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The Making of Differences: Theological Discourse on the Unity of the Church

Guillermo Hansen

We are one, but we are not the same;
We get to carry each other,
carry each other; One...
U2, "One"

In his groundbreaking work, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur provides us with an entry point for our reflections on the themes of unity, church and theology. While Ricoeur does not refer to the unity of the church as such but to the reality of symbols and myth, he makes two affirmations that carry a lot of weight for our topic. First, symbols open up and disclose a dimension of experience that otherwise would remain hidden and closed, not existent. The unveiling and opening up of something that was not there before is the primary effect of the symbol—it participates in the power of the signified. Secondly, myth making—an articulation of symbols within a narrative structure—is always an antidote to distress, to the unhappy consciousness of a “lost” wholeness. If plenitude were to be experienced, it would be everywhere in space and time—no myth would be necessary. Since it is not, themes such as unity, wholeness and reconciliation are realities to be spoken of and acted out, precisely because they are not a given.¹ Unity—with the deity, with humankind, with nature or within a body such as the church—thus refers to a mythical consciousness that seeks to symbolize a completion and fulfillment because of distress and a constitutive lack of actual lived experience. It is as though behind any symbol, behind any myth in this case, the symbol of unity and the myth of the *ecumene*, lay a longing for and the imprint of sheer incompleteness.

In this paper, I shall attempt to reflect on the way in which theology, the practice of theology, brings to the fore a hidden dimension of the unity of the church, that is, its tendency to fall into a “solid” and “totalizing” disciplinary “technology.” In faithfulness to its subject matter, theology may find itself at odds with practices of normalization and governability of minds and bodies in the name of an ideal,

¹ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 167–9.

claimed to be realized by the church. In a certain sense, this may seem anomalous: is not theology a function, a dimension of a total body? Can it be at odds with itself? Are we not to lift up the discourse on oneness, unity, universality and catholicity? Certainly, but we are supposed to do so on the grounds of a freedom bestowed by the gospel and a new freedom signified by the collapse of Christendom and what this disintegration has spawned: Eurocentrism, colonialism and the totalizing myth of modernity. The moment churches fall into the temptation of nostalgia, heritage sites, refuge or simply reaction,² theology needs to speak about a lack, a void, the cracks, in order to recapture the fluidity and networking aspect present from the inception of the church. It is precisely in these "lacks" and "ruptures" that theology sees a gift and not a curse, thus giving expression to a charismatic event in the midst of an eschatological rupture. I contend that the present global "disorder," the present demotic "swarming" of multitudes, provides an opportunity for reimagining new practices of unity and communication that result from the dislocation of our bodies and minds. It is as though the lack of strong social articulation, the slackening of "group and grid," loosens body and mind "control," encouraging thus new forms of relating and therefore of being.³

Before addressing some of the problems involved in the issue of the church's oneness and its unity, I shall lay out my basic theological premises for approaching this theme. I do so not for the sake of a deductive approach, but rather to clarify the dimensions that I will take into account as I approach the theme of unity and the church. I regard the following as the basic theological traits: (a) a biblical primary symbol as this emerges to unveil a new existence and practice in the face of veiled and opaque practices—Paul's metaphor of the body in 1 Corinthians 12; (b) a secondary symbol through which the church understood itself to be lodged—the Trinitarian understanding of being as a communicative relationship, as seen in Athanasius and the Cappadocians; (c) and finally, the regulative principle of law and promise as guiding a discursive practice that supports different levels of decentering and centering that Christian tradition identifies as the breakthrough of the *eschaton*—Luther's understanding of law and gospel. These instances should not be seen as concentric circles but overlapping dimensions. Therefore, I will not assume an essentialist view of unity, as if it were something given and a good to be preserved. Rather, I see unity as an eschatological event, an outbreak that sets in motion a dynamic of decentering and centering that has profound implications on the way in which we conceive and practice the church's alleged unity.

² Cf. Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Paternoster Press, 2002), 22–30.

³ Cf. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 89.

In doing so, I follow up on one of the problems discussed at the 2009 global theological conference “Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today,” (Augsburg, Germany), that relates to the tension present in the notion of Lutheran theology and practices as “bounded openness”—bound by a code, open to the new postcolonial, post-patriarchal and global horizons. What binds? What opens? At the heart of this tension lies the fact that for the church to be church, it must be rule bound, and yet open and fluid; centered (in Christ) and yet decentered (by the Spirit). We can also consider different sets of categories such as the tension between hegemonic oneness and multiplicity, between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, between colonial totalizing thought and postcolonial cacophony, between the one and plurality, between being and becoming, between regularity and irregularity, between rules and formulations, between coherence and dissension or between universalism and particularism. As we shall see, the history of Christian discourse on unity has always echoed—critically or in acquiescence—larger social, philosophical and political concerns.

Theology, of course, situates itself in the order of discourse. By the word discourse, I mean, in the first place, the obvious medium for conveying theological content and meaning through verbal performance. Discourse, as a practice, is what I have called elsewhere the software of the church.⁴ Lutheranism, for example, is the discrete religious software of the church’s “mind.” It is a sign system, a culture with an historically transmitted pattern of meanings encoded in symbols and embodied in social organisms—the (Lutheran) churches. Since it brings forth a world through its discursive (and non-discursive) practices, its resilience is shown through the engaging of variables that bodies encoded by this “mind” have to confront. It is my conviction that the Lutheran “code” is versatile enough to connect the scriptural narrative with the narratives of our own lives, forging a “culture” that can only stay alive insofar as new and diverse “environments” are integrated within the web of belief that forms and builds a tradition. Thus, the main question that arises here is how the theological mind (*noûn Christou*) “ensouls” the body (church), and how this body in turn “hypostatizes” the mind as it confronts an ever-changing scenario.

