

WHY ECCLESIOLOGY CANNOT LIVE BY DOCTRINE ALONE:
A REPLY TO JOHN WEBSTER'S 'IN THE SOCIETY OF GOD'

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ABSTRACT:

This essay defends the significance of ethnography for ecclesiology. It does so by engaging with the ecclesiology of John Webster, particularly his essay 'In the Society of God', which directly challenges the relevance of ethnographic methods for a theology of the church. The discussion demonstrates the importance of Webster's warning against the reduction of ecclesiology to an uncritical embrace of the apparent 'givenness' of observed empirical facts, but also argues that his approach is less useful for analyzing and criticizing the failures of the church community. The essay concludes by arguing that ethnography has the potential to enhance the church's capacity to recognise, and thus confess, its sins, but also to deepen its corporate discernment and attentiveness to the presence of God's activity in its midst.

KEYWORDS: Doctrine, Ecclesiology Ethnography, John Webster, Ephraim Radner

*Oh ye sons of men,
How long will ye turn
My glory into shame?*

These words from Psalm 4 open Linden MacIntyre's novel *The Bishop's Man*. Set in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the book is the story of a Roman Catholic priest, Duncan MacAskill, who is assigned by his bishop to clean up messy situations into which other clergy have gotten themselves. Initially, he is able to remain emotionally detached from this role as 'the Bishop's Man', and carries out his job effectively. However, after he encounters a case involving the sexual abuse of a minor, he can no longer disengage from the troubling situations he witnesses. His reaction is complicated by the fact that his bishop refuses to see abused children as victims, but only as troublesome complainers who need to be silenced, 'I

¹ I would like to thank Philip Ziegler, Donald Wood, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on a previous draft of this essay.

don't care what you think you saw!'² After the suicide of a young boy, the bishop senses that MacAskill is faltering, and orders him not to report anything to the civil authorities: 'all the enemies of Catholicism [are]... thrilled at the discomfort of Mother Church.... It's an ugly world out there. We have to handle this ourselves. Keep the enemy out of it.'³ The bishop then seeks to console his troubled priest by suggesting that, 'The Sacraments mitigate the damage', but MacAskill is not convinced and eventually turns against his church.

This portrait of some of the agonies and failings of contemporary churches illustrates a massive challenge confronting the discipline of ecclesiology. When Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge observe that ecclesiology in the twenty-first century has become 'of great topical interest once again', they acknowledge that one significant reason for this is the sad reality of situations such as the one explored in MacIntyre's novel. Renewed attention to ecclesiology, they remark, is largely due to concerns over the ongoing failures and divisions among and between historical churches, as well as to the fact that Christians are becoming progressively more aware of the extent to which Christian thought and practice are influenced by their 'historical-sociological-institutional footprint'.⁴ This is to say that, increasingly, ecclesiologists - not unlike Father MacAskill - find themselves unable to ignore 'what they think they saw' in their local churches when writing theologically about the Church.

To be sure, not all of the lived ecclesial experiences stimulating greater ecclesiological reflection are as sinister or hurtful as the reality of sexual abuse committed by clergy.

² L. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 20.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴ G. Mannion & L.S. Mudge (eds), *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church* (New York & London: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2008), pp. 1-3.

Interest in the sociological factors related to church growth, and the effectiveness of missionary outreach, has also heightened attention to the realities of particular church practices.⁵ Similarly, explorations of how specific church ministries might best serve particular constituents motivate empirical studies of the church.⁶

For some theologians, these trends are to be embraced and celebrated for shaping ecclesiology into a less abstract, more scientific and empirical discipline.⁷ Other theologians, however, step back from examples of ‘thick descriptions’ of particular church congregations and question whether anything distinguishes such accounts from purely sociological or anthropological studies. More precisely, the concern often raised is: What remains of *theology* in such expressions of ecclesiology? All this is to say that a spectre is haunting dogmatic ecclesiology – the spectre of the empirical church; while at the same time, behind ethnographic accounts of church life lurks the often unaddressed spectre of theology. Contemporary ecclesiological debates are thus torn over how to understand the relationship between doctrinal statements about the Church and empirical descriptions of the embodied realities of particular church communities.

This essay examines this tension between doctrinal approaches to ecclesiology and ethnographic accounts of the church by engaging with a critic of the latter approach: John Webster. The discussion focuses on a paper that Webster delivered at a conference on

⁵ D. A. MacGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); L. J. Francis and C. Roberts, ‘Growth or decline in the Church of England during the decade of Evangelism’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24.1 (2009), pp. 67-81.

⁶ S. Snyder, *Asylum-seeking, Migration and Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); W. Vaughan Jenkins and H. Kavan, ‘Sermon Responses and Preferences in Pentecostal and Mainline Churches’, *Journal of Empirical Theology* 22.2 (2009), pp. 142-161.

