia* takes place between the church and the secular, but in light of the above I first want to outline some basic criteria for seeing God's reign in secular society today.

Seven Observations about the Kingdom of God in Jesus in the Secular

³⁸ Ibid., 28ff.

³⁹ Ibid., 14ff.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 71.

I have summarized the above three thinkers because the point of *symphonia* is to see the presence of the kingdom of God in culture. This requires a sense of what the kingdom of God looks like, which Jesus reveals in himself. Moltmann, Meeks, and Yoder see implications of that reign for the present, rippling out beyond their particular historical instantiation in Jesus himself, a sense that culminates in what we might call the communal christology of Yoder. In Moltmann, we see that God's reign challenges the politics of oppression, and Meeks makes a case for what can be called a *basileic* economy not only of sufficiency but abundant sharing, both of which, Yoder shows us, are to be embodied in the faithful. From this perspective we can see that the purpose of the work of Christ was to make the kingdom of God happen not only in but beyond himself.

The last section having concluded a conceptual construct for seeing the kingdom of God at work in the secular through its own grounding in Jesus, I want to offer some observations for recognizing its presence in the following pages. I focused on the above three themes with this intent in mind, for the shape of our society is largely determined by the configuration, negotiation, and coordination of market, political, and social interests, which offers a fairly comprehensive and comprehensible perspective on how the kingdom of God might be made manifest in our modern, secular society and, thusly, how we might respond to it.⁴¹ Obviously, the following cannot locate all the manifestation of God's unfolding reign in our secular culture, but the above can give us partial glimpses of it and suggest means of response to it.

⁴¹ These themes were inspired by the economist Charles Lindblom, who has, among other things, discussed the way power in modern market society is distributed among its elites in relationship to its "mass" (i.e. the rest of us). Dispelling the modern myth that in a free market, democratic society the voters and consumers have all the power, Lindblom argues that market and political elites exert undue influence on the course of society in ways that are often unseen. The particulars of these influences, which involve clever marketing, campaign finance, and self-serving agendas buried in the inscrutable legalese hundreds of pages of legislation, are not relevant to this discussion, but this configuration does help us think about symphonia in some practical ways. Charles E. Lindblom, *The Market System: What It Is, How It Works, and What to Make of It* (New Haven: Yale, 2001), 64ff.

*In Jesus, the kingdom of God is for the disposables.*⁴² America is not that different from Rome. We may produce more trash than any other country in the world, but consumable goods are not the only thing we dispose of with barely a second thought. We throw away people, too. We support our extravagant lifestyles (by the rest of the world's standards) through wage slavery and sweatshop labor, the modern serfdom of peasant farming in our global economy, and pillaging the earth of its natural resources. Keeping our goods cheap requires keeping our labor poor and trying not to think too much about where our food and clothing came from. The reign of God in Jesus Christ cries out against such practices. Not giving much thought to the people used up in the machine of our global economy makes us like the crowds who passed by the three crosses on the way to Jerusalem. Maybe we actively spit upon the Godforsaken, but more often than not we try not to look at them so that we can go about our business.

We glimpse the kingdom of God at work in individuals and institutions that point to the suffering masses and remind us in some way or another that they too bear God's image (even if they would not put it quite that way). The kingdom of God is at work when people begin to trace the origins of their goods, to humanize the global economy and the policies that perpetuate it by including the stories of their producers in the products we buy. We glimpse the kingdom when people begin to trace the origins of their foods or participate in CSAs, in living wage movements, and even something as minor as the proliferation of compost bins. The presence of Jesus Christ in the Godforsaken puts a face to those whom it is so easy for us to throw away. We see the kingdom when a person looks in the face a man who wears and eats what others have worn and eaten, shakes his hand, and asks his name – who sees Christ in the disposables.

⁴² See Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 94-116.

*In Jesus, the kingdom of God is for the political prisoner and the tortured.*⁴³ Let us not forget that Christ was branded an enemy of the state and a dangerous radical. He was mocked, and he was tortured.⁴⁴ The gospels say he was falsely accused and convicted with only shaky evidence (Matthew 26:60). Of course, crime must be punished. Jesus did not liberate the criminals to his right or left (in a certain sense of the word), but there is a difference between punitive correction and baseless detention. There is a difference between forgiving a crime and excusing one. To the Romans, Jesus was a foreigner and an uncivilized barbarian. For them and us, he is just part of a faceless mass, standing behind barbed wire in an orange jumpsuit with a bag over his head.

