

Blueprint Ecclesiology and the Lived: Normativity as a Perilous Faithfulness

Abstract

Normativity in Ecclesiology has tended to be based on a particular understanding of theology as blueprint. In the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Conversation there has been some dispute around how theological normativity should operate. This paper argues that theological knowledge arises from an ecclesial context of 'abiding'. This abiding is pneumatological in nature 'like the wind' and as such it is perilous. This point is argued with resort to a critical realist epistemology.

Key Words

Normativity – qualitative research – epistemology - abiding

There is a basic conundrum that runs through Ecclesiology. This conundrum centres on the relationship between theology and history. Put simply it is expressed in this question. How is it possible to speak simultaneously of the Church as having its being in the presence of God and its expression in culture? This is not at all new, as Mannion and Mudge point out, every doctrine about the Church can be traced back to particular historical situations. This includes all the traditional categories of speaking about the Church, 'visibility and invisibility, validity and efficacy, right preaching and celebration, apostolicity as Episcopal succession or faithfulness to teaching' each of these, they suggest, 'were formulated to address questions arising at different times and places.'¹ These classical categories, however, are constructed as a resort to an ideal in the face of the ambiguities and inconsistencies of the social and the historical. Hence they operate as a normative voice not simply in their particular context but also for the Church that inherits them. This observation suggests that the relationship between theologies of the Church and the 'lived' expression of the Church might be more complex than the notion of a 'blueprint' might imply'. Theological normativity appears to have a complex and entwined relationship with the lived. My term for this complexity is perilous faithfulness.

The Ecclesiology and Ethnography conversation was initially sparked into life through a sense of unease around idealized theological constructs of the Church. Nicholas Healy calls these idealised theologies of the Church 'blue print ecclesiologies'. A theological blue print is an attempt to reason abstractly about the 'perfect' shape of ecclesial life. The pursuit of a shape for the Church that is constructed as an ideal, Healy says, carries significant problems because it fails

¹ Mannion Gerard and Mudge, Lewis, S. Introduction: Ecclesiology – the nature, story and study of the Church In Mannion Gerard and Mudge, Lewis, S. (eds), *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church* (London: Routledge 2010) p. 3.

to account for the 'concrete' Church. 'Blue print ecclesiologies', he argues, 'foster a disjunction ... betweenideal ecclesiology and the realities of the concrete church.'² So in failing to deal with the 'lived' nature of the Church blueprint ecclesiology tends to overlook the theological importance of the struggles that are involved in being Christian disciples and the frustrations of dealing with a Church that is not at all 'perfect' in many respects.³ Healy's protest at idealized ecclesiology is in marked contrast to John Webster's strongly argued position that theological reason has a priority over the lived. Webster believes that the 'being' of the Church i.e. its true nature, is derived from the being of God. It is therefore fundamentally 'theological', and that this affects the ability to 'see' the deepest and most fundamental reality of the Church. As Webster puts it, 'Christian dogmatics does not concede the ontological primacy and self-evidence of the social-historical; and it considers that apprehension of the phenomenal visibility of social-historical realities is not possible in the absence of reference to their ordering to God, that is, in the absence of reference to their creatureliness. And so its account of the church is an extension of the doctrine of God, and so of teaching about God's immanent perfection and goodness.'⁴ Thus for Webster there is a basic and fundamental hierarchy of knowledge that exists between 'dogmatic' or 'theological' enquiry and any approach that might be employed to engaged with the concrete or the lived i.e. empirical methods.⁵ For Webster the 'temporal forms of the Church are not unconditionally transparent.'⁶ The Church 'is' because it is made such by the presence of God and God is only visible 'spiritually'. The Church is therefore an 'evangelical, rather than simply a social-historical reality.'⁷ As a consequence this 'reality' can only be apprehended by what Webster calls 'spiritual' visibility. 'Spiritual visibility', he argues, 'is visibility to prayerful reason illuminated by the Holy Spirit to trust the work of God in creaturely occurrence.'⁸ The implication here is that 'dogmatics', as reason that is prayerful illumination, is the only way of speaking about the deepest truth of the Church.

Healy and Webster might be taken as representing opposing positions or poles in the conversation around Ecclesiology and Ethnography. So one-way of reading them might be through, Lindbeck's categories, of the cognitive-propositional and the experiential-expressivist.⁹ Yet the imposition of this kind of scheme on the debate might mean that something is lost. Webster and Healy may not be so different. Healy, after all, is not a social scientist but a systematic theologian and

² Healy Nicholas, M. *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), p. 37.

