

# In and of the world: Why there is no Christian ‘community’

by [Nicholas M. Healy](#) in the [May 16, 2012](#) issue



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Congregational studies show that congregations differ, often quite intensely and extensively, in their life and language and in what they do and thus in their understanding of, say, the meanings of the word *God*. To say this is not merely to make the obvious point that the local Methodist church does things differently than the high Anglican church around the corner. Within the same denomination and in similar localities, congregations usually differ substantially, each having its own, often easily recognizable style.

Jerome Baggett’s study *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (2009), for example, describes the substantial differences between six Roman Catholic parishes in the San Francisco Bay region. One is a largely gay congregation, another is centered on the Latin mass, one is oriented toward supporting suburban families, another is mostly Latino, and so on. Certainly all six share some characteristics, but each congregation’s life, language and what it does indicate a substantially different understanding of Christianity from the other five. The beliefs, practices and attitudes of the six congregations are not sufficiently held in common that together they form a single community, as in, say, “the Bay Area Roman Catholic community.”

Furthermore, there are far fewer commonalities *within* each congregation than one might expect. While data tables may point out certain beliefs held by most members

of a particular congregation, there are always people who disagree with the majority, often in remarkably counterintuitive ways. Baggett records, for example, that even in a Catholic congregation clearly identifying itself as having very traditionalist beliefs, 8 percent of its members think you can be a good Catholic without believing that Jesus physically rose from the dead or without believing in the real presence, and 13 percent without following the magisterium's teaching on abortion. And it's not merely a question of beliefs, of course. Most American Roman Catholics are familiar with the large suburban parishes where the Saturday evening service is loud and excited, with clap-alongs and guitars, while the 7:30 mass on Sunday morning is contemplative and virtually silent, and the 9:30 mass family-oriented and noisy in a different way. Many people who usually go to one of these services would not go happily to either of the others.

The diversity of belief and practice between and within congregations seems not simply to be disagreement about the meaning of Christianity and its practice. Both what is diverse and what is shared are as much the product of non-Christian influences. The conclusion of some studies can be generalized to say that the life and language of a particular congregation can be understood adequately only in light of its place within the particularities of its host society. It may have some influence on that larger society, but the congregation itself is also a Christian expression of the town or region in which it is located, rather than something separate built on another foundation. So it would follow that watching this community to learn the meanings of the word *God* requires watching that larger community, too, setting the former within the latter. Differences between congregations and between the members of any one congregation—together with much of what they have in common—reflect attitudes and experiences that come from living with nonecclesial people and their products within non-Christian groups and societies. These shape their understanding of doctrine, their reading of scripture and their practices.

Coherence and consistency among members of any given congregation is not, therefore, to be expected. Neither should we expect self-consistency on the part of each member since most of us disagree with ourselves, holding beliefs or engaging in practices that are in tension or conflict with others we also believe and practice. Christians do not share a common understanding as to how significant such tensions and conflicts are—whether within ourselves or within the congregation or the church as a whole—for living the Christian life well. We do not even agree on the level of

enthusiasm needed to be a good Christian. Not all of us think we need to be highly motivated, however much others insist that we should be.

In this fashion, ethnographic studies render problematic the methodological turn in theology to church-as-community, whether the church is taken to be a particular congregation or, *a fortiori*, the worldwide church. Theologians who watch the church have to make decisions as to what to watch and how to watch it—decisions that are contestable in various ways and for various reasons.

To be sure, there are vital aspects of the church's life and language that are probably shared everywhere. These are likely to be rather formal, however: a focus on holy scripture (however it is read); an attempt (however diverse) to understand the meaning of our lives in relation to the God made known in Christ and the Spirit; and worship of that God (in whatever forms). Although these elements are present in virtually all congregations, the ethnographic view undermines the notion that they constitute the church as a "community" or a moral person in a sufficiently rich and consistent way to work as a principle for theological or ecclesiological method. There is simply too much, materially, that is not shared. Indeed, the worldwide church—the church that is often the subject of contemporary ecclesiology and the locus of modern theological method—when considered with a focus on detail, particularity and the exceptional, is arguably little more than a congeries of diverse forms of life, languages and meanings of the word *God*. We cannot, then, start with the church as it exists; everything slips between the fingers unless we cement and shape according to our agenda, our construal of Christianity and our formation within our particular world.