But, secondly, as an order of discourse, theology also engages in a practice that is governed by a linguistic structure or set of rules that seeks to “order” and “unify” the world, to construct “universal unities” that may lead to very different results. At best, it may lead to what Foucault calls a “single system of differ-

⁴ See Guillermo Hansen, “Resistance, Adaptation or Challenge: The Versatility of the Lutheran Code,” in Karen Bloomquist (ed.), *Transformative Theological Perspectives* (Minneapolis/Geneva: Lutheran University Press/The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), 26.

ences."⁵ At worst, to a homogenous space constructed on the basis of practices of normalization, thus muffling the regime of discontinuities, thresholds, ruptures, breaks and transformations that constantly challenge epistemological structures and social formations.⁶ While certainly Foucault's program is non-metaphysical, non-transcendent and non-theological and, therefore, inassimilable into a full theological view, it does raise the question as to how theology purports to be a discourse of unity and, furthermore, how it locates its "object" (God) within a narrative that may lead to practices of normalization or emancipation. It provides us with an hermeneutics of suspicion that questions the unitary discourses on transcendence in the name of this very transcendence. Or, rather, to point out that transcendence happens when a purported "unity" is unveiled and unmasked for what it is: an invented order, hiding instead of revealing.

Therefore, theological discourse—and therefore the unity of the church—will be largely determined by two phenomena: the extent to which theology is aware of ideological prejudices of language and, more importantly, the mode of (discursive) practice that is generated by and mirrored in the "object" of its discourse, God.

While the church's proclamation and practice may be said to represent a form of immaterial labor⁷—symbolic, relational, affective—which produces, catalyzes or manipulates feelings of well-being, satisfaction, excitement, redemption and communion for instance, theology may be said to be a discourse on the language (mind) of the church, confronting this church with its own unrealized and receding horizon, the Triune God. Speech systems transform the experience of the speakers but, at the same time, language is not an autonomous cultural agent, since its patterns are always related to a structure of social relations and psychological drives.⁸ The social relations constituting the body called church frequently mirror the way in which our (individual) bodies are shaped by cultural norms, political forces and economic asymmetries, thus stifling the revolutionary "technology of the self" embodied by and through the church.⁹ Therefore, theology,

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1993), 205.

⁶ Here I have in mind the efforts of the Vatican during the 1980s to discipline the Latin American church through its most prominent theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez and Jon Sobrino.

⁷ Cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 108.

⁸ See Douglas, op. cit. (note 3), 22.

⁹ Cf. Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (eds), *The Essential Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 146. Foucault understands these "technologies" as "specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves." Therefore, "technologies of the self...permit

as a peculiar “technology of sign systems” embedded within a larger network of a “technology of the self” (church), is what gives expression to the critical mind of a body always in (con)tension with the “technologies of production” (economy) and “technologies of power” (politics) that are the two main forces contending in the location or dislocation of minds and bodies.

I would like to approach the theme of the church as an embodiment of a particular technology of the self through a primary biblical symbol, namely Paul’s image of the body of Christ. I shall explore this trope, image, metaphor, symbol, from perspectives derived from critical theory, postmodern thought and epistemology, focusing on the theme of unity not merely set against the background of divisions and differences (as it is expounded in 1 Cor 12 and 13), but how this unity emerges at the crossroads of a particular “spiritual” technology in its interface with other technologies that encode the bodies and the self in different ways. Thus, the body (of Christ) does not appear as a homogeneous space, or even an hierarchical system of differences, but as a network of differences that makes a difference for its members, for the understanding of self and for the world.

The one and the multiple

As we know, organicist metaphors have been central in the ecumenical quest for unity.¹⁰ Throughout the history of Christianity, the trope of the body (of Christ), as seen in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians for example, has grounded powerful ecclesiological models and rationales. Nonetheless, the metaphor of the body as a linguistic trope is not Paul’s invention, but a resource found in classical antiquity as philosophers, poets and sages sought to grapple with the tension between unity and diversity of political and civil communities. In ancient literature, “body” was the most common allegory for unity—i.e., the fable of Menenius Agrippa (1 BCE), echoed by Xenophon, Cicero and Livy, perhaps the best-known example, surely known to Paul himself.¹¹

individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” I employ Foucault’s definition as a formal frame of reference, not as a material description of the “Christian” technology of the self as such—to which he devotes a lengthy consideration.

¹⁰ See, for example, Lutheran–Roman Catholic Study Commission, *Church and Justification: Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of Justification* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1994), 38–41.

¹¹ See James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul, the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 550. Also Arland Hultgren, “The Church as the Body of Christ: Engaging an Image in the New Testament,” in *Word & World* 22/2 (Spring 2002), 126.

I leave aside the unique spin Paul gave to this image that sets it apart from Greco-Roman corporate expressions (the body of Christ, into which we are incorporated through baptism and the sharing of the Eucharist; a defiance of the principle of territoriality signified by the *polis*), focusing instead on how the image of the body has been a constant reference for political metaphors in the West dealing with unity and diversity.

