CHAPTER 7

On Discerning the Living Truth of the Church: Theological and Sociological Reflections on *Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church*

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Introduction

In order to explore the relationship between ecclesiology and ethnography, this jointly authored contribution focuses on a particular collaborative research project in practical ecclesiology that is currently underway in the North East of England — *Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church (RE&LC)* — which explicitly brings doctrinal, theological, and ethnographic sociological modes of analysis into close conversation in service, it is hoped, of the transformative study of the church. Hosted by the Centre for Catholic Studies within Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion and conducted over a four- to five-year period, *RE&LC* basically involves a mixed total research group of ecclesiologists, practical theologians, sociologists and anthropologists of religion, educational and organizational experts, local practitioners, and key church personnel working together to analyze the respective organizational cultures of nine of the major Christian denominational groupings in the North East of England with a view to asking how they might each fruitfully learn from the respective best practice of the other participant groupings.[1]

In the first part of the essay, Paul Murray, a systematic theologian and

1. The nine participant regional denominational groupings are: the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle; the Anglican Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle respectively; the Northern Synod of the United Reformed Church; the Methodist Districts of Darlington and Newcastle respectively; the Northern Baptist Association; the Northern Division of the Salvation Army; and the Assemblies of God.

the director of the project, introduces the thinking that drives *RE&LC* (A.1), its core aims (A.2), and its shape (A.3). In Part B Mathew Guest, a sociologist of religion and core project advisor to *RE&LC*, probes some pertinent sociological methodological issues before offering an original constructive proposal as to how these might best be conceptualized and approached relative to this project in terms of viewing it as an exercise in "collective ethnography." In the light of this sociological analysis, Paul Murray turns in the final section (Part C) to reflect on the specifically doctrinal ecclesiological significance of *RE&LC* both methodologically and substantively.

The main title of the essay, "On Discerning the Living Truth of the Church," is deliberately ambiguous, with intentional dual resonance indicating the range of commitments and concerns that are in play in seeking to bring theological and sociological perspectives on the church into constructive conversation. On the one hand it has scriptural and doctrinal resonance, recalling the Johannine language of "life," "truth," and "living water" used in reference to Jesus[2] — the one who is in turn regarded in Christian understanding as *the* living truth of the church, its founder, its impulse, the one to whom the church bears witness, the one whose mission the church's practices and structures should serve and reflect, and by whose Spirit it is believed these same practices and structures are themselves shaped. On the other hand it refers us to the living, breathing, "concrete" reality of the church as it actually is — or at least as ethnography might help us see how it is — and not simply as we would have it be or imagine it to be. Here we share Nicholas M. Healy's concern that

> In general, ecclesiology in our period has become highly systematic and theoretical, focused more upon discerning the right things to think about the church rather than orientated to the living, rather messy, confused and confusing body that the church actually is.[3]

We here offer the *RE&LC* regional comparative research project as a worked example of the kind of "practical-prophetic" alternative in

2. For Jesus as life and bestowing life, see John 1:4; 5:26; 6:33, 35, 48, 53, 57, 63; 10:10; 11:25-26; 14:6; 20:31. For Jesus as truth and the way of truth (and the Spirit as leading into truth), see John 1:14, 17; 8:32, 45-46; 14:6; 16:13; 18:37. For Jesus as giving "living water" and being "living bread," see respectively John 4:10-11; 7:38 (the last with explicit reference to the Spirit); and John 6:51.

3. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 3.

ecclesiology for which Healy calls, one that seeks to engage seriously in the empirical study of the church as an integral dimension of a genuinely and robustly theological discerning of the living truth of the church.

Part A: The Anatomy of the Project and Its Theological and Methodological Presuppositions

A.1 Seeking after the Living Truth of the Church: The Task of Ecclesiology in Postliberal Perspective

Key theological, epistemological, and methodological principles at work in *RE&LC* — as also throughout the broader family of Receptive Ecumenism projects of which *RE&LC* is, to date, the most practically focused expression — have their origin in an earlier project exploring the appropriate character of theological reasoning in the light of the now widespread shift to postfoundationalist understandings of human knowledge, particularly as this shift is variously evidenced in the American pragmatist tradition.[4]

In essence we are dealing here with a dual shift, first *from* the image of knowledge as a superstructure progressively erected on the basis of sure and certain, discretely verifiable foundations and *to* the image of knowledge — particularly associated with Willard van Orman Quine — as a complex, flexible, context-specific web.[5] Second, we are dealing with the shift *from* viewing truth purely in terms of cognitive understanding and linguistic and conceptual articulation alone *to* recognizing the need to

4. For the first major text emanating from the Receptive Ecumenism projects, see Paul D. Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, with foreword by Walter Cardinal Kasper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), particularly Murray's preface, pp. ix-xv, and chapter 1, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning — Establishing the Agenda," pp. 5-25; also Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs," *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008): 30-45. For the earlier project focused on postfoundationalist theological reasoning, see Murray, *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004). For something of the relationship between these projects, see Murray, "On Valuing Truth in Practice: Rome's Postmodern Challenge," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006): 163-83; also Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning — Establishing the Agenda," in *Receptive Ecumenism*, pp. 7-8.

5. See Willard van Orman Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951), reprinted in Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 20-46, particularly pp. 42-43. For comment, see Murray, *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*, pp. 35-40.

view truth also in performative terms of efficacy and fruitfulness, and this not just as a means of testing for cognitive truth but as part of what truth actually is.[6] In this way of understanding, truth is not simply about seeking to recognize and articulate the reality of things but also about discerning and living in accordance with the fruitful possibilities that the open-textured reality of things presents. In scriptural terms, "Not every one who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."[7]

Taken together, this dual shift represents the relinquishing of rationality as an aspiration for watertight cognitive security and absolute certainty built around linear modes of reinforcing progression and the contrary embrace of an understanding of rationality as a never-ending, recursively expansive process of situated, self-correcting scrutiny in service of: (1) sound understanding of what is and what might be; (2) reasoned evaluation of the most appropriate way forward; and (3) effective practical implementation of same.[8] Here the aspiration for "objectivity" is understood not in terms of an unattainable neutrality and delusional desire for a "view from nowhere" that seeks to bracket out context and perspective but, following Donald Davidson, in terms of a process of triangulation and mutual accountability.[9] Such ideas recur later in the novel category of "collective ethnography," proposed as an appropriate way of configuring the processes of understanding and accountability in *RE&LC*.