³ Healy, *Church, World*, p. 37.

⁴ Webster, John "In the Society of God: Some Principles of Ecclesiology in Ward, P (ed) *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2012), p. 204.

⁵ Webster Society, p. 221.

⁶ Webster Society, p. 221.

⁷ Webster Society, p. 215.

⁸ Webster Society. P. 215.

⁹ Lindbeck, George *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK 1984).

Webster's location of theological reason in spiritual practice is suggestive of the connection between the theologian and the lived reality of Church in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Although I am sure this is not quite what Webster has in mind it might be possible to view prayer as the collective prayer of the Church and the illumination of the Spirit similarly might be located in the reasoning of both individuals and of the wider community.

Affective Gravitational Pull of the Church

Inherent in the notion of a 'blueprint' is the assumption that the 'plan' is a design for an ensuing project. Blueprint ecclesiologies, in this sense precede, or in some way shape, or set the design for the lived practice of the Church. This approach to theology in relation to the lived is illustrated well by the use of Trinitarian theology in ecclesiology. For example the missiologist Andrew Kirk is typical of this approach in that he makes use of the Trinity as a source for thinking about the mission of the Church. Kirk, like Webster, seeks to talk about ontology. The being of God shapes how the Church engages in mission, "...in recent mission thinking the Trinity has come to the fore. God in Trinity is a community of divine persons. The unity/community which is God, established and maintained in love, constitutes the plan for humanity.'¹⁰ This kind of social Trinitarianism has become central to thinking about the Church and mission in contemporary theology. A further example can be seen in the influential Anglican Mission Shaped Church report that makes the connection between diversity, unity, and mission through the social Trinitarian category of perichoresis. "The three persons of the Trinity in perichoretic relationship do not simply take up an attitude of loving concern towards each other but actually make each other who they are through relation.'¹¹ Andrew Kirk and the Mission Shaped Church Report utilise Trinitarian theology to frame normative moves. The direction of reasoning here moves from the ideal or perfect construct to practice. The reasoning follows a similar pattern to that set out by Webster. The Church, it is argued, has its origin and being in the being of God, and this tells us something about mission and unity, these insights are then used to create norms for practice. Recent work on the Trinity, however, has started to call into question this form of reasoning.

Stephen Holmes is one among many theologians who are finding problems with the social doctrine of the Trinity as a 'blueprint' for ecclesiology. Holmes develops his critique by addressing some of the assumptions about Trinitarian theology and how those who advocate a social doctrine of the trinity have, in his view, misread the tradition, but along the way he makes an interesting observation concerning the relationship between theology and reasoning about the Church. Holmes points out that John Zizioulas and Miroslav Volf resort to very similar Trinitarian theologies but these theologies appear to 'fund' contrasting and contradictory ecclesiologies. Holmes observes that while for

¹⁰ Kirk, Andrew *What is Mission?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1999), p. 29.

¹¹ Robin Greenwood quoted in Archbishop's Council *Mission Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing 2004), p. 96.

Zizioulas the Trinity leads to a hierarchical and structured pattern for the Church, by contrast for Volf it leads to a more democratic and participative ecclesiology. So, although they have very similar 'blueprints' in terms of their reading of the Trinity, each of them appears to conclude that these 'plans' support very different, in fact diametrically opposite, ecclesiologies. Zizioulas is, of course, an Orthodox theologian and Volf (at the time of writing) was Free Church.¹² Holmes appears to have uncovered here what I would term the 'affective gravitational pull of the Church'. So having done the complex reasoning that Trinitarian theology seems to require the resulting ecclesiologies appear to divide along rather predictable lines. The Orthodox Zizioulas settles for hierarchy, and the Free Church Volf for shared leadership. This in a sense calls into question the whole idea of a 'blueprint'. It is rather like a situation where two builders are given the same plans and one builds a bungalow and the other a five-storey block of flats. The point here is that there appears to be something more than theological 'reasoning' at play.

