

THE CHURCH AS ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY. REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

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ABSTRACT. A church faithful to her calling is a church that has a specific missional identity and assumes a unique social role, modelled by Jesus. It is an alternative community, which acts otherwise. The goal of this article is twofold: first, it explains what is meant by the expression “alternative community”. Second, it shows that such a stance is the necessary mode of being for Christian communities in the world today.

KEY WORDS: social involvement, mission, ministry of the Church, Christian existence, Christian living

Introduction

To understand the church as a viable alternative to common culture is to imagine Christian identity in a radically different manner than what it is usually taken to be. It is to envision ecclesiology differently than what most Christian communities have historically comprehended and experienced. For over a millennium the church in Europe has been a dominating force, politically and socially. I refer here to a whole “history of Church-State symbioses and the typical social and cultural Christian hegemony that gave our *Vieux Continent* the label of ‘Christendom’” (Măcelaru 2014: 169). Therefore, to affirm that the church should be something different, something unlike what it has historically been, may seem audacious, and may be condemned as a careless bit of thought that ignores historical progression. Arguments pro and contra change are many and the debate carries on at varying levels of intensity. The true nature of the church, expressed in the reformed slogan *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*, carries the implication that change is utterly necessary. Yet, there is no denying that Christian history is full of examples of church-sponsored censorship of those who have attempted change – just think of the Anabaptists.

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I launch the discussion below on the premise that a church faithful to her calling is a church that has a specific identity and assumes a unique role, modelled by Jesus. It is an alternative community, which acts differently. As such, my goal below is twofold: firstly, I aim to explain what is meant in the context of this paper by the expression “alternative community.” Secondly, I will argue that such a stance is the necessary mode of being for Christian communities in the world today.

Lessons from History

“In one of the great ironies of history,” writes Richard Horsley, “what became the established religion of the empire started as an anti-imperial movement” (Horsley 1997b: 1). With this statement Horsley captures the irony of both the history of the church and the present situation. The church, from her beginnings, existed “over against” the wider human existence in society. Not only because it was a minority in an empire that viewed its existence antagonistically, but also because it possessed a consciousness inherently alternative to the society. Yet this situation changed drastically in the fourth century due to a few significant events: the conversion of Constantine, the acceptance of Christianity as a valid religion within the Roman society, and ultimately the legalization of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Within a century the social location of the church changed almost completely, moving from a marginal presence in the society to a dominating cultural, social, and political force. This was the beginning of a period of church history sometimes referred to as the “Constantinian Christendom”:

Constantinian Christendom... is a summary concept referring to a paradigmatic institutional formation, a millennium and a half in the making, namely, a particular fusion of political and religious reality in historic Christianity. Outwardly, forms vary over time and space. At the core, Constantinian Christendom represents a synthesis in which religion provides sacred legitimation for the secular order and the polity secures monopoly and protection for the religious institution. (Peachy 1981: 184)

Although an in-depth discussion of the new status of the church implied by this concept, several comments relevant to our argument are in place. First, the “officialization” of Christianity as the religion of the empire resulted in a church that was no longer an alternative to the society, but consisted of most, if not all, of the society:

Before Constantine, one knew as a fact of everyday experience that there was a believing Christian community, but one had to take it on faith that God was govern-

ing history. After Constantine one had to believe without seeing that there was a community of believers... but one knew for a fact that God was in control of history. (Yoder 1984: 137)

I argue that the shift from being an alternative presence to being a dominant force within the society changed the church significantly, not only in its outward structure but also in its inward consistency. As Miroslav Volf (1994) noted, the social reality of the church is closely connected to her beliefs and practices. Therefore, when one changes, sooner or later the other will also change. Admittedly, it would be hastily to argue that this change of social status disabled the church or changed her identity. However, the new status must have pulled the church away from its original scope as alternative community and thus reduced her intended social impact. To substantiate this assertion, one need only look at the history of the Early Church and observe that her identity as an alternative community was an essential aspect of her existence, and not only an identity consequential to her status as a minority community.

