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## Some Reflections about Spirit and Church Structure in a Post-Modern Age

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to bring into conversation observations on recent developments within the European church scene framed in a social sciences paradigm with considerations on ecclesiology and practical theology. It is written from a Protestant perspective that engages with newer Pentecostal theological reflections (Yong, Smith, Vondey, Wenk).

Protestant churches can be understood as bureaucratic structures and rational systems in the Weberian sense which are currently being modernized using theories and practices of corporate management and organizational development. But concurrently, new social structures are developing that also influence Protestant faith practices: Phenomena like ‘patchwork religiosity’ without any formal membership, ‘church-hopping’, emerging churches and emerging church networks cannot be described in Weberian categories.

These new developments force Protestants to revisit ecclesiology. Traditional definitions of believing and belonging do no longer suffice; ecclesiological definitions like that of CA VII are built on understandings of organization and doctrine that are no longer plausible in a post-modern world.

This paper argues that rather than constructing a Spirit-structure dichotomy, post-modern ecclesiology has to ask how the Spirit is being embodied in a constant process within the ever evolving and changing community of believers. The *nota ecclesiae* can no longer be static, but have to be understood dynamically. Driven by an ‘ecclesiology of discernment,’ practical theology should reconsider congregation-building and pastoral ministry in terms of attitudes (orthopathy) rather than practices (orthopraxis).

This paper is, in a sense, a work in progress rather than a finished product. It is closely tied to who I am, and whom I am working with. I am a Protestant theologian who has had the privilege to work extensively with the church in China and, later, with migrant churches in Germany. In both situations, I had to deal with very loose and fluid forms of church. Currently I head the Evangelism Department of the United Evangelical Mission, a communion of very diverse Protestant<sup>1</sup> churches in Africa, Asia and Germany. One of the issues that our communion is presently dealing with is “Evangelism and Popular Culture”:

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<sup>1</sup> Including Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Methodist, United, Disciples and Anglican churches. See [www.vemission.org/en](http://www.vemission.org/en).

We are coming to realize that, as Protestant churches, we are not doing too badly in relating to traditional (both ethnic rural and educated middle class) cultures. For example, in our Indonesian member churches, there has been a lot of reflection about the relationship between Christian faith and *adat*<sup>2</sup>, the traditional, mostly unwritten laws that regulate social organization and ritual in many Indonesian cultures. Our member church in West Papua, the GKI-TP, is at the forefront of the fight to preserve the traditional languages and cultures of several highland tribes. Or, for another example, we have trained a number of church musicians to use traditional music like *gamelan* or *angklung*. But both in our practice and in our theological reflection, we pay little attention to processes of urbanization and modernization, to mass media, TV, popular music and globalizing culture. At the same time, almost all member churches of UEM in Asia and Africa continue to lose members to charismatic and Pentecostal churches who are very much at home in popular culture. To look into these issues, we have formed an international study group which has, over the last 18 months, done intensive exposure programs in urban contexts in Germany, Indonesia and Tanzania. Early on, this group realized that rather than limiting ourselves to developing new evangelistic methods, we needed to think of new forms of being church: Ecclesiology is one of the main topics that we have to reflect.

So this paper is growing from practical questions rather than from academic discourse, and consequently, my deliberations will try to bring into conversation observations framed in a social sciences paradigm as well as considerations on ecclesiology and practical theology as a theory of church practice.<sup>3</sup> I am a Protestant, but I find that new Pentecostal theological

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<sup>2</sup> For just one example, see Raja Oloan Tumanggor, “Adat und christlicher Glaube: Eine missionswissenschaftliche Studie zur Inkulturation des christlichen Glaubens unter den Toba-Batak (Indonesien)”, unpublished dissertation, Münster 2006. There is a wealth of published literature in Indonesian language.

<sup>3</sup> The literature taken into account for this paper is by no means complete or even representative, but rather an eclectic mix.

discourses as they are found, for example, in the writings of Amos Yong,<sup>4</sup> James K.A. Smith,<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Vondey<sup>6</sup> and Matthias Wenk,<sup>7</sup> are enormously helpful and enriching for my thought processes.

## Observations

When the church is discussed between Pentecostals / Charismatics and Protestants, the question of Spirit versus structure quickly comes up. I think of discussions I had with migrant pastors in Germany: Mostly without theological training, and sometimes even without any kind of formal ordination, they insisted that their calling and anointing was not only sufficient to make them a pastor, but even superior to “just formal, academic training” and the structural recognition that my church insists on. For them, it was clear that the Spirit had priority over whatever structures humans would construct. In China, I experienced the wild and unregulated growth of the church through the evangelism work of people who had simply experienced a call or physical healing. The Protestant church leadership tried to build structures of accountability and provide basic training, but always lagged behind what was simply happening. In both instances, the interpretation of the situation was, more or less consciously, based on the dichotomy between charisma and office as developed by Max Weber.<sup>8</sup> Weber describes three types of legitimate rule, two of which are of interest for us here: On the one hand, there is “rational” rule which is built on the legality of posited ordinances which are binding for all within an organization or structure, including the leaders.

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<sup>4</sup> In particular: Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh. Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Publishing 2005).