Gravitational pull describes the way that ecclesial traditions shape and condition reasoning. Traditions are affective because they are inhabited, lived in, and simultaneously habituated and internalized. Theologians are, in this sense, no different to any other Christian, in that their traditioning in the Church shapes how they reason. It is worth introducing here Karen Kilby's critique of social Trinitarianism as projection.¹³ Kilby argues that the God in God's self is 'hidden' from us, such that it is not possible to directly reason from the economic to the immanent trinity. Those who advocate social doctrines of the trinity however appear to have seized this 'hiddenness' as an opportunity. What by rights is not known and shouldn't be known, the apophatic, has been filled by the social and political concerns of the theologian. Kilby judges this to be 'projection'. These observations on social Trinitarianism in effect echo Albert Schweitzer's critique of the Liberal lives of Jesus i.e. that liberal theology recreates Christ in its own image.¹⁴ There is a deep irony here, and one that is not lost on Kilby, because those who want to utilize Trinitarian theology in ecclesiology are doing so because they want to insulate themselves against 'liberal' theology based in experience. The assertion that the Church is rooted in the 'being' of God' is intended to provide a theological assurance against the prioritization of the 'lived' as seen in the prevailing move towards 'culture' and 'contextualisation'. Kilby's suggestion that these theologies are some kind of projection rather undermines this assurance. Blueprint ecclesiology, in a sense, might not be the kind of idealised, or normative, 'plans' that the designers claim. The work of Holmes and Kilby is deeply significant but there is a further move that neither of

¹² Holmes, Stephen R. Three Versus One? Some Problems of Social Trinitarianism In *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009), pp. 77-89.

¹³ Kilby, Karen Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity, In *New Blackfriars* (October 2000), Kilby Karen Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible? In *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (Volume 12 Number 1, January 2010).

¹⁴ Schweitzer, Albert *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (ET) (London: A.C. Black 1911).

then quite make, and this relates to the appropriation of Social Trinitarianism in the Church.

Trinitarian theology has been enthusiastically 'taken up' in ecclesial discourse. This taking up is deeply significant because it indicates how there is a symbiotic relationship between theology and the lived. To illustrate this it is worth quoting the Catholic Theologian Catherine LaCugna. 'The heart of the Christian life', says La Cugna, 'is to be united with the God of Jesus Christ by means of communion with one another. The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately therefore a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other. Trinitarian theology could be described par excellence as a theology of relationship, which explores the mysteries of love, relationship, personhood and communion within the framework of God's self revelation in the person of Christ and the activity of the Spirit.'¹⁵ Here the Trinity is nestled in a cocktail of ideas: community, relationship, and communion with one another. These are precisely what Kilby identifies as 'projections', and as such they represent the aspirations of the contemporary Church. We want to be these things. We are drawn towards this vision of ourselves. These ideas lay bare the affective gravitational pull of the Church. They reassure us in the face of the disintegration of community, the rise of consumerism, and the hegemony of the 'self', that the Church embraces another way. The irony here is that this 'other way', read as projection, is not the robust 'theological' understanding of the Church that it purports to be. It is, in effect, another version of what Heelas and Woodhead call the 'subjectivisation' of religion.¹⁶ The only difference is that it is the 'collective' or communal self that is centre stage.

Social Trinitarianism has traction and plausibility in contemporary ecclesiology because it connects to affective sensibilities that circulate in the lived. It 'feels right' because it connects to the collective embodiment of our Churches. This affective and embodied sensibility, in effect, trumps theological reason. Stephen Pickard's recent work on Anglican ecclesiology is a case in point.¹⁷ Pickard is aware of the work of Kilby and others, and he discusses their critique of Social Trinitarianism in some detail. He sees the force of the theological arguments and positions himself as being in agreement with them. What is interesting is that, almost without drawing breath, he then goes on to try to reformulate a theological framework for ecclesiology as relationship, communion, and sociality. So in effect he simply redraws the familiar Trinitarian ecclesiology with a slightly different orientation. He seeks to retain what he calls 'the critical features of a society formed in relation to the sociality of the Triune God.'¹⁸ 'The Church', he says, participates in a double movement of God. So, what we have is

¹⁵ LaCugna, Catherine Mowry *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins 1991), p. 1.

¹⁶ Heelas Paul and Woodhead Linda *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005), pp. 2-5.

¹⁷ Pickard, Stephen *Seeking the Church: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press 2012), pp. 101-116.

¹⁸ Pickard, *Seeking*, p.114.

the form of a Church that consists of a twofold movement of (a) an ever-expanding reach into the world and (b) at the same time an ever-deepening engagement with God and each other through its inner life. These co-related movements informed by and propelled by the Spirit of the Father's Son provide the basic patterning for the form of a renewed sociality.¹⁹ The point I am trying to make here is that even after saying the Social Doctrine of the Trinity is not the way to develop ecclesiology Pickard can't resist returning one more time to the well. This imperative, in a sense, does not come from the doctrine but from prior sensibilities around 'sociality' as the basis for the Church. What we see is that Pickard has a commitment to the Church as a new kind of sociality and community. He gives the impression that he is somewhat disappointed that the systematic theologians have undermined the Trinitarian foundations for these convictions and so he tries to find a way to rescue as much as he can. This is the affective gravitational pull of the Church. Habituated and formed by tradition theologians are shaped by identification. What is at play with Pickard and others is a kind of Theology then does not operate as a blueprint rather it becomes a legitimation of a 'deeper' affective lived truth.