Considering the central role that churchly virtues and practices play for Stanley Hauerwas and his followers reveals some of the issues here. It is much harder to describe what Christians do as "church practices" than they seem to assume, for concretely any given church-accepted practice is performed with intentions and contexts that can be diverse enough to alter the meaning of the practice. It is difficult to isolate a set of distinctly Christian virtues by watching the church, since the church consistently advocates very few particular practices, if any. Nor does it provide consistent guidelines for deciding which virtues should inform the others. Certainly one can make an argument that a certain set of practices should be found throughout the church, or that a certain Christian virtue should inform all other virtues and practices. But that would be to make an argument rather than discern it from watching the church as it is. And the argument is difficult to make. Hauerwas

privileges practices of nonviolence, but very few churchpeople practice or even preach nonviolence.

This is not at all to deny that there are very good reasons for reminding ourselves that theological inquiry is located within the church. Certainly it is important to remember that doctrines are not something handed down from heaven to us fully formed, that Christianity can be conceived and practiced only with due regard to historicity and lived experience, that we are formed by groups and individuals around us, and that we can be Christians only if we think and act in ways that draw upon at least some of the resources the church provides us. Certainly, too, we have no choice but to begin within the church in some way or other, but that is not the same as saying we begin by watching the church's common life and language. Nor is it necessary to assume that beliefs or practices shared, if not by all Christians at least by the best of them or by most of them, are on that account to be accepted.

David Martin contends in *Reflections on Sociology and Theology* (1997) that "the forms of communitarian ideology propagated by mainstream religions are based on delusions. They do not 'correspond' to any reality." He argues that "the emphasis on 'community' corresponds to a shrinkage in the constituency of persons influenced by the church" and "owe[s] a great deal to a middle-class nostalgia about lost community."

Martin's is perhaps a rather British-centered view, but I think one can see this factor in much writing about community in both Britain and the United States, Christian and non-Christian. In the U.S., which has experienced relatively little fascism or collectivism, community is often uncritically presented as a good thing, virtually a term of perfection in the sense of the more community the better.

Another reason for using the word *community* is often to indicate solidarity among underprivileged groups. Thus one talks in the U.S. about the black community, the Latino community, the gay community. You don't refer to "the white community"; it makes no sense, except perhaps in the case of white extremists. Likewise, and for much the same reason, in my view it makes no sense to talk of "the Christian community," except, possibly, if Christians are threatened in some way. And even then it is little more than a figure of speech.

A reply to this might be to say, well, that may be so, but it remains a theological fact that community is constitutive of the church, so community should be fostered at all

costs, and the church should counter as best it can the individualism and relativism rampant within modern societies. I would argue that this cannot be the case if you mean that the church-as-community must have a common life and language that are empirically describable. Since the church does not exist as that kind of community, it is hard to see how it could be an essential aspect of the church, on earth at least. The body of Christ need not be, and historically often has not been, considered a community in anything like the modern sense. Jesus did not say, “Where two or three are gathered together, there is community.” An emphasis upon watching our communal selves may distract our attention from what is far more important for theology, the church and the world.

To be sure, it would be foolish to deny that people do know the church—or to be more precise, the churches—when they see it; churches have easily recognizable family resemblances. Discerning an individual Christian as a Christian just from watching him or her is generally much more difficult, often quite impossible—with the exception of the clergy, of course, those religious who wear habits and theologians and teachers who talk and think about God for a living. Laypeople usually don’t do anything distinctive except (some of them) on Sunday mornings, when non-Christians don’t usually see them anyway. Some laypeople think it a good idea to make it known that they are Christians. They may wear a substantial pectoral cross (a little cross around the neck is too readily confused with a fashion accessory). They may affix signs to their cars—where I live the ichthys symbol has been replaced by “Keep Christ in Christmas.” Or they may pray silently but noticeably before eating a meal in company, perhaps making others in their company feel rather uncomfortable. Many, probably the vast majority of Christians, don’t do any of that. I cannot think of any good reason to conclude that it is better to signal in this way that one is a Christian rather than having it go largely unnoticed. An opportunity for genuine witness would be quite a different matter, but that is unlikely to be a daily occurrence.