<sup>5</sup> In particular: James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom. Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Publishing 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism. The Crisis of Global Theology and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmanns Publishing 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Matthias Wenk, *Community-Forming Power. The Socio-Ethical Role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts* (London/New York: T. & T. Clark International 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie* (5. revidierte Auflage, bearb. Johannes Winckelmann, Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 1980), 124ff.

Rational rule is “bureaucratic” and accountable, consisting of a hierarchy of offices with clearly described competence and strictly limited jurisdiction / responsibility.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, “charismatic” rule depends on the charisma of a leader which is recognized and accepted by those whom he leads. It is personal rather than legal, and does not know clearly described functions. Weber’s thesis that the “routinization” of charisma eventually leads to the establishment of either “traditional”<sup>10</sup> or “rational” rule has been built on his analysis of church history. And indeed, European Protestant churches are organized as bureaucratic structures with geographically bounded parishes, a growing corpus of laws, rules and regulations, and an elected leadership.

*The Protestant church as bureaucratic structure / rational system*

In contemporary organization sociology, Weber’s basic assumptions have been further developed. Nowadays, a distinction is made between organizations as “rational systems” and organizations as “natural / social systems”.<sup>11</sup> Rational systems (the model of which are business companies) are characterized by a) goals and objectives which orient organizational action; b) a stress on formal organizational structures; c) a focus on management as a piloting agency; and d) the assumption of rational individual actors.

If one looks at the reform process of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), it quickly becomes obvious how much the paradigm of a rational system is at work when it comes to organizational development of this Protestant church. The basic document of this reform

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<sup>9</sup> The German term “*Zuständigkeit*” comprises both.

<sup>10</sup> This is the third form of rule Weber describes, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Peter Preisendörfer, *Organisationssoziologie. Grundlagen, Theorien und Problemstellungen* (2. Auflage, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2008), 95ff.

process, entitled “Church of Freedom” (*Kirche der Freiheit*),<sup>12</sup> outlines strategic goals like the following:

“In 2030, the Evangelical Church is close to the people. It offers a home and identity for the believers and reliably accompanies the lives of all those who wish for this. The church is recognizable and able to bind people due to a high and comparable level of quality in all spiritual and pastoral core performances.”<sup>13</sup>

Objectives deducted from these strategic goals have also been formulated, e.g.: “Securing and enhancing the quality of core offers”<sup>14</sup> or “raising the quota of infant baptisms.”<sup>15</sup> To achieve these objectives, reliable quality management is demanded. Consequently, within this reform process, the EKD has set up a “Center for Quality Development in Worship.”<sup>16</sup>

Spirituality has simply become one of the parameters of quality within this framework:

“The qualification of church workers is of such a high priority because the Evangelical Church wants to increase the spiritual quality of its work, and, under this aspect, wants to encourage performance.”<sup>17</sup>

Quality is achieved by competence and performance, as the following list of key competences demanded from pastors also underscores:

“Theological judgment, spiritual competence, pastoral intuition, communicative competence, ability to work in a team and willingness to perform, a high level of quality, and responsibility for the whole of the church.”<sup>18</sup>

These competences are to be achieved by life-long learning and continuing education.

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<sup>12</sup> Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, *Kirche der Freiheit. Perspektiven für die evangelische Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert. Ein Impulspapier* (Hannover: EKD 2006), <http://www.ekd.de/download/kirche-der-freiheit.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> *Kirche der Freiheit*, 49. All quotes from this paper translated from German by the author.

<sup>14</sup> *Kirche der Freiheit*, 52.

<sup>15</sup> *Kirche der Freiheit*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Information about this center in German language can be found under [www.michaeliskloster.de/qualitaetsentwicklung](http://www.michaeliskloster.de/qualitaetsentwicklung).

<sup>17</sup> *Kirche der Freiheit*, 65.

<sup>18</sup> *Kirche der Freiheit*, 71.

Clearly, this is a fully technocratic approach to church management. The paper has no theological reflection, and only in its foreword shortly lists what it calls four main aspects of the church's being and mission: "The development of a spiritual profile" (being the light of the world), "foci of action" (the church must be visible), "flexibility in structures" (being the body of Christ) and "orientation towards the outside" (the foreigner also belongs to Christ).<sup>19</sup> These theological determinations remain so abstract that they are basically meaningless. It can safely be stated that the organization development paradigm overrides theology in the EKD reform process: The church needs to be reformed so that it can survive, without ever having to say what it stands for.

Such a technocratic approach is not limited to more 'liberal' conceptions of church, though. A more evangelical (in the narrow sense) version can be found underlying the trainings in "spiritual church management" which are becoming quite popular in Germany.<sup>20</sup> Here are some telling sentences from an advertisement for such a training:

"The basic aim of this training is to qualify [pastors] for their work under market conditions. Spiritually founded models shall help to better set priorities in ministry. 'Things can be done better, and the Gospel is worth it,' says Professor Dr. Michael Herbst from Greifswald who is one of the trainers [...] Herbst is convinced that spirituality as a 'well-structured life in discipleship to Jesus Christ' and management do not exclude each other. "We want to guide and lead spiritually, and actively manage processes of congregational development in a goal-oriented, structured and professional way." [...] Herbst calls business studies a 'cooperation discipline,' from which 'the principal orientation towards people can be learned'."<sup>21</sup>

Once more we can see that management models inform ministerial practice, with spirituality being reduced to a technique.