In the Middle the Church as Structure of Feeling

Rowan Williams, when asked about the starting point for theological method, is somewhat ambivalent. The theologian, he believes, always starts 'in the middle of things.' Being in the middle comes from a location in the flow of Church tradition and practice. 'There is a practice of common life and language already there, a practice that defines a specific shared way of interpreting human life as lived in relation to God.'²⁰ The meaning of the word God is to be 'discovered by watching what this community does'. For Williams, it is not simply the self-conscious moments of reflection that are of significance, but also the times when the community is acting, educating, inducting and worshipping.²¹ There is a circular movement here in 'being in the middle'. The theologian is shaped and formed by being part of the lived expression of ecclesial life, and then in turn that life itself, in its diversity of expression, informs and shapes theological construction. Thus being in the middle goes some way to explaining the way that theologians, rather than developing blueprints, appear to construct theology, out of, and as a support for, culture or a way of life that is Christian.

Raymond Williams speaks of culture as a way of life. Culture he says is a 'structure of feeling.'²² This way of life is 'as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.'²³ Culture is organic in nature and yet it manifests itself in organization. Like an organism it shifts and changes over time.²⁴ There is a sense in which it can only be made visible to those who are within its organism, but at the same

¹⁹ Pickard, *Seeking*, p.114.

²⁰ Williams, Rowan *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell 2000), p. xii.

²¹ Williams *On Christian*, p. xii.

²² Williams, Raymond *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), p. 64.

²³ Williams, *Long* p. 64.

²⁴ Williams. *Long* p. 65.

time 'visibility' may be restricted by the sense that this is simply the way things are. Hence Williams can talk about the mystery of cultural transmission. 'One generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own 'structure of feeling', which will not appear to have come 'from' anywhere.'²⁵ To be in the middle hence involves sharing in the 'affective' and the structured nature of things. There is a power here but it is power that is hard to pin down. In ecclesiology the 'structure of feeling' manifests itself in the gravitational pull of the Church.

The mysteriousness of the structure of feeling is suggestive of a pneumatological ecclesiology. The Spirit leads the Church into truth but this is the same Spirit that is illusive like the wind and hard to pin down. Hence methodology in ecclesiology starts from the shifting ground of the structure of feeling. Here there is perhaps something to be made of Archbishop Rowan's use of the word 'things'. Theologians, he says, start 'in the middle of things.'²⁶ There is a 'thingness' to Church, it is material and structure, but it is also fluid moving and changing.²⁷ It is a 'feeling', a sensibility and it is in this context that the gravitational pull of traditioning needs to be understood. Things are agents in ecclesial construction. Materiality shapes the theologian and the theology that they go on to produce. This reverses the logic of the 'blueprint'. In the blueprint the ideal shapes the lived and the material. The 'thingness' of tradition by contrast speaks of the way that individuals and communities are shaped by the buildings they inhabit, the rituals they enact, and the songs that they sing. Thingness however also introduces a measure of fluidity. Things are agents that shape but as they shape they articulate with meaning in different ways. A blueprint is an attempt to determine how something should be constructed. It works though an idealized, or prescribed precision. Webster's theology is far from being 'simple' or even clear but it is an attempt to define. It offers the illusion of a hierarchy of knowing not so much because of a privileged means of knowing but because of the way of knowing. What I am suggesting here is that it is a 'blueprint' not because it draws us closer to the divine but because its genre enables precision. The interesting thing is that the logic of a prayerful knowing illuminated by the spirit locates the theologian in a more ambiguous embodied pneumatology. Reading Webster against the grain this prayerful illumination of reason is just as much 'in the middle' of things as Williams suggests. The material from which ecclesiology might be constructed for Webster is different than for Rowan Williams, and it is this that allows the one to present as a distinct way of knowing, but in and of itself it is fundamentally an ecclesial form of knowing, i.e. a way of knowing that seeks to be located in the tradition and simultaneously indwelt by the divine presence. It is being known whilst knowing.

²⁵ Williams. *Long* p. 65.

²⁶ Williams *On Christian*, p. xii.

