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THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNIO AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Guillermo Hansen

This paper addresses the possible impact of the Christian idea of *communio* (*koinonia*)¹ and its communal realization (Christian community) in and for the postmodern social, political and cultural landscape. This landscape, increasingly common to all regions of the planet, shows the central role of new social movements or agents, articulating their claims based on a “politics of difference” celebrating the incommensurable. The common denominator of these groupings consists of the reconfiguration of the nodal points through which individuals and groups imagine themselves and determine that which gives their lives consistency and identity. In the light of the above, what difference does belonging to a Christian community make to the panoply of these different identities? I shall approach this concern presupposing that an appraisal of the phenomenon of the multiple and/or different—as thinkers such as Cornel West, Ernesto Laclau, Frederic Jameson, Xabier Gorostiaga and David Harvey among others have shown—must go beyond a “liberal” understanding emphasizing the socio-economic factors which are critical in their formation. Bearing this in mind, I shall stress the ecclesiological theme not so much by developing an ecclesiology but, more modestly, by seeking to place the ecclesiological question on the map formed by multiple and different identities. Finally this paper deliberately does not treat the church as one more institution within civil society, as one more actor on the cultural scene striving, hopefully, for a more just and egalitarian society. While this, of course, is much to be desired and promoted, it is not where the church’s main contribution to society lies. Hence the sacramental emphasis that underlies my implicit ecclesiology.

Collapse and constructing

Social scientists have time and again pointed out that our times have witnessed the collapse of most of the places from which “universal” subjects spoke²—one of the hallmarks of the post-modern condition. People, both in the North and South, assume a new central role and agency through novel micro-social and cultural formations structured around ethnicity, race, gender, age and religion, or any combination of these. Identifications such as these constitute the basis for group and individual identities which far from conforming to an idyllic “multicultural” panacea in fact embody disparate and competing claims against the backdrop of a labor market and states transformed by the new dynamics of transnational capitalism.³ No discussion of the problem of identity is complete without considering the crises which important identity markers such as jobs or citizenship have undergone in the last two decades.⁴

In the midst of the uncertainties produced by the new, international distribution of labor and the “downsizing” of the state, the referent for “identity” acquires new profiles. The reality of identity no longer points to a single factor but is actually constituted by a set of social relationships. By the same token, the concept no longer assumes that there are eternal, hypostatic referents to our universal representations (such as nationality or race, always linked to a certain notion of a global or even cosmic manifest destiny). Identities, rather, are conceived as *goals* forged in a process of identification against competing desires which, in the long run, are seen as menacing to one’s symbolic representations or actual physical existence.⁵ Therefore the new identity formation can be viewed as different strategies attempting to grapple with a world collapsing under the weight of its unrealized promises, or threatened by forces beyond the control of hitherto existing institutions. *Le différend* characterized by the incommensurableness of identities—as pointed out by the hegemonic post-modern voice—may signal the demise of the monolithic, homogeneous, abstract and all embracing world views.

The question of identity

Yet we must not overlook that the identities emerging from their ashes are intertwined with the new dynamics of discrimination, displacement and struggle against the real threat of disenfranchisement and the alleged menace represented by other forces and groupings in their strategic life-reproducing positioning in the world.

Identities and koinonia

In order to understand the significance of our ecumenical, and especially Lutheran discourse on koinonia and community, it is important that we remind ourselves of the global context within which it is formulated, namely, that of a close-meshed net of identities whose manifestation raises a new question regarding the form of communion that we proclaim and seek. It is no coincidence that in the ecumenical world the concept of “costly” or “costliness” has become so central.⁶ Yet the “costly” nature of the communion sought is not a quality exclusive to the ecumenical process towards the unity of different confessions and denominations. In fact, it is also a lively reality within each confession or church as such. It is no secret that our religious-confessional boundaries actually increasingly envelop heterogeneous categories and identities that oblige us to take a new look at the nature of diversity within an alleged confessional unity.