⁷ J. A. van der Ven and M. Scherer-Rath (eds.), *Empirical Research and Normativity in Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

Ecclesiology and Ethnography at the University of Aberdeen.⁸ Webster criticises what he perceives as a tendency to collapse divine activity into church practices in many ecclesiologies that emphasise the empirical congregation. This discussion shows how Webster's concerns are particularly useful for critically analysing ecclesiologies that intend to offer positive assertions about the presence of the divine in the activities of the congregation, or that construct instrumental strategies for church growth or missional success. At the same time, the essay demonstrates that Webster's approach is less useful for analysing and criticizing the failures of the church community. While Webster's dogmatic perspective focuses on preventing ecclesiology from over-reaching itself, it is far less successful at interrupting and calling into question the practices of the church as such. Put another way, Webster helps encourage an ecclesiological humility when it comes to describing the relation between particular empirical churches and divine activity, but his position is less able to chasten theological assumptions about the church itself. Thus, the argument is not so much a direct challenge against of Webster's theology of the church, but is rather focused on the claim that he misdiagnoses the value of employing (and the consequences of shunning) ethnography in ecclesiological reflection.

By critically engaging with the arguments and presuppositions of Webster's ecclesiology, the discussion demonstrates the potential for ethnography to contribute to ecclesiology, particularly by enhancing the church's capacity to recognise, and thus confess, its sins, but also to deepen its corporate discernment and attentiveness to the presence of God's activity in

⁸ The conference was held in March 2011, and the paper is published as: J. Webster, 'In the Society of God: Some Principles of Ecclesiology', in P. Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 200-222.

its midst. The essay will show that, by enhancing the church's capacity to confess its sins and to discern God's activity in its midst, ethnography has the capacity to deepen rather than dilute the theological task of ecclesiology.

1. Webster on *Theological Ecclesiology*

John Webster's general approach to systematic theology is one which he describes as 'dogmatic' in nature. Informed in his early writing by the work of Karl Barth and Eberhard Jüngel, what characterizes the discipline of theology for Webster is that it begins from the standpoint of the doctrine of God. This is a key distinction in his thought, for he contends that such an approach is not typical of contemporary theology, 'The theological disciplines have, in effect, been "de-regionalized", that is, they have been pressed to give an account of themselves in terms drawn largely from fields of enquiry other than theology'.⁹

In his essays on ecclesiology, Webster warns against the use of the social sciences in theology in a manner that is somewhat similar to the work of John Milbank. Milbank has argued that sociological methodologies inevitably result in a 'policing the sublime'.¹⁰ The impulse to explain everything in social terms, he suggests, expels explicitly theological accounts of the nature of reality, and thus reduces all treatments of social phenomena to this-world naturalistic causation. Webster provocatively extends this critique to include numerous other forms of theological investment in the importance of ecclesial 'practices', including the

⁹ J. Webster, 'Theological Theology' in *Confessing God: Essays on Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 22.

¹⁰ J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 101.

so-called ‘Yale School’ of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei,¹¹ Lutheran theologians like Robert Jenson and David Yeago,¹² and accounts of church practices found in the work of Reinhold Hütter, Miroslav Volf, and David Bass.¹³ What troubles Webster about such approaches is that, in his view, they share a common tendency to emphasise the ‘density’ of embodied church life to such an extent that they ‘so fill the horizon’ of ecclesiology that it ‘obscures the miracle of grace’ and grants insufficient attention to the church’s ultimate source – the triune God. The result is a theology of the church that neglects its origin in and downplays its reliance upon divine activity.¹⁴

It is with such a perspective that Webster turns to an examination of the emerging conversations over the relationship between ecclesiology and ethnography, which he explores in his essay ‘In the Society of God: Some principles of Ecclesiology’. He begins the discussion by making reference to Calvin’s image of the church as the ‘society of God’. Invoking Calvin’s emphasis on the sovereignty of God over the church establishes from the outset what Webster views to be the normative foundation for ecclesiology; namely, that ‘a theology of the church is not simply a phenomenology of ecclesial social history but an inquiry into that history’s ontological ground in the being and works of the church’s God’.¹⁵ For Webster, ecclesiology cannot be reduced to the ‘natural and historical properties’ of

¹¹ G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (London: SPCK, 1984); H. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹² R. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); D. Yeago, ‘The Church as Polity? The Lutheran Context of Robert W. Jensen’s Ecclesiology’, in C. Gunton (ed.), *Trinity, Time and Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 201-37.

¹³ R. Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); M. Volf and D. Bass (eds.), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁴ J. Webster, ‘On Evangelical Ecclesiology’, *Confessing God*, pp.155.

¹⁵ J. Webster, ‘In the Society of God’, p. 200.

Christian communities, for the church is not merely one form of human society among others, but finds its origin and proper identity as ‘the creaturely social coefficient of the outer work in which God restores creatures to fellowship with himself’. Since, in such a view, the church is primarily the product of God’s creating and saving activity (rather than merely of the outworking of sociological and psychological patterns and trends), Webster argues that the church’s origin, identity, and motivating force lie beyond reach of the methods of the social sciences, which can only map out naturalistic and historical phenomena. Thus, according to him, the study of the church can only be ‘an extension of the Christian doctrine of God’.¹⁶

By establishing ecclesiology as derivative and secondary to the doctrine of God, and by criticising any theology of the church that focuses on church ‘practices’ or on social scientific descriptions of particular congregations, Webster clearly relegates ethnography to at best a marginal role in ecclesiology. He essentially implies that it can only serve as a distraction from the real ecclesiological task. Webster acknowledges, however, that such a position leaves his approach to ecclesiology open to the charge of abstract idealism, i.e. that it over-emphasises mental concepts to the neglect of more concrete empirical phenomena. While there are substantial reasons to disagree with his assessment of the contribution of ethnography, it is important not to miss the significance of Webster’s cautionary challenge. Thus it is instructive to reflect on the concerns he raises against linking ecclesiology to ethnography, prior to criticising the implications he draws from these issues.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 201.