²⁷ Ward, Pete *Participation and mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM Press 2008).

‘The wind blows where it chooses, you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.’²⁸ If theology has a special ability to see this ability is itself provisional. The central concern of the theologian, says Thomas Torrance, cannot be regarded simply as ‘data’ that are given over to the control and the manipulation of reason. The gift and the giver, he argues, are identical. ‘It is God who has given and revealed Himself in Israel and in the Incarnation’ to be understood but he ‘remains the Lord God transcendent in His eternal and infinite Being who cannot be comprehended even when we apprehend Him.’²⁹ God has given himself to us and yet in his giving there is something ‘unspecifiable’. This gives the work of dogmatics ‘a rather baffling character’.³⁰ Dogma is concerned with the ultimate ground and creative source of the Church. It focuses on the divine revelation in the incarnation as this communication ‘calls forth form and structure in the Church’s existence and history.’³¹ Through continual revision and reflection the Church advances in the depth and complexity of its knowledge but this process is located in the continuing work of the Spirit. The ‘object’, says Torrance, ‘proclaims, interprets and defines itself, and therefore instructs us in our knowledge of it, assimilating us in our knowing to its own activity and mission.’³² These formulations are not abstract theories or formulations through which the divine can be defined and encapsulated, rather these dogmatic frameworks are interpretative constructs or ‘hermeneutic media’ by means of which the self disclosure of God is manifested in its own self interpretation and in our disciplined response.³³ Through this process in the Church knowledge does not simply break through to us it is also ‘broken up’ in the activity of our knowing and articulating within the Christian community. ‘We cannot take these as transcripts of the Word of God but as orderly, scientific reactions of our relations with the Word through which we must allow the objective reality to reveal itself to us in its own essential harmony and meaning, yet always in such a way that it is sharply distinguished from our dogmatic constructs or dogmas.’³⁴

Ecclesiology is a complex endeavor. Not only is there an inherent problematic between the social and historical ‘being’ of the Church and how this being finds its origin in the being of God but all talk of the divine being is itself provisional. In expression, and in the life of the Church, doctrine shifts, develops and fragments. It is like the wind. Elusiveness does not simply appertain to an examination of the empirical reality of the Church it is also a characteristic of theological thought itself. It is both a journey into that which holds the Church to account, while also holding that expression itself to account. This is not to say that there is no divine being, no transcendent beyond but this ‘reality’ is mediated in and through the interpretative patterning of doctrinal reflection.

²⁸ John 3:8.

²⁹ Torrance, Thomas, F. *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1969) p. 344.

³⁰ Torrance *Theological* p. 344.

³¹ Torrance *Theological* p. 345.

³² Torrance *Theological* p. 346.

³³ Torrance *Theological* p. 346.

³⁴ Torrance *Theological* p. 347.

There is a knowing acknowledgement of the extent to which dogmatic frameworks are provisional constructs while always acknowledging the irreducible reality of the being of God revealed in Jesus Christ. So while with Webster we might agree that ecclesiology is characterized by a hierarchy of knowledge this hierarchy is complex. The doctrinal is an orientation towards origins of the Church and as such it speaks of what 'is'. This speech however is itself provisional. It is a mistake then to see the notion of a hierarchy of knowledge as offering inviolate high ground from which to approach the messy nature of the phenomena of the Church. This has significant implications for the interdisciplinary venture associated with Ecclesiology and Ethnography because doctrine itself is shifting ground. In ecclesiology theological reflection has always been subject to historical contingency.

Critical Realism and Perilous Normativity

Torrance's method arises from the 'creatureliness' or the 'lived' nature of theological thought. There is in this, I would suggest, an essential perilousness that needs to be acknowledged, even as the theologian seeks to engage with revelation. This 'perilousness' comes from the limitations associated with the knowledge of God. At the same time, who God is, and how God is, are not at all 'ambiguous' or indeterminate. God is who God is in Jesus Christ. It is the theologian's attempts to express and make sense of what has been revealed that gives rise to perilousness. This position has clear affinities with Critical Realism.³⁵

Critical Realism, says Andrew Wright, is characterized by ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgmental rationality.³⁶ *Ontological Realism* asserts that, there is a distinction between the realm of knowledge and the realm of the real. 'objects exist and events occur in reality whether we are aware of them or not.'³⁷ 'So there is a crucial distinction to be made between ontology and epistemology. Once the distinction between ontology and epistemology is established it becomes possible to develop a rich account of the contours of reality.'³⁸ *Epistemic Relativism* resists both enlightenment certainty and postmodern scepticism. Ontology has a primacy over epistemology because reality precedes the knowledge of that reality. Our knowledge however is limited and therefore epistemologically relative.³⁹ Knowledge lies between the extremes of absolute certainty and radical skepticism and it consists in reasoned attachment to positions. Knowledge is 'faith seeking understanding.'⁴⁰ 'The affirmation of epistemic relativism acknowledges the limits of our knowledge, but does not deny either the actuality of genuine knowledge or the possibility of

³⁵ See McGrath, Alister *A Scientific Theology: Volume 2 Reality* (London: T and T Clark 2001), p. 234-244.