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<sup>19</sup> *Kirche der Freiheit*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g. the website of the Institute for Research in Evangelism and Congregational Development at Greifswald University, a prominent think tank for the evangelical wing within the Evangelical Church in Germany, [www.ieeg-greifswald.de](http://www.ieeg-greifswald.de).

<sup>21</sup> Quote taken from the website of the Office for Missionary Services of the Evangelical Church in Württemberg, [www.missionarische-dienste.de/cms/startseite/amt-fuer-missionarische-dienste/spirituelles-gemeindemanagement](http://www.missionarische-dienste.de/cms/startseite/amt-fuer-missionarische-dienste/spirituelles-gemeindemanagement).

*The development of new social structures*

I believe that we are at the cusp of a new age of social organization. Not only has global mobility increased exponentially during the last two decades; new communication structures supported by smartphones and social networks (Web 2.0) mean that, increasingly, sociality can be de-coupled from space.

To give you just one example: A young student whom I know currently lives about 350 kilometers apart from her much-beloved boyfriend. Nevertheless, the two spend hours together every day. As soon as they come home, they switch on their laptops and log on to VideoSkype. While they do their everyday chores, read, write, or surf the web, they simply keep it running in the background or in a corner of their screen, occasionally talking to each other, looking at each other, throwing each other a kiss. While this is not the same as being in the same room with each other, they feel that they are together.

The impact of social networks like Facebook should also not be underestimated. Recently, the UEM Study Group on Evangelism and Popular Culture, together with a Lutheran pastor from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, visited a Hindu temple in Dar es salaam. There, we met a young Indian priest who turned out to be not a Tanzanian Indian, but from Gujarat. A university student, he had taken a year off to serve as a volunteer priest in this diaspora temple. He received us wearing saffron robes, a red sign smeared on his forehead, his hands marked with henna tattoos, clutching a blackberry. In the beginning, our interaction was very stilted and awkward. Each perceived the other as the representative of a foreign religion one knew little about, and felt insecure as how to behave. After some time, the young priest waved his blackberry and asked: “Are any of you on Facebook?” Immediately, several of the group members got out their smartphones, and added this young priest to their group of

friends as he added them to his. Within just a minute or two, the whole atmosphere of the encounter changed completely. We had found something in common, and now we could relax and talk openly about our respective faiths.

These new communication structures have an enormous influence on politics. Much has been said about the “Facebook revolutions” in Tunisia and Egypt, or on the Occupy Movement. Occupy has no leadership, no organizational structure in the narrow sense of the word, and no overriding aims. Its fluidity can be appreciated when comparing it to the mostly European ATTAC network<sup>22</sup> which in itself already differs from earlier political movements.

In Germany, a newly founded party called the “Pirates Party” recently won 15 seats in the elections in the city state of Berlin, and polls at 5 – 9 % nationwide, which would get them elected into the Bundestag in national elections. This party does not have a program like other parties, but rather relies on internet-based discussion processes among its members to come up with guidelines for its political decisions. Its adherents are mostly “digital natives”, younger people who have grown up with electronic communication media.<sup>23</sup>

As we see the blossoming of these new movements, we can, at the same time, observe the dissolution of traditional binding structures: Political parties, trade unions, ‘classical’ churches and associations are all losing members and find it hard to recruit young people. Rather than becoming part of an organizational body and sticking with it for an extended period of time (or even for life!), people prefer to organize themselves around projects, and for a limited time. All of this will have a tremendous impact on the churches.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.attac.org/en>

<sup>23</sup> For a critical review of the term “digital natives”, see Sue Bennet, Karl Maton and Lisa Kervin, “The ‘Digital Natives’ Debate: A Critical Review of the Evidence”, *British Journal of Educational Technology* Vol. 39 No.5, 2008, 775-786. doi:10.1111/j.1467/8535.2007.00793.x



*New developments in church / religious structure*

A first phenomenon which needs to be described here is what has been termed “patchwork religiosity”,<sup>24</sup> defined as “the integration of creedal propositions and faith practices from different religious or spiritual traditions into one’s own life without entering into a commitment towards these respective traditions.”<sup>25</sup> Research in Germany has shown that the majority does no longer equate religiosity with the active membership in a certain religious tradition;<sup>26</sup> rather, authentic spirituality is seen as “being-on-the way”,<sup>27</sup> not so much searching for the truth as discovering what fills one’s own individual spiritual needs. This “radical self-authorization of the religious subject”<sup>28</sup> means that faith is no longer defined by historically transmitted creeds, practices, and social organization, but by individual experiential validity and fluid organizational structures: The one on the way will only go where he or she can also leave again. Such patchwork religiosity has been identified in the German context in two slightly different forms: On the one side, there are those who pragmatically choose from different traditions which they see as equally valid, even though their relation to all of these traditions is rather diffuse: Singing mantras because it makes one feel better, praying to ‘the divine’, consulting a horoscope without taking it all too seriously etc. On the other side, there are those with a basic Christian identity who freely complement their practices with elements from other religious traditions, doing Reiki or Zen meditation, or incorporating beliefs in *karma* or re-incarnation.<sup>29</sup> Research in Germany has shown that such

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<sup>24</sup> This English term seems to be more common in German research, though!