This shift is important for observing how it has influenced theological speech. First, as mentioned, theological language is never an autonomous cultural agent, since its patterns are always related to a structure of social relations. This is not only so because the church forms a new pattern of social relations, but also because speech maintains a solidarity which is already imbued with certain experiences of order and legitimacy. Second, turning more closely to the particular metaphorical image of the body, the Pauline image stands in the adjacencies of two basic poles mirroring each other: the social or corporate body, and the physical and individual bodies. As the British anthropologist Mary Douglas has demonstrated, the social body constrains the way in which the physical body is perceived; in turn, the physical experience of the body sustains a particular view of society. "There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other."¹² Strong social control demands strong bodily control—the type of movements, care, grooming, feeding, life span, pains it can stand, etc. And, vice versa, the weaker the social constrains (due to marginalization, gender, ethnicity, labor, etc.), the more slacking and bodily dissociation is approved. I shall return to this remarkable hypothesis, which in part sheds light on the situation in Corinth, where Paul referred to another type of body. The observation that the Pauline trope inserts itself between these two realities suffices; its metaphor is a novel discursive practice playing with the multiple and the one that deeply influences the image of the social body as well as the individual one.

Yet, inertia is one of the characteristics of human thinking and social configurations. It is interesting to observe how the metaphor of the body—once a metaphor for republicanism and assembly—was transformed into the legitimizing icon for an absolute if not totalitarian conception and thus serving a new order of discourse for disciplining bodies. Suffice it to remember the cover of Thomas Hobbes's first edition of the *Leviathan* (1651), showing the king's body towering over the earth, assimilating in his torso and limbs hundreds of small bodies, thus giving expression to the ruler as the embodiment of unity and sovereignty.¹³ In

¹² Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 3), 69.

¹³ Cf. Hardt & Negri, *op. cit.* (note 7), 330.

fact, this type of metaphor has largely come out of a more fundamental philosophical premise, namely Plato's distinction of the one and the many, which served to articulate other fundamental distinctions: order vs chaos, universality vs particularity. As the body is the ordering of "chaotic flesh," and the mind is the ruler and sovereign of the body, so the "one" understood in opposition to difference and multiplicity emerges as a powerful motif for directing the affairs of the world—whether religious, political, or familial. The bringing forth of oneness and unity, at least in the West, was thus not only launched as an ideal for society at large, but became "embodied" in the political realm through the figure of emperor, king, state, nation, people, class or party. And, as is well known from the ecclesiastical history grafted to the bowels of the Roman Empire, this model also emerged as a leading expression of Roman ecclesiology. Whether political or ecclesiastical, the multiple is always seen in opposition to the one.

This interplay between the one and the multiple, between being and becoming, has presented in classical and political philosophy the aporia of an impossible mediation between the universal and the particular—a fact churches are continually grappling with not only ecumenically but also confessionally and denominationally. As the political philosopher Ernesto Laclau argues,¹⁴ there have been two models for conceiving the relation between the universal and the particular within Western tradition. In classical philosophy, two things were always asserted: (a) the existence of an impermeable dividing line between the universal and the particular, an antagonistic and agonistic opposition; and (b) the universal can be grasped by reason, while the particularities defy the premise of universal reason. In this case, the particular is regarded as somehow "corrupting" the universal—as we can see in much of the ecumenical ideology of the World Council of Churches (WCC) before the 1990s, not to mention Roman Catholic ecclesiology.¹⁵ Either the particular realizes in itself (that is, elevates itself to) the universal—thus negating itself as particular—or it negates the universal by asserting its particularism—an impossible event since the very definition of particularities suppose the existence of a "universal" not yet attained. Classical philosophy did not contain within itself a sufficiently differentiated rationale to grasp a more complex and less antagonistic relationship between both.

According to Laclau, another possibility when thinking about the relation between universality and particularity is the motif of incarnation. Here lies the absurd and irrational claim that a body, in itself opaque and ordinary, becomes

¹⁴ See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 22ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Vitor Westhelle, *The Church Event: Call and Challenge of the Church Protestant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 14ff.; here 28.

the medium for a universal, God—a connection that deifies reason altogether, for by postulating a finite body as medium of the universal, it automatically cancels particularity as well as universality. What interests Laclau is not so much Christianity as such, but what the incarnational model has spawned in the history of the West, namely, those movements and trends that after the Enlightenment claimed to be privileged agents in history and embodying a transcendental universality: nation, culture, race, class or party. Colonial Eurocentric thought is thus the natural corollary or merger of both the classical and the incarnational models.

Is Laclau's understanding of the incarnational model correct? I would posit that it is to the extent that from Augustine onwards this has been the recurring understanding of the church, a sort of continuing incarnation of the universal. Nonetheless, Laclau errs when he takes the historical and institutional embodiment of this church as the logical outcome of an agent (Jesus), whose particular body was the expression of a universality that is not only transcendent, but encrypted according to the logic of Greek metaphysical thinking. I shall return to this point later, as I will take up the gauntlet thrown down by Laclau: humanity's impossibility to realize the universal, yet its need for a universal horizon that allows for a certain communication between disparate bodies. In a sense, Laclau's own alternative to the problem of oneness and plurality, universality and particularity, was already dealt with in Paul's theology.