We glimpse the kingdom of God in the lawyer who works *pro bono* to bring some hope and the promise of a future to a political prisoner others brand a dangerous radical. We see it in representatives and activists who risk their own careers and reputations daring to speak on behalf of the extremist. We see it in the reporter who gets leaked photos of the tortured and in the staffer who leaks them. The kingdom of God is at work among those who bear witness to the fact that even those we fear, perhaps even rightly, still bear the image of God and are therefore worthy of our compassion and love.

*In Jesus, the kingdom of God is life-giving abundance.*⁴⁵ The history of God with Israel, both in the desert and in Jesus, is antithetical to the gravitation of wealth toward those at the upper-echelons of society. Possessing more money than one can ever spend in her lifetime is the epitome of hoarding. When some of the Israelites tried to do this with the manna in the

⁴³ Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, 64ff.

⁴⁴ Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 160-70.

⁴⁵ Meeks, *God the Economist*, 171ff.

wilderness, they found that it had spoiled overnight (Exodus 16:20), showing that the extravagance and waste of unused abundance leads to corruption and decay. Though there is death in poverty there is also a kind of slow, hidden death in unjust wealth. “But woe to you who are rich,” Jesus said, “For you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24). Those who find present consolation in wealth are to be pitied because hoarding rots the soul. That is why some children born into privilege can lack the capacity to empathize with the disposables in society, even going so far as to lay most of the blame for their problems on their own bad behavior or alleged incompetence, blind to the sadly ironic fact that many of the rich have similar problems (such as addictions or other destructive behaviors) as those at the bottom of society, only their money is able to protect them from the consequences of their long, slow suicide. This can make repentance difficult to impossible. The rich are not exempt from suffering in an economy of scarcity (even though their suffering does not compare with that of the poor).

True economies of giving defy the fear that makes us hoard and the eroding effects it can have on the soul. An economy where each attends to the needs of the other is rich in the widest possible sense of the term. Jesus is often depicted as preaching poverty. In truth, he preached poverty for some who clung to wealth, like the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16ff). But Jesus did not Romanticize the poor. He was also a laborer. He knew poverty (the sacrifice his parents offered after his birth was a sacrifice made by the poor, Luke 2:24). Yet, in spite of this fact, Jesus is never depicted as struggling to get by with his disciples. He and his disciples had abundant resources, celebrating so much that he even developed a bit of a reputation (Luke 7:34). He celebrated because being with others and enjoying God’s bounty is also a foretaste of the life to come. By giving one learns that the currency of the kingdom is not silver or gold, but

the rarer commodities of love, joy, peace, and fellowship, goods lacking among those who find security in their wealth. This is the currency of the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:19-20), some of which is on deposit in the community of the faithful.

Therefore, we glimpse the kingdom of God in acts of *philanthropia*, even though, in the grand scheme of things, the woman who buys a sandwich for a beggar is probably not greatly contributing to his quality of life. It is a poor financial “investment,” but that assumes that investing is the point of giving. Giving brings God’s reign close to us. It offers hope and the vision of a different kind of future. Every time we resist the urge to hoard by forcing our hands to give of our resources, we begin trading in the treasure of the kingdom. Even small acts of *philanthropia*, bestowed not on ourselves but with others so that they may experience something of the joy of heaven on earth, remind us not to worry. God cares for the lilies, so God will care for us (Luke 12:27). The things we need shall be added to us as well (Matthew 6:33).

In a similar way, we even glimpse the kingdom of God in celebratory extravagance. Celebration is essential to living in the light of God’s reign, for Jesus said the kingdom of God would be a celebration (Matthew 26:29) and a feast (Matthew 22:1ff)! Angels rejoice when a lost sinner comes to repentance (Luke 15:10). When we celebrate with each other, we celebrate life, which is a foretaste of the abundant life to come in God’s reign.

*For this reason, in Jesus, the kingdom of God is living without fear.*⁴⁶ We hoard because we are afraid. Falling into the zero-sum mentality that is the stock and trade of economies of scarcity, we see others as a threat to our prosperity, and thus maybe even our very lives. But God’s reign is life lived to its fullest.⁴⁷ In the economy of God, everyone will have enough, but

⁴⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 77.

nobody will have too much. Nobody will go to bed wondering how they will get their next meal. No mother will skip dinner so that her child may eat; she will never have to decide between food and medicine. In the modern vernacular, God's righteousness means that everybody has an inalienable right to live.