<sup>25</sup> Tatjana Schnell, “Religiosität und Identität,” in *Multiple religiöse Identität. Aus verschiedenen Identitäten schöpfen*, ed. Reinhold Bernhardt and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen Band 5, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich 2008), 163-184. Quote taken from page 168, translated from German by the author.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Christoph Bochinger, “Multiple religiöse Identität im Westen zwischen Traditionsbezug und Individualisierung,” in *Multiple religiöse Identität. Aus verschiedenen Identitäten schöpfen*, ed. Reinhold Bernhardt and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen Band 5, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich 2008), 137-161.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 158f.

patchwork religiosity, especially in the second form, is by no means limited to urban contexts, but common in rural areas as well.<sup>30</sup>

A second phenomenon, which to my knowledge has not been researched very much scientifically but is widely discussed within churches, is “church-hopping”.<sup>31</sup> Even committed, traditional Christians do no longer stick with one local congregation, but ‘shop around’ for a church that suits their needs and likes best, and move on after some time if they do not feel satisfied with their choice. In the European Protestant context of geographical parishes, people tend to freely choose a church to attend on Sunday, being quite willing to drive some distance to listen to a better preacher, or join into a more lively worship service rather than attending the local church which is usually in walking distance. Like patchwork religiosity, church-hopping builds on individual, subjective and pragmatic criteria.

A third phenomenon which is being observed in my own German, Protestant context, is church membership without congregational membership. Especially in cities, people who earlier opted out of church membership return to the church but insist that they just want to be members of the super-structure, but not of a local congregation. Such people may or may not attend church activities (and if they do, they ‘church-hop’); they are not nominal, but rather ‘distanced’ members of the church.

A fourth phenomenon can be subsumed under the key word ‘emerging church’.<sup>32</sup> Some emerging or emergent churches describe themselves as non- or post-denominational, post-evangelical and following a post-modern hermeneutic, while others try a positive, inclusive

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 150ff.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Influencing the Future of American Religion* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 2007), 114ff.

<sup>32</sup> For an extensive listing of literature on emergent churches, see [www.tyndale.ca/seminary/mtsmodular/reading-rooms/missional/postmodernity](http://www.tyndale.ca/seminary/mtsmodular/reading-rooms/missional/postmodernity).

description: “We are evangelical *and* charismatic *and* liberal *and* orthodox *and* contemplative *and* into social justice *and* into alternative worship.”<sup>33</sup> This very disparate movement defies any attempt at easy categorization, but definitely consists of Christian communities which try to live out “the way of Jesus” within post-modern culture and society,<sup>34</sup> developing diverse and flexible church structures unlike those of any traditional church.

A last phenomenon that needs to be mentioned here is one that I have observed in my own research on Pentecostal and charismatic migrant churches in Europe.<sup>35</sup> Among migrant church leaders, I found a number who, while leading a local, independent and usually non-denominational charismatic church, travel widely both nationally and internationally to preach, teach and evangelize, using ad-hoc networks usually established through personal contacts which cross boundaries of language, culture and denomination. As these networks do not have any firm organizational structure, it is very difficult to ascertain their impact. I do believe, though, that they are far more common and influential than outside observers expect.

### *The end of Weberian categories*

Obviously, none of the developments just portrayed can sufficiently be described and analyzed using Weberian categories of “bureaucratic” or “charismatic”. The fluid, individualistic, interaction-driven networks of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do have their share of charismatic figures that attract others, but they are not ruled by them – and even if the attempt is made, people are much more prone to leave a group and find a new one than they were 100

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<sup>33</sup> Simon Hall, quoted in Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging churches: Creating Christian Community in Post-Modern Cultures* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Publishing 2005), 39.

<sup>34</sup> Gibbs and Bolger name three “core practices”: “(1) Identifying with the life of Jesus, (2) transforming secular space, and (3) living as community.” *Ibid.*, 43f.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Claudia Währisch-Oblau, *The Missionary Self-Perception of Pentecostal / Charismatic Church Leaders from the Global South in Europe: Bringing Back the Gospel* (Leiden / Boston: Brill 2009).

years ago. The open question is whether these new networks will eventually form firmer structures to survive. While this may be the case, there is no natural law that stipulates that such structures have to be “bureaucratic”; on the contrary, in the times of smartphones and internet they may take new forms that none of us can presently envision.

### **Ecclesiological reflections**

This situation makes it obvious that there is an urgent need to re-visit ecclesiology. What actually *is* the church? Is it possible to describe it in other categories than “charismatic” or “bureaucratic”? And what are our yardsticks to judge both existing and emerging practices and structures? In this chapter, I want to look at some classical themes of ecclesiology and show where their answers are no longer sufficient.