For the time being, Laclau's notion of humanity's receding horizon helps me to understand that discursive regimes are mounted on a previous reality, an economy of instincts, which may lead to disparate outcomes. When this economy acquires a social dimension, we face the problem of the tension between particularity and universality, as outlined by Laclau. His lasting observation is that the universal horizon—what we can term oneness—is always an intrinsic part of a particular identity as far as the particular is penetrated by a constitutive lack. This universal emerges not as some principle underlying and explaining the particular, but as an incomplete horizon suturing dislocated particular identities.¹⁶ In other words, the tension between particularity and universality is always receding, can never be (historically) solved. That is why the universal and all its cognates (oneness, unity, etc.) are symbols for a missing fullness and do not have any empirical content of their own.

This raises two sets of distinct yet related questions: what is the point of theology as a verbal performance, and what is the incomplete horizon that sutures the dislocated particular identity/particularity that we call church? A signifying system, because it is a system (a church, a tradition, a confession), inherently

¹⁶ Laclau, *op. cit.* (note 14), 28.

speaks about boundaries, about limits. Yet, at the same time, the acknowledgement of these boundaries presents us with a puzzle, the ghost of what lies beyond these boundaries. Herein lies the paradox: when we talk about the limits of a signifying system, it is clear that these limits cannot be signified per se, but show themselves as the interruption or breakdown of the process of signification itself.¹⁷ Boundaries give identity, a sense of unity, yet this identity always contains a crisis, a deficit, the threatening difference that lurks at the margins. Only an eschatological identity can digest difference interrupting into identity.¹⁸

The body of Christ

Theology is an integral moment of the church event. Its symbols catalyze an array of instinctual phenomena, unconscious and transcending, which leads to a certain conformation of psyche and (social) body. Therefore, the reality of unity is always mediated by a discourse, pitched to one or a series of symbols and metaphors. Yet, here is where the main question arises: Does theology simply baptize norms, habits and metaphors already found in society and culture, or does it embody a crisis of those by implanting another code or horizon as a new field, catalyzing a power that comes from beyond its margins? Is this beyond seen as a threat, or as a promise, a gift, grace?

Here we turn to Paul's motif of the body, which is of particular interest since it is interjected between two previous conceptions of body—the social and the individual—which sustain themselves in a mirroring effect. What are the characteristics of this body? In his trailblazing analysis of Pauline theology, John T. Robinson puts an interesting spin on our common organizational and hierarchical assumptions regarding the church which, we must remember, already has a previous history in classical antiquity as well as in Israel as people or assembly. Paul shifts the corporate image of the Christian community from that of the nation state (Israel) and the body politic (classical political philosophy), that is, from traditional boundary markers, to one in which the members are drawn from a multiplicity of backgrounds, united by a common allegiance (incorporation, "adoption") to Christ. The unity in this multiplicity is signified by the notion of sharing Christ's mind (*nous*).¹⁹ What is important here is that members do not create the body by this allegiance, but rather that they are the expression of Christ's own body insofar

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ Cf. Westhelle, *op. cit.* (note 15), 116.

¹⁹ See Dunn, *op. cit.* (note 11), 551.

that they are ensouled by Christ's mind. Here is where Paul's genius comes to the fore: Paul advances a notion of body that reverses the classical ways of approaching unity and multiplicity. In a way, it constitutes a reversal of the principle familiar in Old Testament literature, where the remnant, or the one, represents the many. It is as though Paul sees in the old covenant a vicarious minority, gradually reduced by sin, embodying God's purposes and will for the whole world. This train of thought can be pursued in Romans, where the one (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Elijah, Isaiah, see Rom 4:9 and 11; other Old Testament figures are the Servant of Yahweh, Son of Man, etc.) is chosen on behalf of the many, a representation of the plurality. Yet, in Paul's account, Abraham's seed is reduced to one man, Jesus, who died for all, and now lives as a network of charismata, the church. Here this process is finally inverted. As Robinson asserts,

The principle of exclusion has been set in reverse. Henceforward, it is not the one who represents the many, like the Servant of Jahveh (Isa 42:1) or the Son of Man (standing for the whole "people of the saints of the most High," Dan 7:13–27). Rather, *it is the many who represent the one*....The many, to whom no limit can be put either of race, class or sex (Gal 3:28), now constitutes the one. Abraham's seed, the Christ, is still one, as the promise required...but it is a unity which is inclusive rather than exclusive, representative not simply vicarious.²⁰

For Paul, Christology is what encrypts ecclesiology, a new understanding of unity signified by a common mind as well as a diaconal engagement with each other as bodies. In other words, Paul's notion of the body implies a "software" (mind) as well as a "hardware" (body) whose unity is love. There are many ways in which the apostle conceives of this interplay between the many and the one, all pointing to a mystical, radical and novel recreation of identities, a technology of the self (being "in" Christ and Christ in us, possessing Christ's mind, growing and grafted into Christ, being with Christ, putting on Christ, Christ being formed within us, etc.). It can be said that Paul is referring to what Carl Gustav Jung termed the dynamic of individuation, the emergence of the archetype of the self as the fullness of human identity (New Adam). Yet, this individuation is a corporate one, of solidarity, of interdependency. So, here we are dealing with a confession, a new structure of the mind as well as the underside of this confession, namely a multiplicity of charismata, whose undergirding texture is love, intertwining bodies as a body (1 Cor 13).

²⁰ John T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1952), 61. Author's own emphasis.