Noting the costly dimension of church communion, namely, pointing out some of the forces and factors that underlie its costliness, a central, ecclesiological question forms the core of our present concern: what does *praxis* signified by the Christian, and more specifically, Lutheran communion mean *in* and *for* the world? This entails focusing first of all on the ecclesiological practice of *communio*, namely, on its theological density insofar as something must be happening to the world—as this is constituted by different identity configurations and processes—if the Holy Spirit is more than a linguistic convention for backing up arcane insights. Only then can the understanding of the church’s

contribution to society's identity configurations acquire any theological weight worth considering, contrary to a merely ethical positioning vis-à-vis the great issues of the times. In a changing world characterized by secularization, globalization and fragmentation we Lutherans are understandably eager to find common features that bind us together and thus strengthen our role, position and contribution *to* the world. In sociological terms we are not exempt from the mathematics of power which any institution that wants to contribute to the amelioration of social and cultural ailments must entertain. Yet the question that always remains is whether some of us are not caught up in a functional obsession with the social relevance of the church which sidetracks us from the central, theological matter, namely that which is happening to the world in the communion that is the church.⁷ While this by no means constitutes a solution to the social quandaries underlying the proliferation of "identity groups," it is nonetheless here that we can find the church's real and lasting contribution in an increasingly fragmented and convulsed world.⁸

An example may help clarify this concern. Questions such as "how can our understanding of *communio* help overcome social problems?" have become new rallying points for those who are socially and ecumenically concerned as opposed to those who seem only wrapped up in the narrow confines of their own church and/or "spiritual" life. For those with a more comprehensive understanding of God's workings the latter may seem incomprehensible. Yet the type of question illustrated above may also betray a hyperactive and frantic engagement in the shaping of the social forces of the day whilst relegating critical theological matters to a more convenient time (oblivious to the fact that, in the long run, this can only result in the erosion of the qualitative dimension of our social commitment and contribution). Furthermore, the question also presupposes that the church has an intrinsic capacity to solve or overcome social problems, presumably because these have already been solved within. Is this really an accurate depiction of what actually occurs in the church,

especially in its dealings with the actual divisions and claims of disparate macro- and micro-identities?

As we reflect on a sort of programmatic outline for the church's contribution the above might give the impression that the Christian community has found some magic recipe for itself and the welfare of the world. However in sociological terms we know that the Christian community, just as any other social organization, already carries within it the identities, conflicts and obstacles of the age in which it lives.⁹ It is as though before the church can get to society and contribute to its discernment, society has already got into the social structure that we call church! The poignant question, therefore, is raised at the point where the gospel, as Word and sacrament, meets the world: what does the gospel do with the identities and divisions that it encounters within the very community that is gathered in this (universal) event? Furthermore, what does it do with this fragile compromise that we call society, a compromise often forged between competing ways of dealing with life and death, that is, social ensembles which sustain identities forged in the all too human quest for survival, recognition and meaning?

We are not proposing that the church must solve within itself all of society's conflicts. This is a matter left for society to resolve with its own political, social, and economic mechanisms—where the church as a *social institution* may also contribute decisively. Nevertheless, it is imperative that the church be that "something else" corresponding to its very *sacramental* nature, namely, to be that space, a type of living experiment, where divisions, claims and grievances can be dealt with symbolically¹⁰ within a larger, unifying horizon—that of the universe's recapitulation in Christ. Only then can the fragmentary and partial claims enacted by identity groups find a kind of healthy relativization that supersedes a mere pragmatic compromise of otherwise totalitarian forces. The fact that not all claims can find an equal place under the eschatological vision is a matter I shall outline briefly below.

The power of the sacramental dimension

Since the realities that conform the world are at cross purpose to the *koinonia* that we proclaim and want to see realized, we must ponder, then, how the identity conferred by belonging to the Christian (Lutheran) communion interacts with the several identities which have been given to, adopted by, or imposed on us at different levels of our social existence. In other words, how does the religious way of conferring identity condition and challenge other ways of determining identity? Here we must plunge into the innermost theological nature of the Christian *koinonia* as such, exploring particularly its sacramental dimension, namely the prophetic anticipation of the unity of all humankind and the whole cosmos within the unity entailed by the Triune life.

This sacramental approach must challenge a mere instrumental vision of the church—an image all too frequently found in ecclesiastical documents. For in effect, if when framed by a Trinitarian understanding the church is that fragment of the world that emerges when the Spirit blows in the direction of the Father, and if what emerges is, to be more precise, creation with a special form, that of Christ, how accurate is it then to speak of the church in relation to society mostly as an *instrument* of God?¹¹ While certainly mobilizing and inspiring, this type of representation is missing one important aspect as to the nature and purpose of the church. For in effect, the church as a community is not merely an instrument that is set up to “operate” in society, but, more properly, it signifies the *locus* where society is “operated on” by the Holy Spirit.¹² Granted, this operation is of a sacramental nature, a symbol that stands for a larger unifying representation, the kingdom of God. But precisely because its nature is sacramental, its form and content must be transparent to this new identity that God has in store for creation.¹³