#### *The platonic dichotomy between the believed and the actual church in Protestant ecclesiology*

“The main problem of today’s ecclesiology seems to be the difference between the dogmatic and the empirical talking about the church, and, as its consequence, the problem of mediation between the two. The question is: How can the statements about unity, apostolicity, holiness and universality, as they are formulated in the creed, be made compatible or even be connected with the historical and empirical reality of the church?”<sup>36</sup>

To solve this problem, all classical Protestant ecclesiologies make a distinction between the invisible, believed church and the visible, experienced church. Different models of how the two are related can be observed: In classical Lutheran ecclesiology, the relationship is modeled on the teaching about the two kingdoms. The visible church belongs to the realm of the fallen creation; it cannot and should not strive to become the ‘real’ church in this world (here is the root of the conflict between Luther and the Anabaptist movements!). But a

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<sup>36</sup> Dietrich Rössler, *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie* (2., erweiterte Auflage, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 1994), 286. Quote translated from German by the author.

distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ church can be made; the true church exists where, in a communion of brothers and sisters, the Gospel is preached rightly and the sacraments are administered properly (CA VII).<sup>37</sup> Correct doctrine and sacramental practices become the empirical identifiers of the church – even if, as CA VIII states, preaching and sacraments might, in reality, be “administered by evil men.”<sup>38</sup> While this definition is very flexible in principle, in practice it can lead to both dogmatic and structural fundamentalism.<sup>39</sup> But even if this does not happen: How can the communion of believers be defined in an age of shifting social forms? How can orthodoxy (the right teaching of the Gospel) be ascertained in an age where grand narratives are no longer plausible? And how can ritual orthopraxy (the right administration of the sacraments) be maintained across cultural divisions?

A final problem is also that in this rather static model, there is little room for the Holy Spirit. Often, the Spirit is nothing more than a hermeneutic principle which allows the preacher to preach properly and the listener to actually hear the word of God in, under and through the human words that are being preached.

Ecclesiologies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have tried to work on the basis of a different model: Here, the invisible church becomes a (Platonic) ideal towards which the visible church strives, and from which it is judged: “The invisible church is the purpose and the measuring rod of the visible church.”<sup>40</sup> Or, in the words of a prominent former Bishop of

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<sup>37</sup> “The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.” Augsburg Confession, Article 7 (CA VII), English translation taken from [www.fullbooks.com/The-Augsburg-Confessionx5984.html](http://www.fullbooks.com/The-Augsburg-Confessionx5984.html).

<sup>38</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article 8, *ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> Structural fundamentalism is here understood as a strict insistence on certain forms of church organization, e.g. Sunday morning worship services, a salaried clergy which is professionally trained in academic theology, etc.

<sup>40</sup> Rudolf Schäfer quoted in Rössler, *Grundriß* 307. Quote translated from German by the author.

the Evangelical Church in Germany: “The legal and social form of the church needs to be judged as to whether it gives room to the testimony of Christ’s presence.”<sup>41</sup>

Jürgen Moltmann’s influential book, *“The Church in the Power of the Spirit”*<sup>42</sup> displays this model in an exemplary fashion. Moltmann constructs the ‘ideal’ church by defining the invisible church christologically, describing its attributes as the attributes of Christ: The unity of the church is the unity of Christ who deals with all its members in all places and times; its holiness is the holiness of Christ who justifies it; its catholicity is the limitless reign of Christ; and its apostolicity must be understood in the framework of the sending of Christ and of the Spirit. As the church is grounded in the messianic sending of Christ, its attributes are messianic predications and therefore “sentences of hope.” As such, they lead to sentences of action: Because the church is one in Christ, it should be one. Because it has been sanctified, the members should sanctify their lives in justice. Because it is catholic, it should stand on the side of the oppressed. Because it is apostolic, it should take up its cross. Here, the Holy Spirit becomes the power which drives the development of the church towards the coming Kingdom.

Moltmann’s ecclesiology has influenced a whole generation of theologians who have developed ideals of what the church should be, and are frustrated by the real church failing to come, in an empirically observable fashion, anywhere close to this ideal. Several ways of dealing with this frustration can be observed. The first one is to project one’s hope for a better church onto expressions of church one only knows from hearsay, literature or short visits: Our church may seem spiritually dry, and politically conservative, but base communities in Latin

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<sup>41</sup> Wolfgang Huber, quoted *ibid.* Quote translated from German by the author.

<sup>42</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (transl. Margaret Kohl, London: SCM Press, 1975)

America are spiritually lively and politically active. The whole idea of “learning from the world-wide church” often builds on this mechanism.

A second strategy is the technocratic implementation of ideas derived from a theological description of the invisible church which informs goals and objectives, plans and structures. All literature on congregational development, for example, shows this pattern. When it comes to practice, empirical social science is used pragmatically – the talk is all about structure, management, leadership etc., and spirituality is reduced to a technique.

The problem with these Protestant ecclesiologies is that they are *homo faber* ecclesiologies: Basically, the church is seen as created by people in more or less rational, goal-oriented and structured processes in which one’s concept of the invisible church serves to formulate the goals, and the Holy Spirit is envisioned as the source of energy for people’s action. There is no room for surprises, unplanned occurrences, ‘the Holy Spirit doing something new.’ Anything that happens in the church is measured against and judged by the ideal, and what does not fit into the forms given by the ideal is dismissed. Such an attitude basically does not expect the Holy Spirit to act as a person within history, and therefore precludes any discernment of the Spirit’s work.