Christian laypeople make up the vast majority of the church, yet perhaps because they are largely invisible, when people speak of the church they often omit the laity. Thus the media might say, for example, “the Catholic Church believes that life begins at conception” or “today the church asked forgiveness for its failure to act quickly enough on the child abuse scandal.” We know what is meant: not the church but a particular denomination. And of that denomination only one part of it: in the first instance, only those who agree, while many do not; in the second, the bishops.

Both are incorrect if understood as simple statements.

The church's theological claims about its distinctiveness have often gone beyond difference toward separation and exclusion: the church is the ark of salvation, outside of which there is no salvation; without faith in Jesus Christ and baptism into his church, you cannot get to heaven. The church is the body of Christ, while the world is not; we are the people of God, everyone else is not. There is a tendency nowadays to move away from a strict connection between church membership and likelihood of salvation.

However, one can reasonably generalize from a wide range of views to say that virtually all traditional ecclesiologies accepted by the churches, as well as those implicit in the churches' authorized ways of life, claim that being a member of the Christian church offers the possibility of getting closer to God than you could if you were not a member. The basic claim is that the church's distinctiveness lies in its mediating function, its capacity to bring its members into a closer relationship with God, however that relation is understood.

The church's mediating function can be described in various ways. For the sake of the argument, I will give accounts of two fairly typical versions, then a third version more influenced by the ethnographic view.

According to traditional Roman Catholic ecclesiology, the church's teaching authority—the magisterium—is in receipt of a body of revealed truths, the deposit of faith. This has been handed on by the magisterium from generation to generation, reaching all the way back to the disciples who received the gospel from Jesus. According to some accounts, it reaches even further “back” to the triune God. As the Word of God, Jesus Christ is the self-communication of the Father. The Holy Spirit is Christ's gift to the church's magisterium.

The function of both the Spirit and the magisterium is, in their respective ways, to maintain the church's faith and life in the truth of the gospel. In this view, then, there is movement from God the Father, through the Son and the Spirit, to certain specially graced church leaders who teach the gospel with apostolic authority to the rest of us in the church. We are brought closer to God by means of our obedient acceptance of the magisterium interpretation of the gospel. This is what is distinctive about the church: by the special grace of the Holy Spirit, it possesses revealed truths that it mediates to the faithful through its authoritative teaching.

Rowan Williams has pointed out some of the problems with what he appropriately calls this “linear doctrine” of the Trinity, which he also finds in patristic and Protestant versions. Two of the more significant problems are fairly obvious: the limitation of the role of the Spirit to an epistemological guarantor, and the failure to acknowledge our own responsive action within the dynamic of God’s self-communication.

Williams and other theologians have a rather different construal of the church’s distinctive mediating role. If I may hazard a broad generalization, their common account might go roughly like this: the church and its members do not simply receive a body of revealed truths. They must discern and to some degree construct the meaning of the gospel. The success or failure of the church’s poesis is contingent upon the active presence of the Holy Spirit (and, of course, what constitutes success or failure is also determined by the Spirit—and may often be hidden from us). Revelation is thus a complex dynamic process, emerging within the historical experience of the church’s attempts to respond in faith to Jesus Christ.

On this second view, then, the distinctiveness of the church lies in its Spirit-guided participation in God’s self-communication as this is mediated by scripture, the church’s history and its traditions of practice and inquiry. The church and its members grow closer to God by their formation and participation within the distinctive Christian tradition.