Since the church is the *locus* where the unity underlying the disparate identities is proclaimed as being intrinsic to a future that God envisions for the whole, we must not merely point out what the church can “contribute” to the world, but what happens to the

The question of identity

world when a part of it identifies itself as “church,” a *communio*. Through the praxis of communion the church can and must have an impact on the social and political configuration of the world; yet the impact of this praxis is initially indirect, because of its “non-worldly” transparency. Its transparency installs within society a type of window to what God can and will do with the world. In a manner of speaking, the church as a communion is the place where God’s unifying love and humanity’s diverse identities meet. Judgement and affirmation are intrinsic to this encounter.

The identity-transparency that the church embodies is thus forged not in spite of, but in the midst of the boundary markers that shape us as different subjects also claimed by different ideas of nation, ethnicity, gender, roles and class. It is on this road, in the midst of the multiple and diverse, that the Christian identity is being tested. For this reason Christians embody the *tension* that is produced by being claimed by eternity and time, transcendence and history, God and creatures. No easy synthesis is allowed here, since the issue of the identity conferred by this divine claim in time, is a recurrent event in all contexts and at all times. Therefore the Christian community is constantly prompted to ask, how the identity that it celebrates through the symbol of *koinonia*, relates to the present social asymmetries in the world. The claims of those who are violated in their humanity must be seen as vital epiphanic occurrences in and through which the Christian community recreates its own identity as followers of the crucified.

The catholic dimension

Indeed the church’s communion entails something beyond a liberal tolerance of the other, a multicultural parade of our exaggerated idiosyncracies; it entails a commitment towards a *convergence*, a new manner of conceiving and living which we presently are in view of the wholeness promised.¹⁴ For this reason, seeing ourselves within the encompassing boundaries signified by Christ, a new identity marker emerges: that of our “catholic personality.”¹⁵

This personality does not arise mainly from the cultivation of our several and diverse particularities, but from a practice of *communio* that liberates our identity (both Christian and social) to the *needs* and *tribulations* of others. Christian identity, therefore, is a dynamic process constantly being recreated by the promise of a unified humanity as well as by the demands of those whose humanity is severely threatened.

The freedom that allows us to establish a distance, a *diastasis* to the social and group identities that we carry in the world, does not mean that these are simply dismissed—or that Christians do not challenge the social dynamics where identities are forged. Therefore, if we first of all mentioned the church's "indirect" contribution to society this was not done with the aim of dismissing its *direct* impact on the way in which society is constructed through the positive and negative achievements of different groups' identities. Furthermore, the different social groups to which we belong must indeed become "instruments" for the practical goals that arise out of our Christian identity. At this point our question is how this sacramental identity affects a social reality guided by a different set of rules and goals, by a different grammar constructed by competing forces, groups and social formations?

If our Lutheran tradition is aware of anything then it is that the sacramental nature of the church, its transparency which overcomes the distances signified by boundaries can be neither imposed nor simply replace a still sinful and finite world. Under the present circumstances life can flourish only if it is contained within the so-called "orders" or "mandates" (family, state, church, where gender, work, friendship and ethnicity occur) that constitute indispensable places where recognition, solidarity and protection are exercised to varying degrees and according to different goals. They create a sort of ecosystem where an (incipiently) meaningful existence and identity are given and constructed. As such a temporary yet divinely mandated command to conform is recognized for the sake of life, neighbor and world.

The question of identity

Yet, the fact that the Christian community does not replace society and its configurations of identity does not mean that the Christian identity interacts positively with all types of configurations of identity. A critical "depositivization" of these identities occurs because of the catholicity that Christians embody. While recognizing their relative claims, these identities are set within a larger frame where the different social places that constitute their characters are now seen as a realm of *ethical decisions*, of parabolic and temporal conformation in view of the future God promises in Christ. In this vein, belonging to a Christian communion means to live under a grammar which locates us anew in the world ... with a *disturbed* identity! Disturbed because we cannot bear our former identifications with the same self-righteousness as before and, moreover, many of the social settings that have structured different aspects of our identity may be in open conflict with the identity that we embody as part of the Christian communion. *Metanoia* and identity are, according to Christian grammar, inextricably bound together.