In theological terms, the above-outlined presuppositions feed into and serve to fill out an expanded postliberal theological commitment that

6. See Murray, *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*, pp. 7, 62-63, 64-68, 75-77, 119.

7. Matt. 7:21/Luke 6:46-49. See also Matt. 19:17/Mark 10:17-19/Luke 18:18-20; Mark 3:35/Matt. 12:50/Luke 8:21; Mark 4:20/Matt. 13:23/Luke 8:15; Luke 11:28; John 14:21; 15:14.

8. See Murray, *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*, pp. 91-130, particularly pp. 93-123.

9. For the phrase "the view from nowhere," see Thomas Nagel's book of that title (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). For Donald Davidson on objectivity as triangulation, see "Rational Animals," in *Actions and Events*, ed. Ernest LePore and Brian McLaughlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 473-81 (p. 480); also Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (1983), reprinted with "Afterthoughts" in *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to* Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature *(and Beyond)*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 120-38 (pp. 120-21, 123); and "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974), reprinted in Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 183-98 (p. 198). For comment, see Murray, *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*, pp. 40-49, particularly pp. 45-48.

takes seriously the need to start out from the particularity of Christian tradition and the consequent theological inappropriateness of taking any other discipline (whether philosophy, law, social theory, ethnography, the natural sciences, or whatever) as systematically foundational for Christian theology, while also wanting to guard against the notes of triumphalism, completeness, sufficiency, and superiority that can too easily infect the postliberal theological stance.[10] Contrary to any such potential postliberal complacency, the argument at work here is that the core commitments and dynamics of Christian tradition themselves require — particularly so when read in conjunction with the postfoundationalist account of human rationality traced here — both a due emphasis on Christian particularity and for this to be held open to a continual, even if ad hoc, process of scrutiny and self-critical accountability relative to a range of other perspectives and disciplines in turn regarded as having their own integrity.[11] As a means of holding together a similar constellation of concerns, Rowan Williams suggests the language of "celebratory," "communicative," and "critical" to speak of three necessarily interacting "styles" and interwoven responsibilities in Christian theology: while theology rightly begins in celebratory rootedness in the particularities of Christian faith, if it is not to risk becoming "sealed in on itself" it needs both to engage in "fruitful," potentially mutually enlightening "conversation" with the "rhetoric of its uncommitted environment" and to pursue with rigor critical questions concerning the meaning, coherence, and adequacy of received articulations and performances of Christian tradition.[12]

10. For theological postliberalism, the seminal text is George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984). For comment on Lindbeck and expansion of the principles briefly noted here, see Murray, *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*, pp. 11-16.

11. See Murray, *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*, pp. 131-61, particularly pp. 152-61; also Murray, "A Liberal Helping of Postliberalism Please," in *The Future of Liberal Theology*, ed. Mark Chapman (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 208-18. As the reference to this process of expansive, self-critical scrutinizing being "ad hoc" and relative to other disciplines and perspectives regarded as having their "own integrity" might indicate, the expanded postliberal account articulated here is entirely commensurate with that also in view in Nicholas Healy's essay in the same volume.

12. See Rowan Williams, prologue, in Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. xii-xvi. I am grateful to Paul Lakeland for reminding me of Williams's usage here. The work of Nicholas Lash could also be appealed to at this point as also demonstrating a similar constellation of concerns and self-critical, expansive postliberal theological persuasion; see n. 21.

There are a number of ways in which the above-outlined understanding of theological rationality and approach feed directly into *RE&LC*.

First, the nine participant regional denominational groupings are accordingly treated as complex webs of thought and practice, the understanding of which requires a multi-perspectival approach drawing, as appropriate, on a broad range of analytical approaches beyond the traditionally theological in order to facilitate this.

Second, the aim is not simply to understand and describe these various webs but to identify areas of difficulty, tension, incoherence, awkwardness, even dysfunction, with a view to exploring how they might each potentially be rewoven in order to address their respective difficulties. This is to view the task of ecclesiology as a form of diagnostic, therapeutic analysis; as a means of address and repair for systemic ills; as an agent of change.

Third, as this implies, these webs of thought and practice are regarded not simply as providing the context within which the ecclesial reasoning of the respective participant groupings occurs but as actually embodying this reasoning.[13] The point is that real theological reasoning is embodied in the way, for example, in which Christian communities make decisions and not simply in the arguments that are given in support of the rationality of particular beliefs. It is in relation to such matters as discernment — both practical and doctrinal — and the exercise of authority that the rubber of theological reasoning hits the road of church life. If we wish to ask whether, in practice, a particular Christian tradition or denominational grouping reflects the kind of dynamic, expansive, self-critical reasoning that was earlier advocated, it is to such matters that we must look.

Fourth, this in turn implies the need to examine the extent to which differing webs of ecclesial reasoning, differing webs of thought and practice, are capable in practice of learning from each other. It is here that the ecumenical — and specifically the receptively ecumenical — dimension of the project comes in. Here ecumenical encounter is viewed not simply as posing a series of seemingly intractable problems for the Christian churches but as opening a field of opportunities in which a potential process of expansive, self-critical learning from the alternative ecclesial experiments of other traditions could occur that would resonate powerfully with the earlier outlined understanding of sound ecclesial reasoning. Given its centrality to the *RE&LC* project, it will be helpful now to explore the

13. See Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London and New York: Mowbray, 1996), p. 90.

thinking behind Receptive Ecumenism and the earlier related projects in a little more detail.

A.2 Receptive Ecumenism: Core Principles and Aims

Receptive Ecumenism is a strategy devised to respond to the contemporary ecumenical context. Clear recognition is given to two apparently opposed points: (1) that for a number of reasons the hope for full structural and sacramental unity as a realizable goal that drove much classical ecumenical work has receded from view as a realistic proximate aspiration; (2) that the ultimate goal of full structural and sacramental unity — however that might variously be imagined as being configured — must nevertheless form an essential and abiding orientation for Christian ecumenism as a non-negotiable gospel imperative.[14] Poised in this manner between current and foreseeable non-realization on the one hand and the imperative non-negotiability of the fundamental orientation on the other, the fundamental ecumenical need for the Christian churches in this context is to find an appropriately imaginative way of living this orientation in the here and now; of walking now the way of conversion toward more visible structural and sacramental unity in the future.