This is why the most striking feature of Paul's image is the fact that it is a charismatic one, a confession of a pluralized body united by mind and service—more than a homogenized body headed by the One. The unity of the body is not external, but internal and enacted in and through multiple differentiations (*charismata*) by the Spirit, as well as by a common mind, Christ's (1 Cor 1:10; 2:16—*noîn kurton/Christoi*). What makes of this multiplicity a realized unity (or a unity in becoming) is love, which not only presupposes but also enacts differences. Thus, Paul does not advocate a sort of Cartesian model of the mind, autonomous from and capable of ruling over the body; rather mind and body are attributes of the same hypostasis (Christ) and they interact equally and constantly in the production of reason, imagination, desire, emotions, feelings and effects. We cannot speak of a unitary "agent" or "subject" any more, but of a multitude, a "swarm" that acts in concert, yet differently, outlining a pattern whose coherence is love.²¹

When dealing with the reality of a body that articulates itself charismatically, the first accent, of course, rests in the event or act of gracious giving—by Christ, by the Spirit. Charisma stands here for a concrete "materialization" of God's *charis*, a gracious giving. It is thus a divine, not a natural event. Precisely because it is divine it is multiple, differentiated, democratized. The multiplicity and variety of gifts are thus a witness to God's richness and *charis*—as seen in the gifts mediated by speech and praxis in Romans 12:3–8 (prophecy, teaching, exhortation, service, benevolence, leadership and acts of mercy), or in 1 Corinthians 12:8–11 (wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation). There is another dimension to the reality of the diversification of *charismata* that Paul points out, especially in his letter to the Corinthians. While *charismata* are to be used for the edification of the community, of the body, another remarkable emphasis is that none is to be considered inferior (vv. 14–20), or denigrated (vv. 21–26).²² As indicated by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek,²³ an important dimension of this rhetorical strategy is the subversion of social hierarchy in Christ's body. Paul states:

On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater

²¹ Cf. Hardt & Negri, *op. cit.* (note 7), 337. As shown also by the life sciences, especially biology and neurobiology, the human body itself is a swarm, a multitude organized. For example, decisions are not made by a "center" (mind, will, etc.) but by the configuration of the entire neural network in communication with the body and what lies beyond it.

²² See Hultgren, *op. cit.* (note 11), 130.

²³ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is Christianity Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 116.

respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another (1 Cor 12:22–25).

Charismata thus point simultaneously to a gift that comes from beyond (fullness) and a fragmentary realization through persons (incompleteness) highlighting a constitutive individual lack, a lack that becomes the occasion for a new realization of the self as communion—where weaknesses are turned into strengths and vice-versa. What Paul expounds here is not just a novel reinterpretation of an ancient trope (body) applied now to the church, but a total recasting of what it means to be human. It is as though through the fragility and brittleness of persons sized by a charisma another dimension transpires and becomes visible: our vulnerable interdependence. Our weakness, our lack, is the occasion for the fullness and richness found in God. What is never complete in ourselves is given to us through a participation in communion with others in Christ. To be more precise, in the radical love that connects us and imports difference into identity.

Thus, Paul's notion of body, charismata and weaknesses in fact mirrors his understanding of the crucified Christ. The unity of this body is deeply intertwined with a reversal of a royal metaphor, transmitted through the antique symbol of the body, recasting classic conceptions of hierarchy and virtues. It is in fact a new technology of the self—the self that Christ is—which is realized through the diversity of charismata and the service to one another through a new network, the body, while the other ceases to be an object, particularly, an object of contempt and derision. We become the "place" for actualizing our creatural being, as *imago Dei*. Here, difference is not division, but the provision for unity. Otherness is not a threat to unity, but a condition for it.²⁴ What happens in me, in my consciousness (faith), also happens bodily between me and someone else (love). What happens there is Christ himself. But because that which is manifested is the body of a crucified Lord, it erodes our notions of potencies by proclaiming that the ultimate mystery of love is to remain incomplete, always dis-located from our natural boundaries: only an imperfect being is truly capable of receiving love and to love. As Luther states in his Heidelberg Disputation, "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it... Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive."²⁵

²⁴ Cf. John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006), 5.

²⁵ Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," theological thesis number 28, in Timothy Lull (ed.), *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 60. See also Zizioulas, *ibid.*, 304.

In patristic times, this understanding of unity was further elaborated through a new discursive strategy, a “mutation” of classical monotheistic principle as well as Hellenistic philosophical monism and Gnostic redemptive myths: the Trinity. While the primary concern was obviously the reality of God and salvation, the doctrine of the Trinity was a metonymy for the larger problem of unity and diversity, of being and becoming, the one and the multiple. The doctrine of the Trinity, as John Zizioulas argues, is rooted in the ecclesial experience, an experience of personal communion mediated by the sacraments—and the Word, we may add.²⁶ Athanasius, and especially the Cappadocians—the key interpreters of Nicaean doxology—crushed the notion of being and the one inherited from Hellenistic patterns of thought and the Roman imperial political model. This revolution occurred through the identification of personhood (relatedness) and hypostatic being, namely, that the reciprocal and mutual relationships of the persons are constitutive of God’s being. This being, therefore, is not a previous substance to which later some accidents are added, such as personhood. Rather, God’s *ousia*—and therefore oneness—becomes a predicate of God’s hypostatic relations. This is contrary to the view as found in Augustine, where *ousia* is seen as the *arché* and causal principle of deity. To be God is to be the *eschatos*, sheer unbound- edness, a future that is inexhaustible.²⁷ The unity and oneness of this God, thus, is an inviting and inclusive unity, open to human beings and the world. And this openness, this unity, is what Scripture refers to as love.²⁸