Criticisms of abstract ecclesiologies have been articulated by a number of contemporary theologians, including Nicholas M. Healy, whose work develops a sharp critique of what he calls ‘blueprint ecclesiologies’.¹⁷ Healy argues that the dominant styles of modern ecclesiology have tended to neglect the actuality of concrete churches, by describing the nature of the church according to some essential characteristic or idealized account. In his view, this trend suggests ‘that theologians believe that it is necessary to get our *thinking* about the church right first, after which we can go on to put our theory into practice’.¹⁸ The problem with such an attitude, Healy continues, is that it relies upon a pre-existing agreement over a normative model, but such agreement remains elusive among Christians. The absence of a shared normative starting point, he concludes, means that theological reflection on the church is properly a matter of practical rather than theoretical reasoning. This is to say that, according to Healy, ecclesiologists need to recognise that they are reflecting on ecclesial life in its pilgrim state, and that they have no clear access to the church’s final eschatological completion. Thus, the function of ecclesiology is ‘to aid the concrete church in performing its tasks and witness and pastoral care’.¹⁹

Webster defends a dogmatic approach to ecclesiology against such an appeal to the concrete church. He does so because he thinks that a position like Healy’s contains the hidden conviction ‘that the real is the social-historical’.²⁰ In Webster’s view, if empirical ‘facts’ are permitted a foundational role in ecclesiology, this implies that human history is conceived to be the fullness of reality, rather than the sovereignty of God. In his view, the church’s ‘being

¹⁷ N. M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁰ Webster, ‘In the Society of God’, p. 202.

is not exhausted in its phenomenal surface, because the church is constituted by the presence and action of God'.²¹

It is from such a perspective that Webster criticises approaches to ecclesiology such as those of Roger Haight and Johannes van der Ven. For example, when Haight writes that, 'The principal object of ecclesiology consists in the empirical organization or collectivity or communion called church', Webster argues that, in such a rendering, the secondary features – or 'proximate *res*' - of ecclesiology (the empirical reality of contemporary churches) displace what should be its principal foundation (or 'primary *res*'): the fact that all creaturely reality is grounded in God.²² Similarly, when van der Ven claims that 'God gives to the people to form the church themselves, to do the church themselves',²³ Webster thinks that this view, 'fold[s] language about divine action into language about the functions and codes of the Christian society'.²⁴

This brief summary of Webster's approach to ecclesiology illustrates a typical argumentative strategy found in his work. He begins the discussion with a dogmatic assertion about the nature of theology and its divine object, and then proceeds to contrast it with limitations he thinks are inherent to alternative theological options. Two such contrasting problems that he focuses on have already been brought into view: first, the charge that attention to the concrete practices of historical churches results in reducing theology to the results of empirical

²¹ Ibid., p. 215.

²² R. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1 (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 5.

²³ J.A. van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. xiv.

²⁴ Webster, 'In the Society of God', p. 202.

research; and second, his caution against collapsing divine action into subjective human agency. Each of these accusations will now be examined in more detail.

1.1 *Against the Immediate Givenness of Empirical Reality*

Even those inclined to view Webster's dogmatic approach to ecclesiology as an example of 'dogmatism' or abstract idealism would do well to linger on the critical concerns he raises about the dangers inherent to an over-emphasis on the empirical church. Moreover, it is noteworthy that this is not merely a significant theological caution, but is also one that is of relevance within the social sciences themselves. Criticisms of the supposed objectivity of empirical research is by now well-established, so there is no great need to elaborate at length on this point. Social scientists from the Frankfurt School of Social Research, to Thomas Kuhn, Bruno Latour, and Steven Shapin have all, in diverse ways, sought to challenge the ideology of 'scientism', which mistakes the interpretations of social experience developed by empirical research for an account of the fullness of reality. Such social theorists demonstrate that simplistic celebrations of empirical research fail to recognise that scientific knowledge production is shaped by social context.²⁵ Although such sociological and philosophical critiques of modern science do not share much in common with Webster's theological position (or, indeed, with other prominent theological criticisms of contemporary materialism),²⁶ it is nevertheless clear that his concerns should not simply be dismissed as

²⁵ See: M. Horkheimer, 'Materialism and Metaphysics', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. M.J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 10-46; T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); B. Latour, S. Woolgar & J. Salk, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); S. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: civility and science in seventeenth-century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²⁶ See, for example, J. Milbank, 'Materialism and Transcendence', in C. Davis, J. Milbank & S. Žižek (eds.), *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 393-426.

otherworldly or ‘idealist’ for the way in which they challenge the view that empirical interpretations of particular churches are to be assumed to be insights into objective reality.

Outside of scholarly debates over theological method, there are numerous examples in contemporary church life that illustrate the importance of questioning the assumption that the results of empirical research represent the full reality of the church. One such example can be briefly highlighted here. Within church-growth literature, one often observes a tendency to draw upon a certain reading of American congregational life found among sociologists of religion.²⁷ The basic argument of this school is that ‘conservative’ churches grow, whereas the more ‘liberal’ a church becomes the faster it experiences numerical decline. Dean M. Kelley offered such a view in his book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.²⁸ Since then, the argument that mainline church decline is related to liberal tolerance and doctrinal fuzziness has remained a commonplace among many theologians and journalists.