The profile of our catholic personality, the freedom with which we respond to the Spirit's call, can certainly not be imposed on society. Yet the Christian ethos that is derived from the practice of *communio* is imprinted on every decision and action carried out in the social places that Christians, as social agents, share with other social groups. Under all circumstances, a "nicely calculated less and more of good and evil" (Niebuhr) will always be part of our realism in social and political life. But in this balance the vision of the good against which we reach our compromises is crucial. Our practice of *communio* carries beyond the confines of Christianity a vision derived from our catholicity, namely a sense of a common future inextricably bound to the "rightness" of the relationships linking different groups and identities. While we do not expect the realization of a secular *communio*, we do advocate all that may contribute to the consolidation of a "geoculture"¹⁶ able to mediate claims and grievances in the common quest for a just and peaceful "geosociety".

Notes

1. Throughout the paper no distinction has been made between the terms *communio*, *koinonia* or communion. It is clear that its primary referent is not the sacramental practice in the narrow sense (Holy Supper), but the communion/community between God and human beings that is lived as church.
2. Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity," in John Rajchman (ed.), *The Identity in Question*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995, p. 94.
3. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Cambridge, MA, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989, p. 87. Also Viviane Forrester, *El horror económico*, Buenos Aires, FCE, 1997; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, New York, Vintage Books, 1996.
4. Not to mention the religious referent, deeply questioned and curtailed in the last two centuries in the West and its cultural sphere of influence.
5. See Cornel West, "A Matter of Life and Death," in Rajchman, *The Identity* (note 2), pp. 15ff.
6. See for example, "Toward a Lutheran Understanding of Communion," in Heinrich Holze (ed.), *The Church as Communion*, Geneva, LWF Documentation No. 42, pp. 13ff.
7. The old Christian soteriological axiom, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, is by no means implied hereby. Rather, we are speaking of the sacramental dimension of the church in relation to the promise of salvation to the world, and which temporally manifests itself in that which we call church.
8. Eric Hobsbawm, one of the most prominent historians of the century, is not very optimistic in his prognosis for the next century. He argues that the forces generated by the techno-scientific economy are now great enough to destroy the environment and to produce and irreversible erosion of the very foundations of the capitalist economy resulting in a generalized anarchic situation (*The Age of*

The question of identity

Extremes (note 3), p. 584). Paul Kennedy's warnings are no less dramatic, see *Preparing for the Twentieth-First Century*, New York, Random House, 1993.

9. Not to mention that many times—but by no means always—the very confessional and ecclesial distinctions and divisions reflect class, regional or national identities that see themselves reflected in particular religious experiences.
10. Symbolically here does not imply allegoric, emblematic, figuratively or metaphoric. Rather, it points to a concrete, yet limited action whose significance stems from a wholeness that is intuitively grasped and therefore still awaited.
11. See “Toward a Lutheran Understanding” (note 6).
12. We have in mind Luther's conception of the Spirit as creator. As Prenter has shown, Luther conceived of the Holy Spirit as God's real presence in the creature's sphere. More specifically, the spirit of God as it bows down to seek the creature in order to take it through Christ to the Father (Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, 1953, pp. 288ff.). Luther in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the *Large Catechism* characterizes the Holy Spirit as the one effecting our sanctification through the following: the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. (Th Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, 1959, p. 415.)
13. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1983, pp. 35ff; Paul Tillich, *La Era Protestante*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 1965, p. 309; Philip Hefner, “The Church,” in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (eds.), *Christian Dogmatics*, II, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984, pp. 245ff.
14. The notion of convergence is borrowed from Gregory Baum. Dealing with the problem of multiculturalism (mostly in North America), he points out that the idea of convergence between different cultures and identities discards a forceful assimilation to the stronger implying instead a gradual transformation of both the receiving as well as the contributing cultures. Analogically this can also be applied to the

Communion, Community, Society

Christian community understood as a cultural complex which constantly receives within the contribution of different groups and cultures; it transforms them as well as is transformed by them. See Gregory Baum, "Inculturación y multiculturalismo: Dos temas problemáticos," in *Concilium* 1, 1989, pp. 132-140.

15. On the topic of "catholic personality" see Miroslav Volf, "A Vision of Embrace: Theological Perspectives on Cultural Identity and Conflict," *The Ecumenical Review* 47:2, April 1995, p. 199.
16. See Xabier Gorostiaga, "Entre la crisis neoliberal y la emergencia de la globalización desde abajo" [Between the neoliberal crisis and the emergence of a globalization from below], *Nuevo Mundo* 50, 1995, p. 107.