Trinitarian speech thus signifies the crisis of homogenizing and totalitarian discourses, for the very basis of its intelligibility lies in its underscoring asymmetry over symmetry, interdependence over independence, mutuality and reciprocity over linear emanation. Furthermore, it situates the ecclesial reality within the larger horizon of God’s Triune unity, the final consummation and fulfillment of all creation. The church as Christ’s body thus conforms to a network of charismata in fluid motion, in circulation, constituting self, and inaugurating a new economy of exchanges marked by a novel transactional quality, love. Yet this love is not just an attribute that has been substantially communicated to the church. Actually, this love is also what “hypostasizes” the very being of God. The body of Christ means that this Christ subsists and possesses a mode of existence constituted

²⁶ See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in the Personhood of the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 16.

²⁷ Cfr. Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 164f.

²⁸ See Juergen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 87.

as being in the manner in which God also subsists as being: as a relationship of communion. In like manner, all that the Spirit touches is transformed into a relational being; this is why Christ's body is the relation between differences par excellence: it affirms and realizes otherness.

In sum, Paul's image of the body of Christ signifies a rupture and breakdown of the process of traditional religious and political significations. His charismatic conception denotes a network of differences that always intersect the other, especially the weak and debased, as the instance that creates an existential, political and therefore ontological jolt. The other is not a substance, a nature, but a mode of existence of the Spirit that conceals a unity as well as unveiling a lack, a missing fulfillment. The other appears as a revelation of the truth by the fact of his or her otherness as well as the place for the realization of being, communion. And it is precisely through communion that an individual becomes a person realizing their hypostatic being:²⁹ one "supports" one's identity and particularity not through a sort of antagonistic logic of equivalences ("Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" 1 Cor 12:4–6), nor by inducting the other within a system that only seeks to cancel the differences by "ordering" them hierarchically ("But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another," Cor 12:24b–25). Paul, it seems to me, would hardly agree with concepts of the "unicity" of the church guaranteed by an apostolic and hierarchical succession as portrayed in the Vatican's document *Dominus Iesus*.³⁰ That would be the worst example of gospel "plus."³¹

Thus, the trope of the body necessarily includes what Foucault referred to as the ruptures, differences and thresholds that always challenge any order-

²⁹ See Zizioulas, *op. cit.* (note 26), 106.

³⁰ See *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (2000), especially section IV, "Unicity and Unity of the Church": "The Catholic faithful are required to profess that there is an historical continuity—rooted in the apostolic succession—between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church: This is the single Church of Christ... which our Saviour, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter's pastoral care (cf. *Jn* 21:17), commissioning him and the other Apostles to extend and rule her (cf. *Mt* 28:18ff.), erected for all ages as 'the pillar and mainstay of the truth' (1 *Tim* 3:15). This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in [*subsistit in*] the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him." At www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_eon_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html, accessed 31 May 2010.

³¹ An apt term coined by Robert Bertram, in Michael Hoy (ed.), *A Time for Confessing* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 41.

ing of dispersed elements, any “unity talk” that in the name of universality obliterates particularity. The other always faces me as an other, as a mystery, which becomes the possibility of communion and personhood when this other appears neither as a threat nor as an occasion for my self-affirmation, but as a receding horizon of being—in Christ. It is as though Paul went beyond the (postmodern) logic of absolute difference (“All these [charismata] are activated by one and the same Spirit” 1 Cor 12:11) as well as the (classical and modern) notion of a homogeneous space. He does not need them, for in the end the Spirit itself signifies the ultimate depth of all riches, of all charismata, that is inexhaustible. Bearing witness to the Father’s mercy and coming reign, Jesus embodies a new space: the space of the Spirit. His body, his presence, becomes the locus for a new narrative that is not only about God, but also about how God crosses over into the bodies and minds of those who never expected to be considered “some-bodies.” To draw frontiers is an act of disenfranchising power; to trespass them is an act of divine imagination and love.

This is why Paul’s articulation of the body of Christ stands between the mirroring effects of the social and individual body.³² It actually interrupts the flow between both, creating a crisis or an apocalypse that necessarily has social and political effects. For Paul’s epochal contribution is to recast Christianity as a new technology of the self, the self that is Christ, consisting in a new conception of interdependence as this is played out in the reality we call church. It radically challenges other technologies that, as Foucault indicated, permit individuals to affect by their own means, or with the help of others, certain operations on their own bodies and souls—as in classic Hellenism and the mystery and Gnostic religions. Paul has interjected here a new “software,” the mind of Christ, that through the Spirit weaves a new tapestry of human flesh: this tapestry is now a body, and its inner consistency is (God’s) love. Christ, the mind or center, is not located at any spatial center, for it is also the circumference, the liminal and what lies beyond. But if what happens between me and someone else is the Spirit grafting us into a body through the other, this happening also alters the way in which the otherness of the social body as well as my individual physical body are represented. This body, therefore, is itself a multitude organized on the plane of immanence, standing between sovereignty (of the political body) and anarchy (of individual bodies). It constitutes a third bodily reality taking its own “place” in the world.³³

³² Douglas, *op. cit.* (note 3).