Accordingly, at the heart of Receptive Ecumenism is the basic conviction that further ecumenical progress will indeed be possible but only if denominational traditions make a shift from typically asking what other traditions might fruitfully learn from them and instead take the creative step of rigorously exploring what they themselves might fruitfully learn (or "receive") with integrity from their "others." This represents something of a JFK-style reversal: "Ask not what your ecumenical others must learn from you; ask rather what you must learn from your ecumenical others." If all were acting on this principle — indeed, even if only some were acting on this principle — then change would happen on many fronts, albeit somewhat unpredictably.

Much ecumenism is about, as it were, getting the best china out; about wanting others to see us in our best possible light. In contrast, Re-

14. For more on this and on what follows, see Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning — Establishing the Agenda," in *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*; and "Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts According to Our Needs," also in *Reason, Truth, and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*.

ceptive Ecumenism is an ecumenism of the wounded hands, of showing our wounds to each other, recognizing that we cannot save ourselves but trusting that we can be ministered to by each other, receiving in our needs from each other's particular gifts.

As has been noted on a number of occasions and reflecting the theologically worked pragmatist principles guiding them, each of the initial projects in Receptive Ecumenism were concerned not simply to theorize about the church and to engage in purely doctrinal reimagining alone but to seek to diagnose and address experienced problems with the actual lived structures, systems, cultures, and practices of the church.[15] The basic principle here was that the church is not primarily a doctrine, a theory, but a living, breathing life-world. Almost inevitably, however, the various analyses that were pursued in the first two projects, even when practically oriented, nevertheless tended to operate at a relatively abstract, theorized level. This showed the need for a further, much more practically focused project that would examine the relevance, viability, and on-the-ground implications of Receptive Ecumenism at the level of local church life; with "local church" understood as embracing both the regional level of diocese, district, synod, or equivalent and the more immediate level of parish or congregation, together with the intermediate level of deanery, circuit, or equivalent.

The idea was born of a major collaborative comparative research project involving as many of the Christian denominational groupings in the North East of England as possible, in partnership with staff of Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion (both theologians and sociologists/anthropologists of religion), Durham Business School (organizational, human resource, and financial experts), St. John's College (practical theologians), the North of England Institute for Christian Education (NEICE), and the various regional ecumenical officers and other local church practitioners. The purpose would be to examine how respective specific difficulties in the organizational cultures of each of the participant denominational groupings — and the doctrinal theological commitments associated with these — might fruitfully be addressed by learning from/re-

15. The two initial projects were focused on international research conferences: the first, in January 2006, tested the strategy in relation to potential Catholic receptive learning, exploring also how the various practical, cultural, psychological, and organizational hindrances might be mitigated (see n. 4 here); the second, in January 2009, extended the strategy to all other Christian traditions and will be published as *Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Learning to Be Church Together.*

ceiving of examples of "best practice" in the other traditions. As such, the idea was to use practical and organizational matters — and the social-scientific means of analyzing these — as rigorous yet ultimately ad hoc means of testing, checking, and expanding the explicitly theological.

A.3 Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church:
The Shape of the Project

The need was rapidly identified for three related yet distinct trajectories of research, each with its own research team working in a coordinated yet relatively distinct fashion and focusing respectively on *Governance and Finance; Leadership and Ministry;* and *Learning and Formation.* Each team, with total membership of about eight in each case, is led by a professorial-level expert with significant expertise in an extratheological discipline: *Governance and Finance* by a professor of business ethics of Durham Business School; *Leadership and Ministry* by a professor of human relations, also of Durham Business School; and *Learning and Formation* by a professor of Christian education of the North of England Institute for Christian Education.

Whereas the *Governance and Finance* team is directly concerned with the organizational cultures and systems of authority, accountability, strategic planning, and finance that are operative in each of the participant denominational groupings,[16] *Leadership and Ministry* is concerned with how these are administered and shaped by the respective cultures and practices of leadership. In turn, *Learning and Formation* asks how the respective cultures and identities of the churches are nurtured, transmitted, shaped, and challenged through the habits, practices, experiences, structures, and strategies pertaining to learning and formation that are operative — either explicitly and deliberately or implicitly and accidentally — at various levels.

It is possible to think in terms of there being five broad phases to the project. For each team, the first task was to conduct an initial, detailed mapping of what is currently happening, at least in theory, in each of the participant denominational groupings, and the formal theological self-

16. The work of the *Governance and Finance* team, although developed entirely independently and operating on a far, far smaller scale, bears some comparison with the significant work of the National Leadership Roundtable in the U.S., focused on promoting better management and financial practices in the U.S. Catholic Church; see http://theleadershiproundtable.org/.

understanding that pertains in each case. These mapping exercises were carried out on the basis of available documentation (e.g., authoritative theological self-descriptions, mission statements, terms of reference of relevant committees and bodies, minutes, etc.) cross-referenced with a select number of informal interviews aimed at facilitating interpreter comprehension. The initial reports that derived from these Phase I mapping exercises were offered back to key representatives within the respective denominational groupings for them to consider and comment upon.

Following this, the aim of the second main phase of work was to begin to move from the Phase I level of theory and principle to the relevant lived reality and actual practice in each of the traditions. The threefold purpose was: (1) to test how the respective theories work in practice; (2) to begin to identify respective areas of good practice and difficulty/dysfunction alike; and (3) to begin to identify where fruitful receptive learning might potentially take place across the traditions, whereby one tradition's particular difficulties might be tended to, or enabled, by another's particular gifts.

To these ends each research team engaged upon a discrete broad-based empirical data-gathering exercise utilizing a range of approaches from the more directly quantitative in the case of *Leadership and Ministry* (questionnaire) to the more qualitative in the cases respectively of *Governance and Finance* (structured interviews with key/representative individuals in each denominational grouping and at each of the relevant levels of region, congregation, and intermediate structure) and *Learning and Formation* (group listening exercises/focus groups and participant-observer analysis). Further, while each of these data-gathering exercises was primarily focused on the specific interests of the particular research team in question, they were each also explicitly alert to the concerns of the other two teams and so able, using different methods and research groups, to gather some additional relevant data for the purposes of the other groups. As such, the aim was to build in a degree of triangulation not only within the work of the respective teams but also between them.

In turn, the third key phase of activity — underway at time of writing — is seeking to extend considerably the dimension of triangulation that was already a feature of Phase II by pursuing two time-limited ethnographic congregational studies in each denominational grouping that are explicitly intended to bring the three core concerns of the research teams into integrated focus. To this end, these Phase III cross-trajectory studies are focused on the common issue of the challenges presented by

the declining numbers of full-time ordained/authorized ministers and the respective strategies being adopted by the participant denominational groupings to respond to these challenges. Here we have an issue that brings into common focus matters pertaining to governance, decision-making, finance, leadership, and formation. The interim reports deriving from these case studies will be shared, in each case, with the congregations that shared in the studies.