³⁶ Wright, Andrew *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy (New Studies in Critical Realism and Spirituality)*, (London: Routledge 2012), pp. 10-13.

³⁷ Wright, *Critical*, p. 10.

³⁸ Wright, *Critical* p. 10.

³⁹ Wright, *Critical* p. 11.

⁴⁰ Anselm quoted in Wright, *Critical* p. 13.

establishing better knowledge in the future.’⁴¹ *Judgemental Rationality* recognises that not all accounts of reality are equal. It is possible to make judgements between differing expressions of knowledge. There are no secure foundations for knowledge or indeed no fixed criteria for deciding between truth claims in knowledge but never-the-less rational discussion is possible, in fact it is necessary. As Wright puts it, ‘The priority of ontology means that we must adapt our epistemic tools in response to the objective demands of reality, rather than adjust reality to bring it into conformity with our epistemic tools.’⁴² Knowledge is contextual rather than foundational. Knowledge is built through a creative process and once it is expressed it is subject to revision and correction. Yet both constructs and the means by which we may decide between competing explanatory forms of knowledge are subject to revision. They are provisional. Judgemental rationality, says Wright, is rather like a court of law where different forms of knowledge and information are at play in the pursuit of the truth.⁴³

A Critical Realist perspective introduces a significant analytical framework for ecclesiology. Blueprint ecclesiologies rest on the assertion that the being of the Church is derived from the being of God. Normativity therefore arises from a kind of privileged access to ontology. Theological method, reason illuminated by the Spirit, gives access to the ‘isness’ of God and the ‘isness’ of the Church but what is meant here by ontology is quite distinct from the understanding of ontology within Critical Realism. Ontology for Critical Realism refers to a ‘real’ but description of this ‘real’ is epistemology and therefore relative. In other words, while knowledge is formed in relation to the real, any account of ‘what is’ does not operate in the field of ontology. Blueprint ecclesiologies tend to conflate epistemology and ontology. In fact this merger lies at the heart of their claim to authority. This is what Wright calls enlightenment certainty. The certainty in blueprint ecclesiology comes from complex association of ideas. The first part of the chained set of ideas is the assumption that truth can be attained at the level of abstraction. Abstract descriptions of the Church are then articulated with a claim to express ‘ontological truth’ i.e. to be able to speak about what really ‘is’. What really ‘is’, it is claimed, has its roots in a deeper knowledge, the knowledge of God. This heady mix has been the habituated mode of operation for theological discussion.

Critical Realism suggests a move beyond the blueprint ecclesiology. First it locates doctrinal discussion as epistemologically relative. So despite the claim to operate at the level of what ‘is’, critical realism reads blueprint ecclesiology as accounts of the real and not as ontology itself. As such these accounts are relative, open to challenge, and revision. At the same time a Critical Realist perspective enables the possibility that there is an ontological reality beyond our accounts of that reality. So ontology in a critical realist perspective is present, but it is closed off as a privileged field of discourse. Critical Realism therefore short circuits the link that theologians have been inclined to make between abstraction, ontology, and revelation, but it opens the door for a kind of

⁴¹ Wright *Critical* p.13.

⁴² Wright *Critical* p.13.

⁴³ Wright *Critical* p.14.

ecclesiology that can interact with the doctrinal as a situated knowledge i.e. part of the lived. It does this however while resisting the tendency to collapse the doctrinal into the cultural. This inevitably raises the question of normativity in ecclesiology.

Abiding as Perilous Normativity

The traditional operation of theology in relation to the Church has been to set frameworks and develop boundaries. This normative function is not only necessary it is essential. Normativity, however, because of the gravitational pull of the Church appears to be a perilous activity without guarantees. This ambiguous and muddled aspect of ecclesiology is part of its situation in the lived. Ambiguity comes from the 'structure of feeling'. As has already been suggested, being in the 'flow' of the affective life of the Church introduces a pneumatological ecclesiology. The Spirit leads into truth by enabling the Church to abide. Abiding however is inherently perilous.