³³ Cf. Westhelle’s notion of the church as a third “hybrid” space, standing between locale and place. *Op. cit.* (note 15), 143.

Outcomes for the ecumenical being of the church

So we reach the last question: how is unity realized? Is there a particular Lutheran witness in this regard? One way to answer these questions would be to consider the model of "unity in plurality" as expounded, for example, by Oscar Cullmann³⁴—not far from other notions such "unity through diversity" and "reconciled diversity" as employed in many Lutheran circles. I am, however, not convinced that confessional families as such represent different charismata that other churches do not possess. Churches and confessions, certainly, constitute a networking of charismata, but we cannot point the finger at precisely which charisma is embodied in one or the other tradition. Yet these networks are always regulated by codes that allow certain discursive practices to circulate and therefore to orient the flow of charismata. Because a network also constitutes a system it implicitly proclaims that something else lies beyond itself: other networks of differences which, in turn, may appear as a threat or as a vocative event.

With this in mind, we can point to a theological tradition or, rather, a strategy of speech that is peculiar to Lutheranism in general—although not necessarily expressed in all Lutheran churches, and certainly not confined to them. Whatever expression it takes—law and gospel, demands and promises, command and new obedience—the point is always the same: the conformation of the body of Christ, the signals of the doings of the Spirit, the life of faith, are always an event where we are simultaneously "undone" and then "redone" through Word and sacraments weaving us into a new self. In this self that is Christ we are transformed, changed, turned and converted into one another in love (*verwandeln*),³⁵ which combines total freedom and total servanthood.³⁶ Article VII of the *Confessio Augustana* (CA)—all critiques against its minimalist definition notwithstanding—will always ring as a salutary decentering of the church's mundane ego that always stands between us and God, and between ourselves (uniformity of ceremonies instituted by human beings, which in Article XXVIII is directly linked to "ecclesiastical power" as represented by bishops). By denouncing the incoherence of subsuming under the notion of universality a particular embodiment of authority and practices, and not the gospel and the sacraments, it was a deconstruction of a false universalism.

³⁴ See Oscar Cullmann, *Unity Through Diversity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 9.

³⁵ "Also werden wir ynn eynander vorwandelt und gemeyn durch die liebe, an wilche keyn wandell nit geschehen mag." Martin Luther, "Ein Sermon von dem hochwürdigen Sakrament des heiligen wahren Leichnams Christi und von den Bruderschaften (1519)," in *WA* 2/3, 24–26.

³⁶ "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in Lull, op. cit. (note 25), 391.

It is my contention that the law/gospel code in Luther's hermeneutic is devised to guarantee a certain discursive practice that seeks to reproduce a sense of self that is "gained" by grace, as one's life and gifts flow into the circuitry and metabolism of Christ's body. The law as well as the gospel conform to an eschatological compound, signaling the breakthrough of a new life, where the antithetical tension ceases to exist and the split between subject and other subjects ceases to be antagonistic. This apocalyptic moment—to echo Northrop Frye—is the way in which the world looks after the "ego" that has disappeared.³⁷ In sum, law is the form by which theological speech is addressed as a strategy for decentering the ego (also regarding confessional traditions and churches), producing a crack in the mask of our persona-prosopon in order to unveil the true center of ourselves, Christ, within the new charismatic network of the Spirit, his body. This implies being taken into the very being of God, or rather, to let God practice God's own love in us.³⁸

This rhetorical strategy functions not only as a verbal declaration (*gratia*, the forensic inflection), but as making accessible to us the energies of life that are truly eternal (*donum*). It grants permission to live truly by "decurving" our lives by an inexhaustible promise. As creatures, curved in our own otherness from God, holding our breath, conserving energy for ourselves, we live within a threatening horizon, with opaque boundaries that signal the limits of our signifying activity. As a code, the law/gospel dynamic refers to the space, where the "event horizon" of our lives, curved in upon itself, is opened by a blast that we call Spirit. For that reason, it refers to how God comes alive to persons threatened by the margins—in psychological, spiritual, social and economic terms. It radically redraws the boundaries of God's domain in order to include those who were hitherto considered far from it. This is the body of Christ.

To be "undone" by the law in order to receive a new center of graced identity, that is to set things right, implies always a decentering of those fields that entrap us in a diabolical dance. The law is the unraveling of those scripts that numb and kill in order to receive a self truly, by faith, through the gospel. The language of the gospel, thus, is always received as we are forced into our own margins, margins from where a new centering takes place. And these margins—as Paul's image of the body conveys—are stretched to the point of overlapping with the social margins from where Christ meets us through the destitute, the marginal and the excluded (cf. Mt 25). Not surprisingly, the Eucharist signifies the breaking

³⁷ See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 138.

³⁸ Cf. Tuomo Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther's Religious World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 64. Here Mannermaa refers to Luther's *Adventpostille*.

of a body for broken bodies (and minds), gathered now into a new redistributive community of social, spiritual and material goods.³⁹ This is something that theologies stemming from India (Dalit), Africa (Ubuntu) and Latin America (Liberation) have pressed upon the Lutheran code, ringing the same tones that we hear among feminist and critical theologies in the North.