#### *Traditional definitions of believing and belonging*

A second aspect of traditional ecclesiology must also be discussed here. This one concerns, theologically speaking, the relationship between soteriology and ecclesiology, or, sociologically speaking, the question of boundary construction. Who is a believer? Who belongs to the church? These are questions of both social boundaries and identity markers.

The sociology of religions works with the classical typology of church and sect as it was developed by Max Weber and elaborated by Ernst Troeltsch.<sup>43</sup> This typology builds on the experience of two main types of church in Western Europe: On the one hand, there are the state / people's churches (i.e. the Roman Catholic Church and churches like the Evangelical Church in Germany, or the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Norway) which include large parts of society, and into which one is born and therefore baptized as an infant. Theologically speaking, infant baptism is understood as a ritual in which God's justifying grace is given freely, without the need on the human side to do anything to receive it. Faith, in such a church, is not an individual, but rather a corporate category. Individual members are and remain members because of their baptism even if they never attend any church activity; so-called 'distanced membership' is an option chosen by many and is accepted by the church. In sociological language: The boundary of the church is marked by participation in a single entry ritual which is basically open to all without asking for any qualification. Identity markers are usually weak; there is no sense that a Christian should be 'different' from others around him or her, as the ethical norms of society at large are already shaped by Christianity.

On the other hand, there are the so-called 'free churches' which fall under the 'sect' type. The main characteristic of the sect is that membership is entirely voluntary and defined by a conscious decision which is then ritually confirmed by adult baptism following an individual confession of faith. The underlying soteriology sees individual faith as the precondition for God's saving grace; Christ has to be accepted as Lord before one is justified by faith. Sociologically speaking, the boundary between sect and non-sect is marked by an entry ritual open only to those who make a personal statement of faith, and continued participation in the group's activities. Identity markers are set both verbally (holding to certain propositional

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Gerd Pickl, *Religionssoziologie. Eine Einführung in zentrale Themenbereiche* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2011), 25ff.; W. Swatos, "Church-Sect Theory", *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, ed. W. Swatos (Walnut Creek CA: Altamira Press 1998), [hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/cstheory.htm](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/cstheory.htm). This paper does not allow me to go into details of the development of this typology.



truths) and practically (adhering to clearly defined practices and ethics which may stand in stark contrast to one's surrounding society).

Both 'church' and 'sect' are ideal types<sup>44</sup> that can never be found as such in empirical reality. But even as such, they are now very far apart from the shifting realities of churches in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and therefore may harm rather than help ecclesiological thinking. As I have described above, religious identity is, in many cases, no longer defined in categories of belonging to a social body, but rather as a fluid process.

A further weakness of both types is that they understand the incorporation of new believers as their assimilation into an existing, basically unchangeable structure. This leaves no room for the model depicted in the book of Acts, where the church changes fundamentally with and through the incorporation of new believers (Acts 10f., 15!).

### **Towards a post-modern ecclesiology**

It has become abundantly clear that static models and Weberian typologies are leaving ecclesiology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a number of unsolvable problems. The underlying cause for these problems is that the invisible (ideal) church is constructed as an unchangeable structure, a reality that is always 'before' and 'above' of what is empirically visible and possible. *Ecclesia semper reformanda* simply means that the visible church has to keep reforming because it is in a constant process to express this ideal. In the words of Wolfgang Vondey: "The mission of the church is a performative enactment of the already established

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<sup>44</sup> Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie* (5. revidierte Auflage, bearb. Johannes Winckelmann, Tübingen: Mohr & Siebeck 1980), Chapter 1.

universal church in particular cultural contexts rather than an expansion and transformation of the origin of the church across cultural boundaries.”<sup>45</sup>

*The embodiment of the Spirit in the church as an ongoing process*

Following Vondey, I would like to develop a dynamic ecclesiology that looks at the visible church not as an expression of an ideal, invisible structure, but as the ongoing *embodiment* of the Spirit who moves throughout history. I realize that the term ‘embodiment’ is tricky and needs to be very carefully defined.<sup>46</sup> Certainly, it must not be misunderstood in a Platonic way, as the in-corporation of an ideal or idea, because then we are ending up with the same dichotomies I have described above. Neither are the definitions of the term as they abound in psychology, anthropology or sociology helpful for what I want to achieve.<sup>47</sup>

But the term does seem useful for several reasons: ‘Embodiment’ expresses a mode of presence and engagement in the world that is fluid and dynamic, going beyond empirical reality but bound to it at the same time. In addition, the concept can be used to collapse the Cartesian dualities between mind and body, subject and object. Transferred into theological language, this means that the Spirit becomes historical and visible (incarnated and not just represented!) in the very messiness of the actual church’s life, worship, organization, actions and attitudes. That the Spirit becomes embodied in the church does not mean that he is limited

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<sup>45</sup> Wolfgang Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism. The Crisis of Global Theology and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmanns Publishing 2010), 147.

<sup>46</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Embodiment> for a range of definitions of this term.