We thus glimpse the kingdom in those who help people not to be afraid. The kingdom is in churches that have become inns for the homeless. It is in doctors who provide free medical services on the weekends. We see the kingdom in a representative who resists pressure to cut funding for food stamps to fund wars of choice, and we see it when we forgive suffocating debt because debt makes people slaves (Proverbs 22:7). The slave has no security because nothing he has is his. We thus glimpse God's reign when nations decide that losing a drop in the bucket of their annual budget is worth improving the quality of life for millions in the two-thirds world.

In Jesus, the Kingdom of God is in the ordinary. Yoder helped us to see that the power of God's reign is not in those things wherewith the devil tempted Jesus. The kingdom is not mystical or magical but begins to be embodied in some of the ways just mentioned. The kenosis of Christ means that we have to recognize him. This was true not only for his own people but for us as well. Not everyone followed him. The kingdom, they knew, cannot look like a Galilean (John 1:46) whose closest disciples smell like sweat mixed with fish. Even his hometown, when Jesus announced the beginning of God's reign, were so incensed by what they heard that (after their initial awe wore off) they tried to throw him over a cliff (Luke 4:29). We are at no less of a disadvantage than those Nazarenes. For us, the kingdom of God is something that has to be recognized as well. Their challenge is our challenge: When we meet the kingdom of God, not to throw it over a cliff.

Because of this challenge, in the final place, *in Jesus, the kingdom of God is in the church*. Though Yoder did not want the church to shut out society, he did focus on the way the kingdom in the church challenges society. It is important to remember that just because the reign of God grows to fruition in the world does not mean it is absent from us. To say that would be to place the church on the same footing as the secular and thus re-inscribe the problem of sophic ambiguity in a different form. We love the world not for its own sake but because of Christ who brings his reign to fruition in it. Experiencing God's reign in the midsts of our sisters and brothers teaches us to recognize and respond to that reign in the world. In this movement from our experience of the kingdom of God in the church to its presence in the world we see a modern instantiation of the Byzantine pattern. Our *symphonia* takes place in this interactive movement from the church to the secular, seeking to discern the presence of the kingdom of God through the resources and wisdom of the Christian community.

Conclusion: Symphonia in the Narthex

The observations of the previous section show us that some measure of *symphonia* already happens. The church engages and supports formally secular organizations and movements because we somehow feel they are “good” and “right.” The foregoing has attempted to account for such engagements ecclesialogically. In particular, it has tried to conceive of a more coherent alternative to a postliberal foil by explaining how such engagement does not violate but is a part of the unique identity of the church. Therefore, we shall bring this argument to a close first by showing how the preceding presentation responds to the challenge of Milbank and Hauerwas' counterpositional ecclesiologies, which will help us, in the second place, see how

symphonia can offer a more coherent account for the inevitable interactions of the church and the secular.

An Ecclesiological Alternative

Calling to mind our critical foil once more can help us get a clearer picture of the symphonic alternative by way of contrast. There is no need to rehearse in detail the arguments of previous chapters, save to remind ourselves that postliberalism focuses on a return to the narratives of the church, which appears especially strongly in Milbank and Hauerwas (insofar as they repeat aspects of Lindbeck's thought) as a focus on the church itself over and against its surrounding culture, in our case secular culture. Thus, the church "absorbs" the secular, meaning that it interprets secular culture through the lens either of its texts and traditions (Hauerwas) or its ongoing, self-correcting history (Milbank). For the church to see the world only out from within its narratives – which is to see the world out from within itself – makes the church not really secular. This interpretive meniscus – bolstered by an eschatology that collapses the church into its future perfection – thus acts as a kind of shield against the disintegrating effects secular society can have on traditional Christian practice, except that this seeming protection comes at the cost of consistency. Christian cognitive dissonance refers not just to an inconsistency of practice and belief but the promotion of such a "disconnect" by effectively blinding us to the ways we do engage and tacitly support that which we profess to oppose.

The foregoing description of the kingdom's presence in Jesus Christ makes such an understanding of the church's relationship to its narratives and its culture extremely difficult to maintain. As the foundation of the world, Jesus Christ is its internal logic. As the future of the

world, he is the coming kingdom. This perspective renders history as the the unfolding of the logic of creation on the way toward its eschatological culmination. Nature, human societal development, and everything involved in their interaction are taken up in his coming reign.