Following the completion of the data-gathering stages of *RE&LC* (Phases I, II, and III), the fourth phase will focus on analyzing the data in the round and seeking to identify on this basis the respective gifts (examples of good practice) and needs (areas of difficulty/dysfunction) in each denominational grouping. This in turn should allow some cogent and specific proposals to be made concerning ways in which the needs of one grouping might fruitfully be addressed by learning from something of the gifts of the others. Clearly it will not be enough here simply to indicate such possibilities in a vague, hypothetical manner. Each proposal will need testing through in terms of: (1) the degree to which it can be shown to cohere with relevant core doctrinal convictions in the overall web of the host grouping and, correlatively, the degree to which the overall web can be legitimately reconfigured, even rewoven, in order to accommodate the proposal in question; (2) its practicality (e.g., its financial, organizational, and cultural costs); and (3) its ability to attract support within the proposed receiving denominational grouping. As such, this process of testing through will need to be carried out in close conversation both with the relevant formal, authoritatively articulated theologies and actually operative theologies (as disclosed in Phases II and III here), as also with key subgroups within the groupings. The point will be to identify all possible objections and to examine whether a reasonable way forward can be found. Those proposals that survive this iterative process will be regarded as robust and worthy of serious consideration. It will be these that are offered to the respective denominational groupings.

The final phase will be that of dissemination. This will operate at a number of levels. Most immediately — and, perhaps, most important — it will consist in the production of a distinct report for each participating denominational grouping, containing a number of well-thought-through and tested practical proposals for real potential receptive learning within that regional grouping, proposals that hold the promise of enabling each grouping to live their respective callings and mission more fruitfully. Alongside and reinforcing these reports, it is hoped that more directly

practical and face-to-face dissemination will take place in the region through the reports being discussed, together with key team members, by all the appropriate committees and decision-making bodies within each participant grouping and at the three relevant levels of region, congregation, and intermediate structure. There will in addition be a further major academic volume providing a thorough methodological and theological analysis of the project and of the constructive doctrinal ecclesiological work that will figure in the testing and refinement of the project's proposals. Finally, there will also be a series of popular-level publications aimed at widely promoting the basic strategy of Receptive Ecumenism including, most notably, a set of resource materials that Churches Together in England have committed to producing for local groups wishing to pursue the path of receptive ecumenical learning.

Part B: Toward a Collective Ecclesial Ethnography: Sociological Perspectives on *Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church*

RE&LC aims to bring the various participating denominational groupings into, to borrow a phrase from Don Browning, "mutually critical dialogue."[17] While a pressing issue, this aspiration is by no means an original one. What makes this project distinctive is its determination to ground this dialogue in empirical research. The various parties involved will, it is hoped, engage in a critical and reflexive process of self-examination and mutual learning, basing their self-knowledge not merely on established doctrinal traditions, but on what they discover about themselves using empirical research. This central task is no mean feat, and raises a whole host of questions about the nature of this kind of ecclesiological exercise. Not least, it is worth emphasizing that just because ethnography[18] is working in the service of theological questions, this does not mean it is any less subject to the methodological challenges surrounding its deployment

17. See Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

18. Ethnography is taken here as the description of a cultural phenomenon (literally, "writing culture"), and involving the extended study of a human group in their "natural" context, drawing on a variety of — chiefly qualitative — research methods. For discussions of the definition of ethnography, see Martin Hammersley, *What's Wrong with Ethnography? Methodological Explorations* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Perti Alasuutari, *Researching Culture: Qualitative Methods and Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 1995).

within the social sciences. Issues of validity, representativeness, the ethical responsibility of the researcher, the politics of subjectivity, professional loyalties versus loyalties forged "in the field," the power relations embedded in the writing process — all have their place in discussions among theologians about how they properly and most effectively handle empirical research as a source of knowledge. We should note that this is not, in our view, a one-way street. The social sciences, in their own deployment of ethnography, also have much to learn from their colleagues in theology, not least on account of a more pervasive and developed engagement among theologians with epistemological debates focused on questions of truth and the status of truth claims (see A.1 here). While there has been much fruitful discussion among social scientists on this issue — one might note Charlotte Aull Davies's grounding of a reflexive ethnography in Roy Bhaskar's vision of critical realism[19] — there remains much to do, and more fruitful debates will ensue if theology and social science enter more deeply into conversation as distinct but engaged disciplines rather than building insurmountable boundaries around themselves.

To return to the challenges facing *RE&LC*, one stands out as particularly difficult, raising crucial avenues of debate pertinent to the theological appropriation of social-scientific method, and concerning the aspiration to generate normative claims on the basis of empirical investigation. The project assumes the desirability and legitimacy of questioning the status quo. This raises numerous tricky questions: Who has the right to offer critique, and how do they earn it? How does one balance the professional obligations one has as an ethnographer to the academy with the moral obligations one has to those who are the subjects of the study, bearing in mind that these subjects may also be members of one's own church? What place is to be given to critical voices that might emerge from each domain but which clash with one another, presenting a challenge to the coherent cultural portrait sometimes expected, and indeed hoped for, by the industrious participant observer? Moreover, might there be circumstances in which a clear, coherent, and well-bounded portrait of Christian life in a particular locality might not be a desirable, responsible, or illuminating aspiration? Here we might consider Frances Ward's ethnographic study of a mixed-race congregation in Manchester, which draws from post-structural theory in advocating an ethnographic discourse that fore-

19. See Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 1999).

grounds fragmentation, disruption, and difference as a precondition for identifying and facilitating a voice for the otherwise marginalized members of a church, in this case, its black members.[20]

What we propose to do in this section is take two interlinked challenges and offer a brief engagement with each from a sociological perspective. Our hope is that by attempting to grapple with methodological, conceptual, and epistemological challenges presented by an ongoing empirical research project, we will foster discussion that might shed some real light on the interdisciplinary dialogue between ethnography and ecclesiology. Our focus will be on two connected challenges, which may be addressed via a consideration of cognate debates in the social sciences. Both have analogues among social scientists in general and among social scientists engaged with theological concerns in particular. Both have to do with issues of method, although the first has a more epistemological relevance while the second raises more in the way of ethical issues. We will reflect on (1) how we might discern and describe the identity of a particular church, and then, in light of this, (2) how the tensions between descriptive and normative accounts might be ethically and effectively negotiated. A final section will discuss how each of these issues might be addressed through the adoption of an approach we are calling "collective ethnography."