The Church as Genuine Alternative

There are two specific aspects of the church that substantiate her existence as an alternative community. First, as an alternative community the church must genuinely offer a way of life other than that of the broader society, not only in terms of belief but as livable social reality. Second, because of the previous, the church, as a community, must be ontologically and morally different from the society around. Ultimately, the alternative nature of the Christian community is informed by the belief that the new creation has already dawned amid the structures and spaces of the old world.

To be an alternative means to present a viable option that counters that which dominates. In sociological terms, an alternative community, also known as a counterculture, poses a significantly “other” way of being within the broader culture of any given society. The Christian assembly (*ekklesia*), in its earliest experience, was an alternative way of being that contrasted the broader Graeco-Roman society. She was an “independent community over against the dominant society” (Horsley 1997a: 251). Thus, when genuinely understood, the role of an alternative community is not played out by withdrawal from the society, as some would do. Rather, as Fiorenza observes, the early church “provided an experience of an alternative community in the midst of the Greco-Roman city for those who came in contact with it” (1997: 229). These alternative communities were not just private religious cults but were political and social realities with specific religious overtones. As the primary term used by Paul to speak of both, the movement as a whole and the local Christian communities, is *ekklesia*. As argued by Horsley

(1997c: 208), while it is true that for Paul the term *ekklesia*, adopted from the Septuagint, may have had strong Jewish implications – it brought up the image of the “assembly of all Israel,” its primary meaning in the Greek-speaking eastern Roman empire was that of the citizen assembly of the Greek polis. As such, in the New Testament *ekklesia* is a political term that received certain religious overtones. Therefore, it may be misleading to continue to translate *ekklesia* as “church,” if the word “church” implies only worship and religious rituals. To exist as a part of the Church in the experience of the early Christian communities was to exist as a “visible” society within the society.

Furthermore, the church becomes an alternative community when she exists otherwise, when the teaching of the gospel becomes her expression of life. To explain, the existence of the church revolves around a specific story that the broader society does not share. As Marcel Măcelaru (2016: 73) puts it, this is “the Story of God with, in and for the world”, and it is this story that

tells of a God who acts within human history – of the beginning of it all at creation, of the development of God’s plan in the election and life of Israel, of a culmination brought about in Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection, of the continuation of God’s work in and through the church, which is to be his agent in the world today, and of the eschatological conclusion of this history at the end of time, when God’s purposes for creation will come to full fruition. (Măcelaru 2016: 73)

Understood in this way, Christian existence is a “representation of the historical events of Christ’s suffering and death” (Hanson 1987: 36). This means that the Christian alternative is formed by values, ideas, and morals unique to the church, but also of the way these are lived out in the world. As Volf (1994: 18) notes, “communities of those who are born anew and follow Christ live an alternative way of life within the political ethnic, religious, and cultural institutions of the larger society.”

The obvious consequence of the above is that a church that is an alternative to the broader society must be distinct from the society. Its distinct teaching demands a distinct social presence. This distinction is not fundamentally a rejection of “the world,” of those outside of its borders. Instead, the major difference between the church and the world is founded on the positive choice to believe and to follow Jesus Christ as Lord. In Yoder’s words, “that community is different from the surrounding community because of the allegiance they confess to Jesus as Lord, over against other lords (Yoder 1984: 189). Significantly though, Volf (1994) labels this distinct stance towards the society “soft difference.” That is so because it is not a difference that comes out of isolation, but rather the

difference that is driven by mission. This difference is soft not only because it is purposefully mission driven, but because it is also characterized by love and gentleness towards those who are on the outside. Furthermore, it is a difference from within, the difference uniquely carried by a society who partakes in the events of the larger society, yet who according to their allegiance to Christ, discern what activities are consistent and are not consistent with the proclamation of Christ's Lordship.