Such conclusions have been developed in detail among sociologists of religion who orient their approach according to rational choice theory. Rodney Stark, for example, argues that when a church diminishes its emphasis on providing access to miraculous events and the afterlife, it weakens its appeal to the general population. This explains, he concludes, why mainline liberal Christian churches are in decline.²⁹ In similar fashion, Lawrence Iannaccone credits the strength of more doctrinally conservative and morally strict Christian churches in

²⁷ For example, see: A. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reconstructing the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007); D. MacLauren, *Mission Implausible: Restoring Credibility to the Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004); D. A. Roozen & C. K. Hadaway, *Church & Denominational Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

²⁸ D.M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

²⁹ R. Stark, “Bringing Theory Back In,” in L. A. Young (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 3-23.

the United States for their greater ‘efficiency’. On the assumption that time is money, Iannaccone argues that churches with higher average salaries have a shorter worship service, and that shared-faith marriages result in a higher level of church attendance than mixed denominational marriages because ‘partners of the same religion can produce religious commodities more efficiently’. Why is this? Because, he continues, they benefit from economies of scale, ‘The same car drives everyone to church; there is no question as to how time and money contributions will be allocated to different religions’.³⁰

When church leaders and theologians draw upon such interpretations of church attendance in developing church-growth strategies, worship schedules and outreach to ‘seekers’, what is often missed is how adopting the conclusions of these sociological studies imports a variety of theoretical presuppositions about human nature.³¹ These theories are not simply ‘facts’ about social ‘reality’, but are themselves *interpretations* of particular observations of phenomena in the world. Church communities are viewed through the lens of supply-side economic theory, so that their role is simply to offer ‘compensation’ to people for the absence or unavailability of certain rewards, principally the longing for immortality. Stark claims that churches function according to the dynamic that, ‘it is necessary to enter into a long-term exchange relationship with the divine and with divinely inspired institutions, in order to follow the instructions’ on how to achieve the desired goal over the longer term.³² Such a perspective on church communities focuses on immediate material benefits (such as wealth, power, health, immortality), but displays little attention on other important, though less

³⁰ L. Iannaccone, ‘Religious Practices: A Human Capital Approach’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 29.3 (1990), p. 301.

³¹ I explore this in more detail in: C.C. Brittain, *Adorno and Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), pp. 147-159.

³² Stark, ‘Bringing Theory Back in’, pp. 6-7.

empirically measurable values, such as relationships, identity, meaning (not to mention the activity of God). More to the point, the implied understanding of human beings is at some distance from Christian visions of the moral life or the purpose of ecclesial community. Instead, these are simply portrayed as reward-seeking and shaped by cost-benefit instrumental reasoning. But theologians who draw on rational choice theory to orient church growth strategies generally fail to notice the baggage that such an approach brings with it. This example illustrates that there are significant reasons for theologians to challenge the equation of empirical observations about churches with ecclesiology as such.

That Christians are capable of being enticed by the trappings and temptations of their context, or, stated in more traditional terms, of being limited by their own sinful perceptions of the world, suggests that theologians like Webster are right to caution against an uncritical embrace of the empirical. Similarly, such a view also serves as a reminder of the fact that simply because some situation presently ‘is’ does not imply that it ‘ought’ to be. This is the most constructive way to interpret Webster’s insistence that all ‘talk of the human practices of the church must be rooted in...operative talk of God.’³³ In his ecclesiology, a focus on the doctrine of God intends to interrupt any propensity towards mistaking the givenness of the present moment for the fullness of reality. Thus, ‘the church is outside itself’; it is ‘ectopic’, because ‘its “place” is in the being and act of the creative and communicative God of the gospel’.³⁴ The use of such doctrinal language intends to guard against the collapse of ecclesiological statements into arbitrary preferences or ideological embraces of immediate ‘facts’. Recognising this illuminates how, for Webster, the specifically doctrinal language of

³³ J. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 42-43.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

doctrine intends to hold open a respect for the interruption of divine agency in human history and the life of the church.

1.2 *On Divine Agency and the Creaturely Church*

If this is the intention of Webster's dogmatic approach to ecclesiology, how does he present the nature of this *theological* interruption of empirical approaches to ecclesiology? It is helpful on this point to briefly compare his approach to some other views on the subject. For Alister McGrath, for example, there is little concern for any inherent contradiction between ecclesiology and ethnography, since he assumes that there remains 'a distinctively Christian way of seeing things', which is informed by doctrine and the forming of Christian character, and this focuses the ethnographic lens.³⁵ John Swinton offers a relational viewpoint, suggesting that, when ethnography is 'set aside for a special purpose' – i.e. serving the needs of the church – then it can be 'sanctified' and contributes to the task of ecclesiology.³⁶ Mary McClintock Fulkerson emphasises how 'bodily techniques' instil 'properties' and 'knowledges' that inform the subjectivities of human beings, so that attending to the ways in which Christians are shaped by (and themselves give shape to) the practices of the churches in which they gather, uncovers the implicit theologies that these communities embody.³⁷

Webster has not commented directly on any of these contributions, but there is reason to assume that he would raise concerns about each in turn. Fulkerson's investment in bodily

³⁵ A.E. McGrath, 'The Cultivation of Theological Vision: Theological Attentiveness and the Practice of Ministry', in P. Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, p. 108.