B.1 Ethnographies of "Church"

While the empirical study of the Christian church — whether via national surveys, or on a more local or institutional level — now has a fairly lengthy history that has produced numerous rich published accounts, few of these have engaged seriously with the question of the social construction of Christian community.[21] It has been taken on board by many theologians and sociologists that the church needs to be acknowledged as a concrete, material, embodied, and human phenomenon, fashioned by the fires of history and social upheaval like any other institutional entity. It is also recognized that we would do well to examine the social life of the church us-

20. Frances Ward, "The Messiness of Studying Congregations," in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, ed. M. Guest, K. Tusting, and L. Woodhead (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004).

21. Notable exceptions are: Peter Stromberg, *Symbols of Community: The Cultural System of a Swedish Church* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986); and Al Dowie, *Interpreting Culture in a Scottish Congregation* (New York: Lang, 2002).

ing the tried and tested tools of sociology and anthropology. However, how we get from the empirical data at our disposal to the description of church life we offer as the conclusion of our study is a question less often faced. Assuming an eclectic toolbox of research methods — as is often the case in such studies — how do we take a collection of written observations, interview transcripts, church records, notes on informal conversations, questionnaire responses, and a healthy dose of intuition born of personal experience, and transform it into a coherent and meaningful account of church life? The assumption that this transformation might be straightforward or unproblematic is absurd as much as it is disturbing. For an uncritical methodological strategy that fails to address this issue can only compromise a research endeavor: at best throwing into question the epistemological standing of its claims, at worst papering over power inequalities or acts of misrepresentation that have more serious ethical implications.[22]

RE&LC faces this daunting problem on a number of levels. First, at the level of personnel, the project involves a large number of researchers, analysts, advisors, and stakeholders, not to mention those responsible for directing the project. Within the context of such collaborative research, goals of coordinating data collection and analysis so as to facilitate a convergence of insights and the construction of a fair and illuminating picture are all the more challenging. Second, our analysis of church life among the various denominations in the North East rightly distinguishes between different levels of organization and governance: the local, intermediate, and regional. The multiple voices one might expect to encounter within a study of churches as singular phenomena might therefore be multiplied three times over, and as the higher echelons of power enter into consideration, so the various discourses in evidence start to gather more force and may be expected to carry more impetus in their ambitions to dominate and influence the research agenda, an issue to which we will return later.

Third, there is, as in arguably all social groups, a distinction to be drawn between what Gerd Baumann has called "dominant" and "demotic" discourses.[23] In this context, we might speak of "official" versus "popular"

22. These challenges are perhaps most visible within the writing processes involved in ethnography, as it is here that aspects and voices are "edited out" as the "final" picture of a social collective is formalized. See John van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

23. Gerd Baumann, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

perspectives, the former enshrined in constitutional documents and embodied in church leaders, the latter constructed at the grassroots level, among ordinary churchgoers, whose outlook on various issues might be quite different from their vicar's, priest's, or minister's. An advantage of an ethnographic approach, with its longitudinal dimension and attention to subtlety and detail, is that it allows some investigation into how these different discourses have come to take their present form. One does not have to look far for some excellent published studies that have pursued this line of approach with illuminating results. In the U.S., we might turn to R. S. Warner's exemplary ethnographic study of a small-town Presbyterian church, *New Wine in Old Wineskins,* which engages the lived reality of church life among leaders and townsfolk. What is produced is a rich account of change: from liberal to evangelical sympathies, as filtered through the experiences of ordinary churchgoers and the ministers subject to their shifting allegiances.[24] Closer to home, Tim Jenkins's *Religion in English Everyday Life* includes a study of the village of Comberton near Cambridge, offering an evocative picture of contemporary rural parish life. What is striking here is how perceptions of the local church, its significance, legitimacy, role, and purpose, are radically shaped not by doctrinal allegiances, but by embedded understandings of village identity and the social-class structures endemic to it.[25] At the very least, ethnographies of Christian churches need to consider how a multitude of discourses constitute congregational life.

Fourth, life within the various church communities involved in this project is inevitably colored not just by perceptions and experiences of life in St. Peter's, the West Durham deanery, in the Durham diocese, to take a fictional example, but by a perceived participation in more abstract collective entities, such as Christianity, or, at the level of churchmanship, for example, the evangelical, Anglo-Catholic, or charismatic movements. Such subtle affiliations may be best described, following Benedict Anderson's work, as "imagined communities,"[26] collective and supralocal entities that are constructed and maintained by their members in dialogue with inher-

24. R. S. Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988).

25. Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999). See also Martin Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008).

26. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

ited traditions and ongoing efforts at self-identification, via ritual markers and sometimes collective disputes. These differing shades of British Christianity have been with us for a long time, some for centuries, but they are worth mentioning here because recent controversies over Christian identity, priestly authority, and moral teaching have engendered a new, organized level of affiliation, one that has for some arguably overtaken the local congregation as the primary point of identification for grassroots Christians in Britain. The widespread — sometimes divisive — influence of organizations like Forward in Faith, the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, and Reform are testament to this, and at the very least indicate a stratum of engagement that, in accordance with debates at local, regional, and national levels, may often generate a reconfiguration of loyalties among churchgoers. With such lines of affiliation and protest cross-cutting local expressions of denominational, regional, and generational identity, it is unsurprising that the task of capturing the identities of local churches is an elusive one.