Obviously, the church as alternative community is not to be understood simply as a phenomenon of the early Christianity. It is rather the genuine expression of Christian identity and existence in the world, at all times and in all places, driven by the belief that in Christ the new creation has broken into the world, and exists alongside of the passing old order. The church is the locus where the new creation and the old order meet, the place in which the life and death of Christ are manifested in the power of his resurrection (Brown 1998: 278). It is an eschatological beachhead, "the place where the power of God has invaded the world" (Hays 1996: 27).

Moreover, the church is the "purposive social-group representing the new order that God intends" (Mott 1982: 129). In commenting on Paul's understanding of ethics in 1 Corinthians, Richard Hays notes that Paul understands the existence and continuing life of the church as a central sign of God's reconciling work in the world. Central to this reconciling work is the creation of communities that "prefigure and embody the reconciliation and healing of the world" (Hays 2003: 32). The Church therefore prefigures God's reconciliation by exhibiting reconciled and reconciling relationships of justice and peace within her own life, and embodies God's reconciliation by seeking to manifest the justice and peace that is within her community without, that is, to all of humanity. Thus, the church's alternative nature is deeply bound up both within its identity and its task.

Being an Alternative in the World Today

Where the church is not lived and experienced as an alternative community the fulfillment of her task is endangered. This is primarily because as the first fruits of the inbreaking new creation, the church is to foreshadow the coming redemption (Yoder 1984: 92). Her very existence is her primary witness to the world of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, a witness that functions as the basis of all other forms of witness in the world. This is an essential aspect of her existence; and although the church will never be able to fully live up to this idealistic vision and will always suffer under the weight of the sinfulness of her members, she must strive to be a distinct community. Simply stated, to make a difference the church

must be different. Thus, the church must strive to exhibit within her own life the reconciling and reconciled work of God, for her initial task in the world is to be an example. As Yoder (1994: 61) puts it, “the church’s responsibility to the world is first and always to be the church.”

Central to the idea of being the church in the world rightly is the church’s role as a forgiven and forgiving community. If the goal of the community is to exhibit and live out God’s reconciliation to the world, then it must seek to actualize this by the hard work of practicing the discipline of forgiveness. As Jones (2000: 122) noted, “Christian forgiveness aims at reconciliation and involves the task of responding to God’s forgiving love by crafting communities of forgiven and forgiving people.”

Thus, the Christian community as alternative community is as well a first-taste of God’s intended *shalom* – wholesome peace, wholeness, well-being – for the entire creation. Since God originally intended humanity to live in *shalom* (cf. where the church attempts to manifest this sense of peace, cooperation, and well-being, she points to the reality of God’s new creation in the world, already here, and to its completion that is yet to come (Burkholder and Bender 1982: 13). Furthermore, she not only points to the fulfillment of God’s work prophetically but works to establish justice and peace upon the earth in the present. By trying to actively realize *shalom* in everyday life, the church is the presence and agent of the Reign of God. By acting in this way, the church challenges oppression and sin within the society, calling for repentance and for renewed justice:

The community of Jesus which lives and acts messianically, practices the great alternative to the world’s present system. It is a “contrast-society,” and through its existence it calls into question the systems of violence and injustice. (Moltmann 1993: 122)

Whereas this conception of the church is historically that of the “free church” tradition, it is in fact a thoroughly holistic model of the church. It is not limited to certain ecclesiological persuasions or institutional structures. The concept of an alternative community is available even in more rigid ecclesial structures. For instance, consider the so-called “base communities” of the Latin American Roman Catholic Church. These are communities that consist of small groups of believers who meet for prayer, mutual support, and to discuss what social action needs to be taken (Brown 1993: 73ff).

Conclusions

The church as alternative community is necessarily the model of Christian existence that is faithful to the assertion that Jesus is Lord over the whole creation, that is, over all of life. When the church loses her clear sense of alternativeness then it loses her bearings and loses the essential foundation for her task in the world. The first Christians formed alternative communities, not only because they were a minority within the society, but because this was an intentional act of mission. Thus, the very mission for the church in the world today is that she becomes the alternative community intended by Christ (see Măcelaru 2018: 321-322).

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