³⁶ J. Swinton, 'Where is Your Church? Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography', in P. Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, p. 89.

³⁷ M. M. Fulkerson, 'Interpreting a Situation: When is "Empirical" Also "Theological"?' in P. Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, p. 132.

techniques seems to reiterate the tendency to grant considerable weight to church practices, and thus, from a Websterian perspective, collapses divine agency into human subjectivity. In the case of Swinton's contribution, it is conceivable that Webster would view its emphasis on ensuring the proper *intention* regarding the deployment of ethnography as implying that the issue is simply a matter of subjective human will, which again could be read as grounding ecclesiology in something other than the triune God. Finally, the example of McGrath might be closest to Webster's own position, in that it affirms the distinctiveness of the Christian perception of the world, which is rooted in 'the one focal interpretive story of Jesus'.³⁸ Here the concern one suspects that Webster would raise is the need for even greater doctrinal precision in elucidating the nature of the Christian perspective on the church, while weakening the degree to which this can be rooted in church practices. To give greater substance to these conjectures, it is instructive to turn to the way in which Webster engages directly with two other interlocutors: Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar.

1.3 Webster's Critique of de Lubac

In a number of his essays on ecclesiology, Webster discusses Henri de Lubac's 'communion ecclesiology', which intends to oppose a 'separated theology', or a rigid distinction between nature and grace in thinking about the church.³⁹ De Lubac seeks to overcome what he perceives to be a problematic conceptual dualism between the natural world and grace-infused supernature in neo-scholastic Catholic theology, which makes it impossible to

³⁸ McGrath, p. 110. For another example that shares much in common with McGrath's approach, see: N. Adams and C. Elliott, 'Ethnography is Dogmatics: Making Description Central to Systematic Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53 (Autumn 2000), pp. 339-64.

³⁹ H. de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. L. C. Sheppard & E. Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

conceive of nature as participating in God. The ecclesiological impact of this alienation, he continues, is to imagine Christ as the divine supernature and the church as mere nature, which reduces the connection between the two to a merely extrinsic relation. De Lubac hopes to mend this dualism by emphasising the church's participation in and mediation of divine activity, thus disclosing the church as being in a state of communion with God.⁴⁰

Relevant here is Webster's reaction to de Lubac's attempt to repair this dualism. He interprets de Lubac's ecclesiology as implying that the church is not merely an external community gathering around the saving action of God, but is rather itself contained within the drama of salvation.⁴¹ For Webster, this suggests that 'salvation is not so much confessed as bodied forth: the church *is* saved humankind'.⁴² In his view, this threatens the dogmatic distinction between Creator and creature, as well as the principle of divine activity as *creation ex nihilo*. According to Webster, the doctrinal roots of this error lie in a weak Christology, in that the unique and substantial agency properly due to Christ is collapsed into the church. The result is the 'elevation of the church beyond creaturely status, which transfers the agency of Christ to the human community'.⁴³

By this point, Webster's interest in critically interrupting any ecclesiological embrace of immediacy and empirical observation has shifted to a different concern: advocating for a particular dogmatic understanding of the nature of the church. Adopting his position, he

⁴⁰ De Lubac's approach on this issue is a significant influence on Milbank's criticism of the use of social theory by theology; see: J. Milbank, *The Suspended Middle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁴¹ Whether or not Webster's interpretations of the authors he criticises are accurate is beyond the scope of this essay. One might note here that Webster's rhetorical style is such that he often constructs his own theological approach by contrasting it against theological articulations he considers inadequate. In these brief engagements with major figures like de Lubac and Congar (perhaps also Haight), Webster is vulnerable to the accusation that he simplifies their work to such an extent that they function as mere 'straw men'.

⁴² Webster, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology', pp. 160-161.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

argues, resolves the problem of the relation between nature and grace, since a ‘theology of Christ’s perfection surely transcends any such duality’. Instead of collapsing the sovereignty of Christ’s divine agency into the church community, he argues, when one conceives of the relation of God and creatures ‘as a relation-in-distinction’, the goals of communion ecclesiology can be obtained without confusing empirical churches with the theology of the Church.⁴⁴ In other words, when one gets one’s thinking about God right, then an accurate ecclesiology will fall into place. As Webster puts in his essay ‘In the Society of God’, ‘Properly undertaken, with the right kind of evangelical determinacy’, one can recognise accurately that the church has ‘its origin in God’s goodness’, and that (quoting Barth) ‘it is only in God that we can come to a positive position’.⁴⁵

This response to de Lubac’s ecclesiology brings into view one of the limitations of the critical approach that Webster develops in opposition to ethnographic approaches to ecclesiology, as well as against theological investments in church practices. This follows from his description of divine activity exclusively in terms of an event that interrupts the Christian community and its creaturely pretensions, which he emphasises against any suggestion that God’s activity and presence is something which is located or ‘incarnated’ within the church. His position is posited in such strong terms that there is little space left for experiences of the church to contribute to, or criticise, ecclesiological reflection. Essentially, the discussion begins with a theory of God, which is taken as definitive of the nature of the church, with the implication that this theoretical lens cannot be called into question by the empirical observations and experiences of members of historical churches. Ecclesiology expressed in such exclusively

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 166.