B.2 Descriptive and Normative Accounts

Aside from the issue of constructing, appropriating, or assembling some kind of descriptive account of identity from the fragmented pieces of congregational life, the challenge of producing a coherent account brings with it other problems of a political nature. In recent decades, social scientists have subjected the history of ethnography to deconstruction and postcolonial critique. Notable here was James Clifford and George Marcus's 1986 volume, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*,[27] which collected together a series of essays critiquing the assumed objectivity and unproblematic knowledge claims of classical anthropology. The work of the founding fathers of participant observation, such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Raymond Firth, as well as more recent authors like Clifford Geertz, is examined in light of postmodern and postcolonial theory, the authors unmasking how the cultural and academic identities of these "masters" were constitutive in their construction of the ethnographic "other." A value-neutral ethnography was, so it seemed, impossible, and at the very least, authors ought to exercise critical reflexivity in offering de-

27. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1986).

tailed and transparent reflections on how their own cultural baggage finds its way into their analyses. The long-term impact of Clifford and Marcus upon the social sciences has proved to be variable: some ignore their work in favor of a traditional, realist approach which, so they claim, retains legitimacy, with at best a perfunctory reflection on the construction of key concepts. Others have taken fully on board their critique of ethnographic writing, to the point where their newly conceived "postmodern ethnography" no longer constitutes an attempt to represent a social reality "out there," for all that truly exists is the self-emanating discourse of the ethnographer as a cultural agent caught in the assumptions, language, and categories of his or her own situated identity.[28]

These are extremes. At the very least, the debate surrounding Clifford and Marcus's book alerts us to the danger of assuming a straightforward and clear-cut distinction between descriptive and normative accounts. No ethnographies emerge "from nowhere"; all are a product of a particular — or several — individual(s), located within a particular cultural and academic context, the result of a particular set of questions being asked in a particular way of a particular community at a particular time. If the context of the community under study is historically situated, so is the context of the ethnographer conducting the study. These constraints are inescapable, and the question of how they are negotiated through practical research strategies and epistemological discussion is not easily resolved. Many acknowledge their situatedness as authors, and then write their ethnographies with no further reference to this observation. Others go back to something approaching first principles in deconstructing key concepts and rebuilding them from scratch, and yet remain themselves virtually invisible within the emerging written account.[29] One approach is simply to acknowledge the implicitly normative nature of research, render this explicit, and put it to work in the service of a particular agenda. While this may sound attractive — and familiar — to theologians seeking to put empirical study in the service of particular ecclesiological or doctrinal arguments, it has been most systematically formulated among social scientists. To take one example, Paul Willis was known in the 1970s as a pioneer of cultural studies, and for conducting a

28. A striking example can be found in Sarah Caldwell's ethnography of a Kali cult in India; see Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali* (Oxford and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

29. This may be said of Tim Jenkins's ethnographic study of English religion. See Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life*.

series of ethnographic studies among working-class men and members of youth subcultures. What distinguishes Willis's work is his explicitly Marxist perspective, which shapes both his motivation for study and his understanding of his task as a sociologist. Writing in 1977, in his influential study *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Willis notes:

> The role of ethnography is to show the cultural viewpoint of the oppressed, their "hidden" knowledges and resistances as well as the basis on which their entrapping "decisions" are taken in some sense of liberty, but which nevertheless help to produce "structure." This is, in part, the project of showing the capacities of the working class to generate, albeit ambiguous, complex and often ironic, collective and cultural forms of knowledge not reducible to the bourgeois forms — and the importance of this as one of the bases for political change.[30]

Willis's vision of ethnography is instructive in several respects. Not least, it offers a methodological strategy for offering the marginalized a new voice, a place within a discourse, a role in a collective identity within which they were previously hidden and oppressed. While there may be some space for a theological critique of Willis's Marxist assumptions — both substantively as social critique and methodologically as a questionable basis for study — his approach nevertheless demonstrates how an external agenda can be put to work via ethnographic study. Moreover, in challenging existing dominant discourses, Willis opens up space for change and reform, aspirations at the heart of *RE&LC*. It is worth expressing this more technically, as it is highly important to the vision of a collective ethnography that follows. What we are advocating is an explicit but discriminate attempt to relativize the social reality within churches among those within them, or at least among those who lead them. By relativizing what might be taken to be fixed traditions or conventions, and exposing their contingency upon specific socio-historical conditions, ethnographic analysis might open up the possibility of positive change among the communities under study. Insofar as *RE&LC* has as one of its key aims the enablement of church leaders to discern aspects of their denominational "culture" that might be improved or enhanced in light of lessons learned from others, this decoupling of churches from established conventions might be a precondition of its suc-

30. Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Farnborough, UK: Saxon House, 1977), p. 203.

cess, for only if change is considered to be possible can change be entertained as a practical and theological ambition.

B.3 Proposing a "Collective Ethnography"

In this way, ethnographic study itself may enable conversations conducive to receptive ecumenism, but only if roles within the research context (researcher, practitioner, leader, etc.) are effectively managed, and if these churches effectively share the ownership of the ethnographic study. In this sense, this kind of ethnography may be said to be potentially emancipatory, and we would argue that this is both a desirable and important outcome because a precondition of change is the freeing up of church members and leaders from the presumed inevitability of embedded conventions. To encourage change we first have to recognize that things need not be as they are.

However, ethnography may only be emancipatory if there is an effective separation of leadership structures and the ethnographic voice, with each thereby operating within a mutually critical — perhaps prophetic — relationship. Practicalities stand in the way of this ideal model in this context because those church members most available, able, and willing to act in the role of ethnographer are also in many cases their priests or ministers. Of course, these individuals are arguably best placed to do this, on account of their prior knowledge and position within local church networks. The obvious danger, however, would be that existing leaders rehearse and re-embed the community structures that they themselves embody, and in so doing produce an only partial account of their church's life. Or, their account is taken to be authoritative by church members because of their status.

To address this, we are proposing here a model we are calling "collective ethnography," with practitioners empowered by the academic (and ecclesiastical) community to be ethnographers of their own churches and to build a picture of themselves via conversations enhanced by engagement with others in their church, and with those in other churches, hence facilitating an ongoing dialogue with multiple nodes of activity. This model avoids the danger of standardization and homogenization, our first challenge, by elevating the status of all ethnographic voices to an equal level, each holding the other to account, and reflecting Elaine Graham's call for pastoral theology to genuinely begin with the experiences of Christian

communities, in all their internal diversity and situatedness.[31] It also addresses the issue of normativity by obliging transparency on the part of all involved and issuing emerging findings in a more subjunctive, rather than imperative, voice. It draws from Paul Willis's model of ethnography in focusing on the empowerment of lost voices (including here lost aspects, features, and traditions), not as a means primarily to alleviate oppression, but to facilitate a more authentic and multifaceted account of church life. In this way, this approach presents a means of negotiating the problems of leaders studying their own churches, as they are held to account by other ethnographers and by the project group as a whole, quite aside from the channels of feedback and conversation that would be opened between project researchers and representatives of their churches and denominations. In building essentially on channels of conversation, this model sets up the communicative and epistemological means of generating the kind of exchange that is central to *RE&LC*. What it does not do is identify how such lines of conversation might achieve agreement or closure, although whether that is a desirable prescription at all is perhaps a moot point.