<sup>47</sup> For the psychological use of the term, cf. Malcolm MacLachlan, *Embodiment: clinical, critical, and cultural perspectives on health and illness* (Maidenhead: Open University Press / McGraw-Hill 2004). For the term in anthropology, cf. Thomas J. Csordas, “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,” *Ethos*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (March 1990), 5-47; Thomas J. Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994). For an overview of embodiment in sociology, cf. Dennis D. Waskul and Phillip Vannini, “Introduction: The Body in Symbolic Interaction,” in *Body/Embodiment. Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*, ed. D. Waskul and P. Vannini (Aldershot/Burlington VA: Ashgate Publishing 2006).

to it; rather, the Spirit is at work in creation, in society at large, but where this work becomes ‘denser’, embodied in social structures, we can call these embodiments ‘church.’

Theologically, we can start out with the Pauline metaphor of the church as the ‘body of Christ:’ “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...” (1Cor12:12f) The Holy Spirit is not an abstract principle of unity; rather, he needs a body, a living system to ‘express’ himself. And as every body is alive and constantly changing, the body of Christ is also never fixed into a certain structure, but rather dynamic and ever changing due to the work of the Holy Spirit. In terms of organizational theory, the church must therefore be understood as a ‘natural system.’<sup>48</sup> Consequently, ecclesiology has to look at dynamics rather than at fixed structures or beliefs. It follows an “experiential and incarnational logic that acknowledges the Spirit’s being made present and active through the materiality of personal embodiment and congregational life.”<sup>49</sup>

#### *Suggestions for a dynamization of the nota ecclesiae*

In the following, I want to re-think the *nota ecclesiae*, unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity, not from the static ideal of a believed church, but rather from the dynamics of the Holy Spirit embodying himself in an ever-changing multitude of communities of followers of Christ.<sup>50</sup> In all this, we have to be very careful not to construct a new ideal of the church. Rather, this is about an *ecclesiology of discernment*: Where do we see the Holy Spirit at work? And where is this Spirit being embodied in old and new forms of community?

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Crawford S. Holling, “Understanding the Complexity of Economic, Ecological and Social Systems”, *Ecosystems* (2001) 4: 390-405, doi:10.1007/s10021-001-0101-5.

<sup>49</sup> Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh. Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Publishing 2005), 136. Yong ascribes this logic to “Pentecostal sacramentality.”

<sup>50</sup> Here, I follow Amos Yong to some degree, but develop his thinking further. Amos Yong, *Spirit*, in particular 135ff.

The *unity* of the church, to begin, rather than being derived from the unity of the one invisible, ideal church, results from the one Holy Spirit who turns people into followers of Jesus Christ. Following the metaphor of the ‘directed set’ taken from mathematics (a set which is not defined by a boundary, but by the directedness of all its elements towards a common center), believing and belonging are not defined either by boundaries of orthodoxy (a believer is who holds to certain dogmatic propositions), by boundaries of orthopraxy (a believer is who lives by certain, defined rules), or by boundaries of ritual incorporation (a believer is who has been baptized and who takes part in Holy Communion). Rather, believing and belonging are dynamic categories, describing the direction of an individual life or the life of a community. The demarcation between ‘church’ and ‘not church’ becomes fluid and open to negotiation.<sup>51</sup>

The unity of the church described in this dynamic way is not so loosely defined as to become meaningless. It is also mediated by the Bible as a founding document which all followers of Christ relate to. The Bible is not understood in a fundamentalist sense as a set of unchangeable doctrines, but as a historic and living document in constant conversation with its readers. Using reception aesthetics, a multiplicity of contextual interpretations of the one book are possible, guided by the lecture criteria of adequacy (to the written text), plausibility, and relevance which have to be constantly re-negotiated.<sup>52</sup> As no interpretation can claim to have “the whole” of the meaning, it is important to share different contextual readings of the Bible to enrich each other’s perspective. Again, here we have no clear-cut boundary; whoever is, for whatever reason and with whatever motives, involved and engaged in this lecture and discussion process is in communication with the one book – unity is again constructed by directedness rather than by defining a margin to belonging.

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, the discussion about “messianic Muslims”. John Travis, “Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa. A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol. 17:1 (Spring 2000), 53-59, [www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/17\\_1\\_PDFs/Followers\\_of\\_Isa.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/17_1_PDFs/Followers_of_Isa.pdf). See also the discussion on this topic within the Lausanne Movement, [conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11298](http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11298).

<sup>52</sup> On the role of reception aesthetics for Biblical exegesis see Werner Kahl, *Jesus als Lebensretter* (New Testament Studies in Contextual Exegesis Vol. 2, Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2007), 116ff.

The *holiness* of the church, similarly, is not conceptualized as an in-dwelling quality. Rather, it is its calling, out of the world into a new community (*ekklesia*). This calling-out can never be separated from the church's *apostolicity*, its being sent into the world. The Spirit is the caller, mover and builder of this new community.

The *apostolicity* of the church is in its missional calling. It is the Spirit which sets the believers into motion to give testimony to what God has done. The community of followers of Christ never exists as an end in itself, but always for and towards others. Apostolicity is a dynamic category because it needs constant historical reflection and re-lecture of the Bible, rather than an a-historical orientation at a given idea of what apostolicity means.