⁴⁵ Webster, ‘In the Society of God’, p. 205.

dogmatic terms (i.e. in a manner limited to an exposition of the doctrine of God), however, is left in a theoretical position that bears some resemblance to the bishop's brushing off of Father MacAskill in MacIntyre's novel, 'I don't care what you think you saw'.

1.4. Webster on Congar and Holy Scripture

Such an emphasis on the doctrine of God is also prominent in Webster's discussion of the relationship between Scripture and the church, in which he contrasts his own position with that of Yves Congar. Webster emphasises the notion that Holy Scripture, as the medium through which God reveals Godself, is to be given priority over the church assembly that gathers around it, 'Scripture is not the word of the church; the church is the church of the Word'. As such, he suggests that Scripture is a 'de-stabilising feature' of the church, something which breaks it open, so that 'the church exists in the space which is made by the Word'.⁴⁶

Webster argues that, through Scripture, the church is 'laid open to the sheer otherness of the divine Word', and he contrasts this against any inclination to suggest that ecclesial tradition has some decisive role in guiding the interpretation of the bible. In making this point, he challenges Congar's statement that, 'Nowhere in history is there a "chemically pure Word of God", only a translation of this Word in the preaching of the Church in our time'. Webster argues that this view erodes the distinction between divine agency and the creaturely community, and insists to the contrary that, 'The Word of God...*must* be pure'.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52 (emphasis in original).

Highlighted here is the extent to which Webster emphasises the sheer otherness of the divine vis-à-vis creaturely existence, so that it can only be described in unmediated terms.

Dogmatic ecclesiology serves to guard this crucial distinction in Webster's work. But note here that it is not ecclesiology in the form of a body of teachings by an institutional church (as his challenge to Congar indicates); rather, Webster's reader is left with the impression that the church can only really be understood as the ongoing event of individuals being interrupted by divine revelation.⁴⁸ Although Webster argues that 'creaturely realities are sanctified for divine use', so that the reading of Scripture (but presumably also church practices and institutional bodies) can become significant for one's salvation, it is clear that he does not want to grant any of these activities any inherent mediatory potential.⁴⁹

Ultimately, sanctification can only really be an event that occurs between God and the individual creature, which implies a rather individualistic notion of church.⁵⁰

This problematic emphasis in Webster's work is heightened by a second tendency in his approach to ecclesiology, which is a propensity towards a firm marginalisation of visible historical churches, in defence of the pure invisible church. Such a position is in evidence when Webster suggests that, 'the church is not primarily a visible social quantity but the invisible new creation'.⁵¹ On this point his Christological assumptions are operative. In order to prevent what he calls the 'ecclesiological functionalisation of Christological

⁴⁸ For a more sympathetic interpretation of the ecclesiological relevance of the Barthian concept of revelation as an 'event' and how this relates to ecclesiology, see: C. R. J. Holmes, 'The Church and the Presence of Christ: Defending Actualist Ecclesiology' *Pro Ecclesia* 22.3 (summer 2012), pp. 268-280.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Gavin D'Costa argues that Webster's theology of Scripture implies a 'telos towards individualism'; G. D'Costa, 'Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster's Conception of 'Holy Scripture'', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6.4 (October 2004), p. 342.

⁵¹ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 47.

doctrine’, Webster establishes a firm distinction between God the ‘Son’ and the ‘incarnate Son’, for ‘the Son is not made Son by the flesh, nor can he be deduced from it’. The same formula can also serve as a description of Webster’s ecclesiology: the full actuality of the church lies beyond material reality. In the case of the Son, one is to ‘look beyond its temporal occurrence to the Son’s antecedent divine capacity’; whereas, in the case of the church, the fullness of its reality beyond temporality is eschatological, finding its proper completion in the future.⁵²

It is at this point that Webster’s ekstatic and ectopic approach to ecclesiology should itself be interrupted and concretely located. For the inclination towards individualism, and the reaffirmation of the priority of the invisible church, both which Webster’s work implies, are increasingly being called into question by situations emerging within contemporary churches.

2. The Invisible Church and its Visible Scandals

In MacIntyre’s novel *The Bishop’s Man*, the principal scandal driving the narrative is not so much the failings of individual priests, but the stubborn refusal of church authorities – in this case the diocesan bishop – to acknowledge the ugly reality of the situation.⁵³ Against all of the testimony and empirical evidence that Father MacAskill brings to his bishop, the latter refuses to accept that these issues require any change in ecclesial policy or practice, ‘Keep

⁵² Webster, ‘In the Society of God’, pp. 209-210.

⁵³ For another notable narrative account of a Roman Catholic priest who fails to maintain adequate boundaries in his relationship with a minor, see: A. O’Hagan, *Be Near Me* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007). For a narrative set in one of Canada’s church-run ‘Residential Schools’ for aboriginal children, see: R. Wagamese, *Indian Horse* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012).

your eye on the ball’, the bishop says to MacAskill, as he urges his priest to protect the image of the church from being tainted.⁵⁴

The point of this anecdotal intervention is not moral but methodological. Without a doubt, Webster is as scandalised as anyone by the issue of clerical abuse of minors. The question is rather whether his treatment of ecclesiology equips us to respond adequately to the tragic challenge of such failings within contemporary churches.