Part C: The Doctrinal Theological Significance of Practical Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Ethnography

Prior to exploring the basic vision and strategy of Receptive Ecumenism (A.2) and the specific shape of the current regional comparative research project in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church* (A.3), the first section of this essay started out by identifying and reflecting on various of the key theological, epistemological, and methodological principles that have specifically informed the conceiving of the ecclesiological task at issue in the Receptive Ecumenism projects (A.1). Having now engaged with the practicalities of *RE&LC* and considered how the social sciences may contribute to the resourcing of this project (Part B), it is appropriate to return to explicit consideration of methodological matters in ecclesiology as these pertain to *RE&LC*.

Here the basic question is as to what exactly is the doctrinal theological significance of such an exercise in the empirical study of the church, or ecclesial ethnography. Alternatively posed, in what sense is this kind of practical ecclesiology a genuinely ecclesiological exercise? What does it

31. Graham, *Transforming Practice*, p. 93.

contribute to the systematic, doctrinal, ecclesiological task? Does empirical study of the church simply serve to illustrate the characteristic denominational practices and cultures associated with respective formally articulated ecclesiologies? Or does it have some more directly critical, constructive, and genuinely theological contribution to make to the systematic, doctrinal, ecclesiological task? And perhaps prior even to these questions: In what sense is it genuinely theologically appropriate — and not simply practically expedient — to incorporate a methodologically naturalist discipline, such as ethnographic sociology necessarily is, as a necessary turn or moment into an authentic understanding of the Christian theological task? Reflections here in relation to these questions will be ordered in two steps: (1) a few words in qualified general support for a necessary naturalist moment in Christian theology; (2) a few words more specifically on the necessary role of empirical sociological (and other) studies in doctrinal ecclesiological testing for the living truth of the church in practice.

C.1 The Intrinsic Need for a Certain Naturalist Moment in Christian Theology

To approach this issue we can profitably reflect briefly on the responses Thomas Aquinas gives to two articles, or subsequent questions, he poses in his *Summa Theologiae*, the first of which, at first sight at least, appears to take us in anything but a naturalist direction. These are *ST* 1a.1.7, concerning the subject of Christian theology, and *ST* 1a.47.1, concerning the multiplicity and distinction of things as deriving from God.

Having established that Christian theology can properly be regarded as a science (*ST* 1a.1.2, also 1a.1.3-6), Aquinas turns in the seventh article under the first question on "what sort of teaching Christian theology is and what it covers" to ask "Is God the subject of this science?" His response, famously, is that as the very word *theology*, or "talk about God," suggests the subject of theology is indeed God — while recognizing that God is not a thing of any kind — but also of all particular things in relation to God as their source, sustainer, and consummation.[32] As such, the-

32. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1, *Christian Theology (1a.1)*, ed. Thomas Gilby (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 1a.1.7, pp. 25-27, particularly: "Now all things are dealt with in holy teaching in terms of God, either because they are God himself or because they are relative to him as their origin and end" (p. 27).

ology rightly has a perspective on everything. It is about understanding all things in relation to their originating and ultimate, rather than merely proximate, orientation: in relation, as it were, to God as first and final cause, and not simply in relation to the realm of secondary causes to which more methodologically naturalist disciplines confine their attention. Indeed, the clear implication is that things are not understood fully or aright until they are understood in theological perspective.

At first sight, this theological "queening" over the sciences does not appear to hold out much prospect of a positive regard for the contribution of a certain naturalist moment in theological understanding. If it is only in theological perspective that a full account of any particular thing can be given, what real contribution is made by naturalist perspectives that can at best, it would seem, be considered partial and provisional?

An answer to this question is implicit in Aquinas's response to the first article under question 47 on the plurality of things.[33] Posing the question as to whether "the multiplicity and distinction of things is from God," Aquinas replies in two stages. First, he reminds us that God's purpose in creating anything at all is so that God's "goodness might be communicated to creatures and reenacted through them." Second, he notes that being finite, any creature can only communicate God's goodness partially and inadequately. Hence, it is necessary for there to be an abundant diversity of things ("many and diverse") so that "what was wanting in one expression of divine goodness might be supplied by another" and, thereby, the abundant goodness of God be figured forth more adequately. As Aquinas puts it: "Hence the whole universe less incompletely than one alone shares and represents his [God's] goodness."

This gives us deeper perspective on what it means to think of theology as a process not just of understanding God but of all things in relation to God as their source, sustainer, and consummation. This is not simply about completing our knowledge of things by bringing them into explicit relation with the only finally adequate perspective within which to understand them. It is every bit as much about the deepening and enriching of our theological understanding through asking after the myriad particular ways in which something of the goodness of God is shown in and through finite, created reality — albeit always in partial and disfigured form — and what it means to live before and within the gift of God in these circum-

33. *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 8, *Creation, Variety, and Evil (1a.44-49)*, ed. Thomas Gilby (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 1a.47.1, pp. 91-97.

stances (who in God's-self remains unknowable).[34] This in turn implies that far from the concern to view things in naturalist perspective necessarily being a confusing, even corrupting, distraction from more properly viewing them in theological perspective, such a naturalist viewing is in fact — or at least can be when properly pursued — a necessary moment in a genuinely theological understanding of things.

The point is that if we are to understand how a mineral, or a plant, or an animal, or a human social life-form, or the fundamental physical laws of the universe manifest, each in its particularity, something of the goodness of God and what it means to live in accordance with this, then it is necessary to take time to understand each such finite reality in its own right, with all its own immensely complex particularity in view. It is here that we require, even for ultimate theological purposes, the services of the focused perspectives of the methodologically naturalist disciplines. While our prior starting point might appropriately be with explicitly theological convictions concerning, for example, all things having their origin, being, and end in the trinitarian life of God (or concerning the church being the Spirit-indwelt people of God), and while we might appropriately intend to end up asking how the given area of finite, created reality in question — whether the laws of physics or an aspect of the life of the church — is to be read in explicitly theological perspective, our actual understanding of these finite created realities in all their complex particularity requires other frames of analysis than the explicitly theological alone. Indeed, not to take account of what can be understood of a given area of finite created reality from within the perspectives of the focused naturalist disciplines will lead not to a purity of appropriate theological understanding but to its confusion and occlusion. The same is true whether the area of finite created reality in question be the fundamental laws of physics, the com-