A disagreement Jürgen Moltmann had with the political theology of Karl Barth can help unpack the significance of this christonormative view of history for the church. Moltmann takes a critical stance toward Barth's notion that we must look for "parables" and "correspondences" of the kingdom of God when dealing with the political realities of this world. He agrees with the sentiment but not the description, saying, "It would probably be more appropriate to history to regard these correspondences not as parables of what is perfect, but as anticipations and promises in the process of realization, in which the ultimate announces itself in the penultimate and the unconditional in the conditioned."⁴⁸ The disagreement with Barth is thus over whether, when we glimpse the kingdom in society, we see the kingdom itself. The language of correspondence implies a separation between the kingdom and the world, which Moltmann rejects. The kingdom is present in the world around us, but in a kind of preliminary form. From the broad view of creation grounded in Christ I have put forward, we can say that history itself contains "anticipations and promises *in the process of realization*" (emphasis mine).

To further illustrate this point by adapting the *Parable of the Wheat and the Tares* (Matthew 13:24-30), we can say that the seeds of the kingdom of God grow up in the field of human history. Though Augustine used this parable to argue for the doctrine of the "invisible" church, seeing creation itself as God's field expands the meaning of this parable beyond the church.⁴⁹ The seeds of the kingdom grow up in the universal history of human cultural

⁴⁸ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 320-21.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, XX.5.

development. During this process, we can sometimes begin to see the differences between the wheat and the weeds, but to attempt to separate them ahead of time damages the church.

Returning to the matter at hand, grounding creation in the Word and orienting its development toward the kingdom means there can be no absolute limits placed on what may be the growth of the seeds of the kingdom in the world – particularly in the historical progress of human society and culture – ahead of time. This inclusiveness renders any attempt to conceive of the church in a way that shuts out society’s influence potentially to shut ourselves off from the work of the Word that is happening there. It is to attempt to pluck the weeds before the harvest is ready, thus failing to see how aspects of God’s reign may be partly present among us.

Yet, the revelation of our future in Jesus Christ means that, even though we can no longer simply assert ourselves against the secular, we are not at the mercy of culture. We can begin to see differences between the kingdom of God and creaturely fallenness because our hope for the future has already arrived ahead of time. The church can judge the world in humble anticipation of the final judgment by turning to the biblical witness to Jesus, and it can be more certain of its judgments the more pronounced the difference is between the present situation of society and God’s coming righteousness (but we should also be mindful of the fact that to judge the world in this way is also for the church – which is a mixed body – to judge itself, as well as to be subject to the judgment of the world around it, for “with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you,” Matthew 7:2). Therefore, we can no more uncritically accept the secular than we can uncritically reject it. He to whom the Scripture bears witness testifies in himself to the future the world shares with us. In a world that is fallen, the arc of Christ’s life thus guides our engagement

by calling our attention to aspects of our present culture that conform to the reign of God's righteousness, and, alternatively, those that do not.

Even so, the witness of Christ in scripture to the unfolding of the kingdom in the present is not always clear. It is still something we must discern. In this act of discernment a more consistent vision of the narthex takes shape. We find ourselves between the presence of Christ in the world and the presence of Christ in the witness of our narratives. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann once said, "[T]he kingdom of God is the content of the Christian faith – the goal, the meaning and the content of the Christian life."⁵⁰ If this statement is true, and the kingdom happens in the secular, then the secular is *rightly* constitutive for the identity of the church today, at least to a point. The disciple engages the secular not for its own sake, but because she is looking for the presence of the kingdom of God in it. The need to discern throws her back upon the narratives of her community, seeking for analogues in scripture whereby she might locate and water the seeds of the kingdom in her society. In this way, the secular is included in the narratives of the church insofar as it raises the questions which we turn to the witness of scripture, within the context of our interpreting community, to answer. Our narratives, in turn, send us back to the world to tend to the presence of the kingdom in it. To go even a step further than that: if the kingdom of God is the content of the church, then insofar as the kingdom is present in the secular, the secular is the content of the church, too.

This partial constitution by the secular, conditioned by the kingdom of God in it, does not present a challenge to ecclesial identity but relocates it. Our identity as the church does not come to us simply from our narratives but the creative interactions of these narratives with our culture,

⁵⁰ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans., Paul Kachur (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 1987), 40.

for as the secular sends us to our narratives to discover our identity in Jesus Christ, we discover that he is not confined to our text but is also present in our world. Thus, we are sent back into the secular to find and to nurture the seeds of the kingdom of God in it. Accordingly, we can only even speak about identity in a “tongue-in-cheek” kind of way. Our identity in the present is always changing as a result of this interaction because who we are as the church comes to us as our past narratives meet our present context and both are illuminated by a future that has not yet fully arrived.