It seems to me that when the church is seen as the event that emerges when space and bodies are carved out by the receding-and-yet-present God, the flow and counterflow of a Trinitarian God that never cease to create and call forth, then the tenor and scope of our speech strategies begin to mutate. First, it leads to examining the type of unity being realized in our own local churches, then to the nature of our global Lutheran communion and, finally, to the type of unity reflected in our larger ecumenical conversations. The three instances are actually three dimensions of "networks of communication," networks of affective, intellectual and social relationships—charismata. These church events are not isolated phenomena; they stand between the centripetal forces and sovereign project of nations and—more so in the present—empire, and the centrifugal and anarchic drives of individual minds and bodies.

The first level of unity, that of local and/or national churches, will certainly influence the way in which the second (confessional) and third (ecumenical) levels are addressed. Yet, this must not blur the fact that a different dynamics of "uniting" may be operative at these different levels and, furthermore, that it is the universal horizon of Christ's body—the network of charismata, of minds encrypted by the Word and bodies intertwined by the sacraments—that confers upon the local church and confessional tradition its ecclesial status. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that in the confessional documents we find a salutary relativization of any particularity—local, regional, territorial, or even "confessional"—that purports to become the universal. Whether one stresses Luther's definition in the Large Catechism,⁴⁰ or CA VII,⁴¹ it is clear that the assembly of all believers is defined by its relation to certain events brought to them (preaching and sacraments) constitutes the church.

³⁹ See this concept developed in Luther's "Sermon on the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods (1519)," in Helmut T. Lehman (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 45 ff.

⁴⁰ "I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit, in one faith, mind and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism." "Large Catechism," in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000), 437–78.

⁴¹ "The Augsburg Confession—German Text—Article VII," in *ibid.* 42. "The assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached"

Therefore, the fact that in local or confessional terms we may be said to be an expression of a “network of differences,” united by a common “faith, mind and understanding” (Luther), we do not shy away from acknowledging that our system of significations, implicitly includes the proviso that that which we signify (the body of Christ) does not begin or end with our own particular expression. The church’s charismatic nature, as well as the gospel’s universality, assume that a variety of “dialects” exist, and that our (Lutheran) “linguaging” is certainly not the only one conjugating God’s promises.

Thus we should not be offended by some statements by our ecumenical partners, as for example, when the Roman Catholic Church addresses those communities and traditions that are not in full communion with Peter and “are not Churches in the proper sense,” stating that “we believe that they suffer from defects.”⁴² I suggest that instead of quarreling about the same issues as during the Reformation, we must go ahead and confess the veracity of this statement, namely, that we do indeed suffer from “defects.” There is an incompleteness that is proper to the body if the body is to maintain itself as the body of Christ: it always needs to be nourished and conformed by something that comes from beyond its spatial-temporal boundaries. Fullness is not something the church possesses, but what the church witnesses to through the gospel. Therefore we have a sort of a “constitutive lack” and “defects”; but so does our partner. And this is a blessing, for only that which is lacking can be fulfilled—by God. Acknowledging and confessing this “defect” is the first step in realizing the unity of the body of Christ.

Nonetheless, the ecumenical dialogue about the unity of the church is not just at the level of comparing software, what we call doctrines, as important as this may be. There is a legitimate concern to probe each other’s understanding and interpretation of what the mind of Christ consists of. After all, meaning is always a result of negotiation, of exchanges in pursuit of sharing that which we have in common, and affects the way in which bodies and minds relate. But mind, as we saw, is always related to a body. Therefore, dialogue is also a matter of letting the body of Christ be, of slackening our orders of discourse to the effect of letting the dynamics of different charismata come together in novel and renewed synergies. This is messy, untidy, even disconcerting at times, yet it happens thanks to the new phenomenon of swarming multitudes that have erupted in the last hundred years or so through new and very different expressions of Christian communities and engagements.

⁴² See *Dominus Iesus*, op. cit. (note 30), IV, 17.

I have in mind not only the explosion of the Pentecostal churches, or the so-called "emergent churches," but also the "irreverent" practices of worship, spirituality and solidarity enacted at the grassroots level between members or communities belonging to "mainline" traditions—with or without the official sanction of ecclesiastical bodies. By trespassing old systems of signification, by sharing the Word and Eucharist and engaging in the pursuit of the common, they give expression to new ways in which the body of Christ is networked, loosening institutional corsets, giving room to the living gospel. That this happens mostly at the fringes of the classical "centers" (ecclesiastical, political, economic) should not come as a surprise: here the disciplining and ordering of discursive strategies have no effect. The irrelevance of power within the so-called emergent churches has broken automatic allegiances. Established traditions, theologians and institutions understandably get nervous with this, but the body of Christ is neither an institution, nor a society in the strict sense of the term. It is really the expression of a swarm without a "center," for Christ is mediated by a decentered and decentering network of charismata. The network, the body, is the center. Paraphrasing Foucault, we could say that theological discourse about the unity of the church would consist in "making differences," without privileging any center—for the sake of Christ.

Talk of unity, therefore, is best approached when we let our churches' experience be interpreted through the biblical witness, especially Paul's reference to the body of Christ. What we see there is neither a notion of unity cast at the expense of plurality (absolutism), nor a plurality devoid of unity (liberalism). What we have is a unity emerging from the overlapping operations of a common Spirit, shaped by the mind of Christ, stressing enacted difference and therefore, a universal horizon. This is why the unity of the church is a symbol for an incompleteness, signifying something that is yet to come in order for us to become. But precisely because it is a symbol, it needs to be spoken of and acted out.