34. For St. Thomas, while "holy teaching" (his term for theology conducted in the light of God's self-revelation rather than purely in terms of what can be known of God on the basis of natural human reasoning alone) is primarily a theoretical rather than practical science ("it is mainly concerned with the divine things which are, rather than with things men do"), it is never a matter of theoretical knowledge of God for its own sake but always in service of helping us understand how most appropriately to live well before and within the gift of God in the circumstances of this life. It is, we might say, a matter of theoretical analysis and knowledge — a theoretical science — in service of practical wisdom. See *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 8, 1a.1.2, 4, 6, pp. 17 and 21-25 in particular. For God in God's-self as remaining always unknowable in this learning of "holy teaching," see 1a.1.7, p. 27 and *passim*.

plex realities of human sexuality, or the living, breathing reality of the church.[35]

C.2 The Role of Empirical Accountability in Testing for the Living Truth of the Church

Bringing the general remarks above about the need for an appropriately naturalist moment in theological understanding to specifically ecclesiological focus, we might say that part of the ecclesiological methodological significance of the *RE&LC* project is that it is seeking precisely to avoid moving too quickly from appropriate prior theological convictions about the church and reflection on these to detailed claims about the church's supposed reality and associated practical implications without attending patiently to what is seen of the actual reality of the church when viewed in empirical sociological perspective. By integrating this empirical "moment" or "turn" within *RE&LC*, the aim is to escape the tendency, identified by Nicholas Healy, of pursuing ecclesiology in an abstract, purely theoretical-conceptual mode that operates in an ideal realm detached from the concrete reality of church life. But this alone does not exhaust the aims and desired ecclesiological significance (both methodological and substantive) of *RE&LC*.

Vital though it is to the ecclesiological task to seek to gain as full and accurate depiction of the actual reality of church life as possible and for the articulation of ecclesiology to be held in real conversation with this, and vital though the role of empirical sociology and other disciplines be in gaining such a depiction, this does not yet get to the core aim of *RE&LC*. The point is that *RE&LC* aims not simply to give better, more accurate depictions of the church but to perform a critical-transformative role; to contribute to the reconfiguring of the respective ecclesial webs of the participant regional groupings. Alongside, in Williams's terms, "celebration" and "communication," at the heart of the assumed role of Christian theology in *RE&LC* is that it is a process of "critical reflection on Christian practice" — we might add also "constructive reflection" — with a view to

35. Insofar as the argument here is in support of the real and necessary contribution that is always required by a certain naturalist moment, or turn, within the overall process of a robustly Christian theology, it is to be clearly distinguished from any attempts at a thoroughgoing theological naturalism such as that attempted by Willem B. Drees in his *Religion, Science and Naturalism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1996]).

diagnosing its ills, whether conceptual, historical, hermeneutical, or practical, and enhancing the quality of this practice.[36] That is, the aim is to test for and search out that which, in theological terms, signifies grace and that which is culturally, organizationally, and practically discordant, even dysfunctional. Having done this, the further aim is to ask how the relevant ecclesial webs might be rewoven with dynamic integrity so as to ameliorate, even overcome, that which is dysfunctional by learning/receiving from that which tangibly bears grace in the respective others. As such, the relationship between the more explicitly ecclesiological concerns of *RE&LC* and the extended use of empirical sociological methods that are integral to it is — from the ecclesiological perspective — not simply one of extended and refined description but one of critical accountability.

It is well recognized that the more traditional theological partner disciplines of philosophical, historical, linguistic, and literary-textual — and, more recently, natural scientific — analyses are capable of performing not just as vehicles for the fresh articulation of otherwise substantively unrevised established convictions and doctrinal tenets but as significant means for the testing and, where necessary, revising of such convictions and tenets.[37] This process of critical accountability might be thought of as operating at the dual levels of *internal coherence* — "Can the convictions and tenets in question be articulated in such a way as enables them to hang together without tension and contradiction?" — and *extensive coherence* — "Can the convictions and tenets in question be articulated in such a way as enables them to hang together with what we otherwise have good reason for understanding about relevant aspects of the world?"

So also, the various approaches and methods of empirical sociology

36. On the role of Christian theology as one of critical-constructive reflection on Christian practice, see Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope: A Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), pp. 208 and 133; and Lash, "Doing Theology on Dover Beach," in *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), pp. 3-23 (p. 14); Lash, "Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy," in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), pp. 95-119 (pp. 101, 103); "Theory, Theology and Ideology," in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, pp. 120-38 (p. 137); "Criticism or Construction? The Task of the Theologian," in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, pp. 3-17. For comment and analysis, see Murray, "Theology 'Under the Lash': Theology as Idolatry Critique in the Work of Nicholas Lash," *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007): 4-24, reprinted in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007), pp. 246-66.

37. See Lash, "Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy," in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, pp. 103-5; "Theory, Theology and Ideology," in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, p. 138.

(as also any other cognate disciplines) may rightly be regarded in the ecclesiological context as being similarly capable of performing not simply as means of extended and refined description but as means of critical testing. Where for other typical theological partner disciplines (e.g., the natural sciences, philosophy, etc.) this process of critical accountability may most commonly operate at what have here been identified as the levels of *internal* and *extensive* coherence, in the case of the social sciences it may more appropriately be regarded as generally operating at the level of *pragmatic coherence.* By this I mean that it could be thought of as operating, in the first instance, at the level of the relationships that pertain between a given theological conviction or doctrinal tenet on the one hand and the actual habits, practices, values, structures, systems, and interpersonal relationships that these same convictions and tenets allow to happen, even promote, whether intentionally or unintentionally, on the other hand.

In short, what are the practical consequences that follow from, or are supported by — whether unintentionally, tacitly, or explicitly — a particular theological conviction or doctrinal tenet, and how do these consequences disclose weaknesses in the convictions and tenets themselves and suggest the need for them to be rewoven in order to counter these weaknesses? The key principle here is that if a way of thinking consistently and recurrently promotes, or serves to legitimate, an undesirable practical consequence, then it raises questions about the adequacy of the way of thinking itself and the need for it to be revised.

Of course, this in turn raises the need for a return to explicitly theological modes of analysis wherein the relevant webs of practice and belief are carefully assessed with a view to establishing whether or not they can be reconfigured, even expanded, with integrity in order to accommodate — to "receive" — the identified aspect of desired potential learning. In short, the prolonged exercises in ad hoc engagement with the social sciences — the empirical "moments" or "turns" — that are in view in this understanding of the ecclesiological task not only start out from explicitly theological and doctrinally laden contexts but properly return there for discernment as to their theological adequacy.