Unlike the first way, here no one has absolute authority. Although the Holy Spirit ensures the overall indefectibility of the church, we can readily acknowledge the confusion and occasional misdirection of the teaching authorities. Furthermore, all Christians are to participate to some degree in the church’s constructive response. All engage the tradition in light of their own background and concerns, informed by which they make judgments as to which aspects of the tradition are authoritative, which secondary.

On this view, one should judge a theological proposal not by who makes it (though obviously some members of the church have far greater weight than others). Nor does its conformity to a set of authoritative statements or to a basic Christian logic make it necessarily acceptable. Its authority is dependent upon its reception, and thus upon whether or not it makes a convincing case to a sufficient number of Christians, especially to those well versed in the Christian tradition. As David Kelsey remarks, the “mode” of a theological proposal is “hypothetical.” We say: “Here is an

important theological question; try looking at it this way.”

The ethnographic view suggests the outlines of a third way of construing the church’s mediating role that shares much with the second, but expands it in various ways. In this third picture of the church, the tradition in question is the Christian expression and embodiment of the world, rather than an expression and embodiment of something based in itself. Distinctiveness here lies in its members’ quest to live authentically as Christians within the world, and so in their using the resources of the church, as well as other resources. Accordingly, the church remains distinctive but is less obviously so, its distinctiveness even hidden in important ways.

Implied in this third view is an ecclesiology, or possibly a range of ecclesiologies. A rough sketch of one ecclesiology might go something like this: scripture tells us that the triune God is active everywhere, not only in the church, and certainly not solely in its teaching authorities or in its own distinctive tradition. For the world is the object of God’s love. It is to the world that the Father sent the Son, to reconcile it and bring it to eschatological consummation. It is in the world that the Spirit works in multitudinous ways to this same saving end, the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost not being limited to the empirical church. Theologically, as well as empirically, the church is in the world and of the world.

If the church’s empirical distinctiveness is limited, its practices, beliefs and attitudes largely determined by the resources of the world’s cultures and societies, it is the church’s theological distinctiveness that is of primary significance, what the church is *sub ratione Dei*. Scripture indicates that its members are called to be the church, to respond to the gospel, the truth about the world. They do so haltingly and feebly for the most part, and that’s all right, because God’s salvation of the world is not contingent upon the church embodying or displaying the gospel successfully. Nor does the church possess the gospel. Rather, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is to point away from itself to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is as a personal instrument of God, as it were, that it is theologically distinctive: here, if anywhere, we can talk about a moral person with a truly individual life. But this person and life is not empirically visible or even empirically actual; the church cannot display its special relation to God in, say, a shared set of distinctive practices or beliefs, or in some depth dimension of its essence. The church is theologically distinctive because of God’s call, not because of its response to that call.

The church is thus not a sacrament if by that we mean a visible sign of an invisible reality that lies within itself. When people come to know the invisible reality of which the church is a sign, they know something other than the church, namely, God in the world, for our salvation. That said, the church can say it is an expression and embodiment of the world's response to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and thus is a kind of sacrament. But visibly it confuses as much as or more than it signifies. What we are as Christians and as the church is hidden by our own finitude, diversity, inconsistency and the confusions of our places within the world. This is not to say that, hidden underneath all our worldliness, we are special. For who we are, as Christians and as the church, is what the world is, too. The church is not an ark floating on the top of the waters. It lives and breathes within the waters. The world is the ark of salvation; the church is but the worldly expression of the Christian response to God's saving work in the world.

The church is called, then, to be the world's Christian expression. We are hidden yet truly called by God, and we are the church irrespective of the quality of our response. Thus the church, our true center, our essential existence, lies outside ourselves, in God and in the world. As the Christian expression of the world, we remain a worldly product, for to be the church as it is called to be, we must be in and of the world; we are not called to leave the world—and anyway, how could we? But we are indeed called, so our lives as Christians are centered in God's call to us in the world. The world and God are the church; the church isn't the church apart from both the world and God working in it.

*This article is adapted from Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography, edited by Pete Ward and just published by Eerdmans.*