John 15:1-11 makes it clear that abiding in Jesus is fundamental to Christian practice. Jesus is the true vine and his Father is the vine grower. The followers of Jesus are the branches. If they do not bear fruit then they will be pruned. But the word that Jesus has spoken to his disciples makes them clean.⁴⁴ Christian practice springs as a fruit from being made one with Christ, the vine. Apart from the vine there is no fruit. In fact the unfruitful branches are cut off and thrown on the fire. The life of the believer and life of the Christian community have no other source and orientation than what is found in union with Christ. C. K. Barrett talks about the union of believers with Christ 'originating in his initiative and sealed by his death on their behalf, is completed by the believers' responsive love and obedience, and is the essence of Christianity.'⁴⁵ Abiding is a union with Christ. This union however finds its orientation and description in the relationship that Jesus has with the Father. As Craig Koester says 'Jesus's bond with the Father shows what it means to bear fruit. He abides in his Father's love and shows this by keeping his Father's commandments. His love is expressed in obedience.'⁴⁶ This abiding of the Father and the Son is set in parallel to the abiding of the followers of Christ. To be fruitful it is necessary to abide in the love and in the words of Jesus and walk the path of obedience.⁴⁷ Abiding, Barrett argues, is characterised by mutuality. 'Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit'⁴⁸ Abiding echoes the talk of the dwelling places that are to be prepared in the Father's house for believers. The Father and the Son dwell in each other and make their home in believers. 'Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the

⁴⁴ John 15: 4-5 and 8-10.

⁴⁵ Barrett, C. K. *The Gospel According to John* (2nd Edition) (London: SPCK 1978), p. 470.

⁴⁶ Koester, Craig, R. *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2008), p. 196.

⁴⁷ Koester *Word* p. 196.

⁴⁸ John 15: 5, Barrett, *John*, p. 470.

works themselves.⁴⁹ The believer is to abide or to 'indwell' Christ and Christ is to abide or indwell the believer. 'The Christian is unthinkable', says Barrett, 'except in union with Christ.'⁵⁰ The notion of abiding also echoes Jesus' words about the Bread of Life. 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.'⁵¹ Mutual abiding is therefore explained in both passages analogically by a comparison to Jesus' relation to the Father. 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.'⁵² To abide is to grow up 'in all things into him'⁵³ Thus to dwell in Christ is to continually be made clean by the words that Jesus has spoken. This is not a metaphorical use of words but a reference to the actual words that Jesus has spoken.⁵⁴ For Rudolf Bultmann abiding signals a steadfast loyalty to the cause of Christ, but this persistence comes from the experience of being 'held', or 'allowing oneself to be held'.⁵⁵ To abide 'means holding on loyally to the decision once taken, and one can hold on to it only by continually going through it again.'⁵⁶ So abiding involves a contemplative return to the words of Christ of the Gospels. To abide requires a continual focused attention on Jesus. It is an intense loving relationship.

Abiding Normativity and Method

Normativity, reconstituted as abiding, describes an ecclesial practice. Fundamentally this means that normativity, as abiding, comes with none of the guarantees that talk of a 'hierarchy' of knowledge might imply. Normativity is not simply delivered through the genre of theological rationality and the ability to make distinctions in the ideal. Neither can it be achieved by privileging the voice of the trained theologian. Being in the middle locates the theologian in the flow of tradition and as part of the prayer of the community. Having said this, theological production, in common with all academic work, generates knowledge. In its form this product is no different to any other kind of knowledge it consists of theories, descriptions, analysis and formulations. In terms of genre what this boils down to are words, and whether they are on a page, or shared in some other way, at this basic level, these words share a genre with any other kind of knowing. As such they can be operationalised in interdisciplinary work both as interpretative tools and as a form of judgment. Normativity in this sense is facilitated by genre i.e. the form that theological knowing has been transformed into. The crucial point here is that this product arises from attention and contemplation. Abiding is not simply the perquisite for knowing (and being known) it is its primary location. What this means is that the 'product' of theological creativity, presented as knowledge, is not in and of

⁴⁹ John 14:10-11, see also 14:2 and 23. (Burridge, Richard, A. *John: The People's Bible Commentary* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship 1998), p. 181.

⁵⁰ Barrett, *John*, p. 474.

⁵¹ John 6:56.

⁵² John 6:57.