2.1 Perceiving the Sins of the Church

There is a long tradition in ecclesiological writing that reflects on the relationship between the holiness of the church and the sins of its members. It is commonplace in such discussions to describe the church as ‘holy’ on the grounds that it is the product of God’s action. In support of this position, biblical texts like Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians are referenced, ‘God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple’ (1 Cor 3.17). Translating such a text into a simple ecclesiological emphasis, however, can mistakenly be taken to imply that human sin is external to the reality of the church. Thus, for example, an ecclesiological statement of the World Council of Churches affirms that, ‘the essential holiness of the Church stands in contrast to sin, individual as well as communal’.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ MacIntyre, *The Bishop’s Man*, pp. 101-102.

⁵⁵ World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Geneva: WCC, 2005), para. 54.

Jeremy Bergen has demonstrated that this sharp distinction between the church's holiness and the sins of its members is a prominent emphasis in various expressions of Christian theology. In Protestant thought, he observes, the sinfulness of all human beings is contrasted with the holiness of God, whereas Catholic theology generally focuses on the act of ecclesial repentance, in which the church purifies itself as it confesses the sins of its members. The problem with the former approach, Bergen argues, is that the Protestant emphasis on the general sinfulness of humanity deflects attention away from specific acts of historical sin; while the Catholic example implies an abstract church that is over against and distinct from its members.⁵⁶ Bergen echoes Michael McCarthy's criticism of such ecclesiologies of a sinless church: 'it invites idealization, and in doing so reinscribes the conditions of disillusionment'.⁵⁷

Such a conclusion resonates with the way in which MacIntyre's novel portrays the bishop's refusal to admit that his church is committing a series of serious crimes, 'it's the integrity of the institution that is at stake. Something larger and more important than all or any of us'. Subsequently, Father MacAskill proceeds to counsel the parents of an abused child about the nature of God's healing and justice', but he leaves feeling ashamed, 'You debase the word, I told myself'. Such neglect and dismissal of the failures of the church, in order to protect its ideal image and authority, renders any act of contrition 'just a bunch of words'.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ J. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 202-216.

⁵⁷ M. C. McCarthy, 'Religious Disillusionment and the Cross', *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007), p. 584; quoted in Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance*, p. 223.

⁵⁸ MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, pp. 102, 105, 394.

The problem this novel illustrates is one that Webster's approach to ecclesiology is unable to address adequately. By restricting any account of the church to an extension of the doctrine of God, and by emphasising that the relationship between the actual lived history of churches and the triune God in whom the church has its origin is 'non-reciprocal', Webster's ecclesiology arrives at the point where he argues that all acts of the church are 'movements moved by God'.⁵⁹ The implication of such a position, however, is either that the terrible acts of members of the church described by MacIntyre's novel are to be understood as 'moved by God', or (and this seems the more obvious conclusion), that when such things are committed, it is not really the church that is implicated, but only sinful human beings.

Webster's ecclesiology is not entirely clear on the question of the sinfulness of the church. In some of his ecclesiological essays, his account resembles the standard Protestant approach to the issue, which is to assert the universal sinfulness of humanity in relation to the future completion of the fullness of the church. Thus, in his book *Holiness*, he writes, 'The Church's holiness is the result of the divine decision [of election], not of any human acts of separating a 'pure' group from an 'impure'. Likewise, Webster acknowledges that the church is called to confess its sins, and he affirms Luther's statement that 'There is no greater sinner than the Christian Church'.⁶⁰

As Bergen has warned, however, such a generalised admission of the church's capacity to sin often diminishes the attention given to any particular sins of the church's members, which in itself is sufficient to question whether Webster's handling of the issue is an adequate

⁵⁹ Webster, 'In the Society of God', p. 215.

⁶⁰ Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 60, 73.

ecclesiological response to situations such as the one described in MacIntyre's novel. But there are also some elements of Webster's approach that appear to go even further than this. His description of the invisible church is such that it often implies that the *ecclesia as such* remains detached from creaturely sin. If Webster were to argue more clearly that this concept of the 'invisible church' is merely a reference to its perfected eschatological future, then his position would remain entirely distinct from the Catholic concept of the sinlessness of the church as the Body of Christ; however, the more he labours to establish a sharp dogmatic boundary between the church derived solely from the activity of God, and historical communities of human beings, the more puzzling his account becomes on the question of ecclesial sin. For example, he writes, 'the agency at the heart of the Church is God's', so that, 'all the acts of the holy Church must demonstrate a reference to the work of the One who is holy'.⁶¹ It would seem to follow, then, that acts deemed 'unholy' cannot truly be acts of the 'Church', but merely acts by human beings in isolation from divine agency. Moreover, if all the church's movements are initiated by God, then any sinful acts cannot be acts of the church. In such statements, the difference between Webster's position and Catholic ecclesiology would only seem to be that, while the latter directly affirms the sinlessness of the church, Webster instead implies that when human assemblies fail to embody signs of God's holiness, they are not in fact churches. The visibility of the invisible church, he writes, is a 'spiritual event'; 'It is that which can be described only by talking of the active, communicative presence of the triune God'. Any sign of the church's visible nature 'cannot be converted into mere phenomenal form'.⁶² Thus, while Webster criticises Catholic

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 63.