The dynamics here are not simply those of assimilation and incorporation because the Spirit changes not only the new believers so that they can become members of the community, but also the community so that it constantly re-opens itself to new members and towards the world that surrounds it.<sup>53</sup> Holiness and apostolicity, being called-out and being called-towards mean that the church lives in a constant tension between being inculturated (seeing the Spirit at work in the cultures surrounding and penetrating it) and being a counter-cultural community which points towards the coming Kingdom of God (being redeemed and sanctified by the Spirit).

Finally, the *catholicity* of the church is constituted by the Spirit, concretely by the manifestation of the Spirit's fruits and gifts in the life of each member. In this way, a dynamic concept of unity in diversity can be maintained. The fruits grow and ripen, and the gifts are given according to the need of a situation. They are different and they change, but they all come from the same source. Again, the recognition of something as a fruit or gift of the Spirit

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. the ground-breaking study of Matthias Wenk, *Community-Forming Power. The Socio-Ethical Role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts* (London/New York: T. & T. Clark International 2004).

has to be negotiated in conversation with the Biblical testimonies and with the traditions of the church: The same Spirit who sent and empowered the first disciples is still the one who sends and empowers every contemporary believer.

*From orthodoxy and orthopraxy to orthopathy*

Traditional Protestant ecclesiology builds on orthodoxy and ritual orthopraxy,<sup>54</sup> late 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant ecclesiology has widened the latter to include political and social orthopraxy.<sup>55</sup> But in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, new trends can be observed. The German practical theologian Manfred Josuttis has written extensively about religion as practice in categories of spiritual exercise which opens the practitioner to a power outside of him- or herself.<sup>56</sup>

In our UEM Working Group on Evangelism and Popular Culture, our discussions quickly began to revolve around questions of discernment: How could we judge cultural and societal developments and their influence on our respective Christian communities? We considered this important as we realized that evangelism was not only about changing others to become ‘like us’, but also about changing our churches so that they would be open to ‘others’. Consequently, rather than developing new evangelistic methods to react to shifting social structures, we devised a questionnaire for congregations to assess their own openness towards the culture that surrounds and also penetrates them. Basically, we were looking at attitudes that will make a congregation or Christian group evangelistic or not. We realized that proper discernment is not a matter of fixed dogmatic propositions, but of flexible approaches.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See CA VII.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Moltmann, *Kirche*, note 43.

<sup>56</sup> See Manfred Josuttis, *Religion als Handwerk. Zur Handlungslogik spiritueller Methoden* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2002); *Segenskräfte. Potentiale einer energetischen Seelsorge* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2000).

<sup>57</sup> To show how this works, here is just one question from the not yet published questionnaire: “How can we decide what to resist and what to embrace in a culture without becoming judgmental?”

Criteria:

The Pentecostal theologian James K.A. Smith strongly argues to put Christian formation from its head to its feet:<sup>58</sup> Rather than defining the ‘essence’ of Christianity as a set of propositional truths, he describes Christianity as practice. Humans are not first and foremost rational animals; they are fundamentally affective beings driven by their desires. The church is the community that forms and schools these desires so that they are directed towards God’s new creation. This formation happens through worship, i.e. liturgies (described as “thick practices”) which are “earthy, material and mundane.”<sup>59</sup>

To summarize: Traditional models of Spirit and church structure open up a dichotomy which allows no room for the Spirit when it comes to practical theology. When church is defined by orthodoxy, the Spirit becomes a hermeneutic principle. When church is defined by ritual orthopraxy, the Spirit, by maintaining the bond between the actually performed ritual and its Platonic ideal, becomes the guarantee of its actual effectiveness. When church is defined by political and social orthopraxy, the Spirit becomes the empowering force which moves the

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- ethics / 10 commandments
  - Love God, love yourself, love your neighbor, love your enemy
  - Accept the worldwide church
  - Does it glorify God and edify the church?
  - Laws are there to serve the people, but not people to serve the law.
  - Does it liberate and empower people?

Attitudes:

- observe, meet, live with people long term
- know that you cannot have the truth on your own
- know that you need God’s power
- listen before you speak
- allow yourself to be led by the Holy Spirit
- accept that you need forgiveness yourself
- ability to admit that I am wrong
- looking for God in everything
- humility
- love
- a forgiving heart.”

<sup>58</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom. Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Publishing 2009).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 139.

church to certain action. In all of these models, the Spirit remains an abstract force and is never seriously conceived as an actor and the third person of the Trinity.

In contrast, I want to argue in favor of an *ecclesiology of discernment*. Driven by an affectivity<sup>60</sup> which is formed by the Spirit, it looks at worship and ritual, structures and administration of existing churches just as well as at what is happening in society at large, seeking to discern where the Holy Spirit is at work. This is a theological exercise that cannot do without empirical analysis; an exercise that needs to be done in conversation with others who define themselves as believers or followers of Christ (this includes the Christian tradition of the past!), and in conversation with the Bible. Discernment is always temporary and provisional; it can discover the Spirit but cannot ‘have’ it. It is an exercise of faith and trust that the Spirit works in and through others as well as through me and my community. Discernment is not judgment: there are no once-for-all firm criteria by which to decide where the Spirit is and where not. Discernment means a radical openness, a willingness to be surprised by God’s Spirit who will do new things.

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<sup>60</sup> Stephen Land describes the three “Pentecostal affections” as gratitude, compassion and courage. Stephen Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality. A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Reprint 2001).