Christian cognitive dissonance is what happens when discernment is exchanged for a constant critique, wherein we do not admit the ways we support the secular and are influenced by it. The preceding account addresses this problem by locating the identity of the church not simply in its narratives. Rather, the need to discern the presence of the kingdom of God in the world requires a constant return to the revelation of God’s future in Jesus. We thus inhabit an oscillating dynamic between our narratives and our culture. Acknowledging the inevitability of this interaction with the secular, without being uncritically open to it, allows for the conscious incorporation of aspects of culture into the church, still subordinating this process to our reception of God’s coming reign seen in the scriptures. This keeps the narratives of the church primary without presuming a false unidirectionality between those narratives and the culture that positions our reading of them.

I said earlier that this process of engagement and incorporation was inevitable. Recognizing this interaction between our narratives – interpreted in the context of the worshipping community – and the secular keeps us honest about the fact that we are formed by both without losing what it is that makes us unique, namely our commitment to the kingdom of God. So we

are able to recognize that we are shaped by the secular and support it without this necessarily being a problem for us. Or, to put it differently, we can resist Christian cognitive dissonance if we are upfront about the fact that who we are is no more the product of our narratives than our society but their interaction in the ongoing story of the church. In a certain sense, our identity is found in our narthex.

A New Symphonia

This creative interaction is our *symphonia*. *Symphonia* is about constructively triangulating the church's interactions with society under the kingdom of God. The foregoing understanding of history, as being driven by its foundation in Jesus Christ toward the kingdom, thus partly manifesting it in the present, enables us to see the seeds of God's reign sprouting in the secular. This perspective incorporates our inevitable engagement with the secular into our own self-understanding in the way I just described, so that what it means to be the church is to support the secular and even to be influenced by it, insofar as these actions are conditioned by the proleptic realization of the kingdom of God within it.

We saw for the Byzantines that the idealized harmony they sought between church and state was the adaptation of the early church's eschatological imperative to embody God's reign for an imperial context. As such, so the sophiologists showed us, it does not require a formally Christian state, only the recognition that the kingdom of God is present in society and that the church is more than its institutions. In the above schema, the secular plays for us the part played by the emperor of Byzantium. The question is not whether to engage the secular but *how*. Tactically, the Byzantines offer us the helpful model of provisional triumphalism and situational

sectarianism for thinking about how it is we relate to the secular. We can promote the secular whenever we see it promoting the reign of God's righteousness, the triumph of life over death, and the incorporation of the margins into the center of society. Likewise, we can oppose the secular when it is domineering, hierarchical, and perpetuating itself through the consumption of human fodder. Furthermore, insofar as we are the body of Christ, we can have some measure of confidence in our capacity to discern the difference between a world that is laboring to give birth to its own renewal, and a world that fights against its own future. The presence of Christ in our midsts reminds us that this world will one day be a place where the last are first, where the naked are clothed, where the poor are fed, and where tax collectors and prostitutes have their dignity. Anything else requires our resistance.

Like our Byzantine forebears, we stand between withdrawal on the one hand, and embrace on the other. Yet, unlike them, these scales cannot be balanced in any kind of "official" way. The balance of *symphonia* must happen within ourselves, in particular within the local church as we discern "on a case by case basis" (so to speak) how to respond to a kingdom we believe is coming to fruition in this still fallen world. I have said, *symphonia* today can only be an ecclesiology. Of course, I have not presented an entire ecclesiology, but a part of it.

Symphonia is an ecclesiology for the narthex. It is about being the church in a liminal space. Only, in this case, the space is *us*. Like the narthex, we are both church and world at once.

We constructively support the secular by attending to the presence of the kingdom of God in it. This de-centers the church, so to speak, locating our mission not in the perpetuation of some kind of stable construct of our imagined identity, but in our tending to the anticipatory growth of God's reign in the world. Discerning the kingdom in the dynamic that takes place in the narthex

is what allows us to be sent – like migrant workers (Matthew 9:37) – to nurture the green shoots of the kingdom of God within secular society. Yet it is precisely our prioritization of the kingdom that enables us to withdraw again into our own particularity. Just as the Byzantine faithful bore witness against the emperor, remembering that we embrace the world not in itself but for the sake of the kingdom in it enables us to withdraw again into *our* own particularity, resisting a world that is in many ways still captive to the powers of sin and death. We are able to bear such witness because a people that looks for the beginning of God's reign in the world need not forget that the church is still the body of Christ and a foretaste of the life to come.

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