⁵³ Ephesians 4:15 see Lightfoot, R. H. *St John's Gospel: A Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1956) p. 282.

⁵⁴ Lightfoot, *St John* p. 283.

⁵⁵ Bultmann, Rudolf *The Gospel of John* (ET) (Oxford: Blackwell 1971), p. 535.

⁵⁶ Bultmann *The Gospel*, p. 536.

itself normative. Normativity is always located in the middle. The product thus is the approximation to normativity. It is always contingent. This brings us back to Mannion and Mudge's observation that the key doctrines of the Church have been generated out of the particular and the social.⁵⁷ Ecclesiology is thus always and already a conditioned form of knowing. Normativity as distinction becomes possible when we are content to converse in the ideal, but there are limitations to this because normativity in ecclesiology is not simply a question of making abstract distinctions. Ecclesiology is distinctive in academic theology precisely because it has to connect to the social and historical. This is the central 'conundrum' that cannot be avoided. If judgment is simply deciding between competing idealized accounts then normativity can operate by an exchange between theological products. This kind of normativity however is not at all what is required in ecclesiology because judgment has implications for the social and the cultural. Churches have to take material form. They are 'things'. The connection to the material and historical requires ecclesiology to forge some kind of connection to the particular. This notion, in a sense, is inherent in the idea of 'blueprint'. Blueprints assume agency and construction. Obviously it is possible to talk about the relative merits of different blueprints but this is the architecture of the imagination. Normativity in ecclesiology calls for something more than this, i.e. a way to develop judgment in relation to the contingent. Perilous normativity draws attention to the gravitational pull of the embodied. What this means is that normativity operates in relation to the lived and as part of the lived.

The central conundrum in ecclesiology is precisely the agenda that Ecclesiology and Ethnography has set itself. When the 'lived' is explored through qualitative research and theology, issues of normativity remain central. This paper has been an attempt to lay the ground for a more extensive methodological contribution to the Ecclesiology and Ethnography conversation. A detailed account of how perilous normativity might operate in relation to qualitative method will require more space than this paper allows but by way of closing I want to sketch how this might be developed. The central argument running through the piece has been that speech about the Church does not take the form of a 'blueprint' rather it is itself crucially influenced by and located in the lived. Theology of all kinds, and particularly theologies of the Church, arise from the 'middle.' At the same time locating theologies of the Church as part of the 'structure of feeling' does not preclude the reference to that which is beyond. The critical realist move suggests that it is in the nature of things that there is always a disconnect between theological expression and the being of God. A shift in genre towards abstraction and the ideal is in no sense a journey up the ladder towards the divine. All speech, be it in a sermon or a theological treatise is epistemologically relative but simultaneously it is also a place of divine encounter. The Spirit blows where it wills. So normativity is located in abiding but the knowledge that is generated as product from the 'middle' is contingent. There are parallels here to qualitative method.

⁵⁷ Mannion and Mudge, Introduction, p. 3.

Empirical research like theology generates product. This product is distinct from the lived that is being studied. It is this commonality of genre that allows for the kind of interdisciplinary work that Ecclesiology and Ethnography is seeking. Qualitative method requires a mix of reflexivity and theory in the interpretation of data. Theological enquiry is similarly conditioned. Qualitative method foregrounds the reflexive as a relativizing move. Analysis should be read as an account of the 'real'. This relativity is shared by the theological voice even as that voice seeks to offer a basis for judgment. This judgment however is not in and of itself a resort to hierarchy or blueprint. There is one fundamental reason why this is so. The location for normativity is not found in academic production but abiding and abiding is located in the 'middle'. It is precisely this location that forms the area for attention in qualitative research. Empirical methods are a means to explore the practices of the Church. The relationship between abiding and qualitative method and theological production are much closer than the notion of hierarchy might assume. Crucial to this observation is the argument that normativity lies in abiding rather than in the product of abiding. The product of theological rationality therefore rests in relation to the lived in a very similar place to any other kind of theoretical contribution to data analysis, but with one crucial exception. Theological production, as theory, pays attention to the flow of tradition in relation to the practices of communities. It brings these 'voices' into conversation with the particular. Theological product is in this sense not entirely interchangeable with any other kind of critical theory. Its distinction lies in the accumulated attention. It is part of the practice of abiding and in this sense it is ecclesial in form. The authority of theological product lies, therefore, not so much in the individual charisma, or in the learning of a particular voice, but in the location of this voice in the 'middle'. This collective authority is not in any way clear cut or even decisive. It has more of the character of being a sense. It is a structure of feeling.