⁶² Ibid., p. 71.

ecclesiology in order to emphasise the distinction between God and the creaturely church, he does so by making any form or action of the church dependent upon the immediate activity of the divine. But the resulting lack of any mediating category with which to describe the historical 'visible' church makes it difficult for him to describe the church *as such* as sinful, other than to say that, as a creaturely institution, populated by sinful human beings, it contains sin. Such an approach, however, implies that attending to the particular sins of the ecclesia's members is not really a core ecclesiological problem, but merely a contextual pastoral matter.

However one interprets the precise nature of Webster's treatment of the sin of the church, the issue is heightened when one notes how he rejects prominent alternative ecclesiological proposals that seek to redress the challenge of ecclesial sin. One such tradition, for example, identifies the church with Christ's body undergoing the passion. This different theological emphasis emphasises how, in its historical existence, the church can never achieve the fullness of its eschatological perfection, but it remains Christ's wounded body. For example, according to Bergen, in the case of Bonaventure, this implies that the church must acknowledge and respond to this reality, for the sake of its own salvation.⁶³ Such a position avoids the implication of a perfected invisible church outside of history, and suggests an incomplete and imperfect institution whose completion remains an ongoing project. As

⁶³ See: Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance*, p. 235; C. C. Anderson, 'Bonaventure and the Sin of the Church', *Theological Studies* 63 (2002), pp. 667-89.

Bergen describes it, in this account of the church, creaturely sinners become ‘that body that is God’s endurance of sin’.⁶⁴

Webster’s ecclesiology would appear to discourage this line of thinking, and one can safely assume that he would consider it but another example of the fostering of a ‘porous Christology’ for the way it could be read as elevating the church beyond its creaturely status.⁶⁵ Webster is suspicious of any language that implies that the church shares in Christ’s divine being. For him, ‘the Incarnation is unilateral’; it is a one-time event that occurs only in the person of Jesus; ‘it is not a figure in some more general unity of divinity and humanity’.⁶⁶ Thus, in his essay ‘In the Society of God’, Webster argues that, ‘creaturely being does not partake of the divine being but rather has its own identity and integrity at the hands of God’.⁶⁷ The church cannot participate in the sufferings of Christ through its identity as the body of Christ; rather, the notion of the presence of Christ as ‘God with us’, ‘does not mean the diffusion of God’s life but its generativity’.⁶⁸

A second possible ecclesiological response to the sins of contemporary members of the church is proposed by Ephraim Radner, who shifts the focus of attention from Christology to Pneumatology. Radner understands the denominational divisions between post-Reformation churches to be a sign that they are under divine judgement. Thus, rather than presume that the Holy Spirit resides in any one particular historical church, or imagine that the ecumenical movement is being led by the movement of the Spirit, Radner suggests that it may be that the

⁶⁴ Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance*, p. 234.

⁶⁵ Webster, ‘On Evangelical Ecclesiology’, p. 165.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁶⁷ Webster, ‘In the Society of God’, p. 207.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

Spirit has withdrawn from the churches.⁶⁹ Such a possibility, he continues, finds a biblical analogy in the divided kingdom of Israel, during which God's chosen people experienced judgement, exile, and a call to repent of their sins. Radner reads this pneumatological possibility through his Christology, suggesting that the Spirit has withdrawn so that the church might, 'die with Christ' and 'suffer Jesus' suffering for the Church'.⁷⁰ In this way, Radner opens up a path that understands the sin of the church as both a participation in the sufferings of Christ, but also as an opportunity to grow in Christ.

Radner also challenges commonplace theological explanations for divisions between churches, such as in statements like, 'the "Church as such" is not divided, only individual Christians are divided.'⁷¹ He traces a long history of ecclesiological reflection which considers it impossible to conceive of the real church as containing division or sin, and concludes, 'whether Catholic or Protestant, the true church is always one that is pure in some fundamental way, immune from the embarrassments of its members'.⁷² To challenge this tendency, Radner proposes an 'eristic' ecclesiology, one which takes its own location within a divided and sinful Church as its starting point, and which reflects and acts in the midst of conflict and crisis.

One might assume that Webster would appreciate the way in which Radner's account offers a Trinitarian account of divine engagement with the church. According to Webster, however, Radner's ecclesiological position emphasises a 'motif of abandonment', which results in a

⁶⁹ E. Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 26.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁷¹ E. Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, TX: Baylor: 2012). p. 130.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

theology that does ‘not fully register the church’s deep antecedent and eschatological peace, and the present efficacy of that incomplete yet real peace’. Webster argues that discussions of the judgment of the church must be relativised by a theology of election and providence.⁷³ He is concerned that the ‘very intensity of our description’ of the church’s divisions and brokenness, ‘can run counter to the gospel’s announcement that the regime of conflict is at an end’.⁷⁴ Thus, before one can speak theologically about conflict, one must affirm the peace of God which offers a truer account of reality. In the same way, before one can speak about divine judgement over the church, one must speak of God’s election of the church and how this sanctifies it and makes it holy. Webster summarises this methodological procedure as follows, ‘introduc[e] into each ecclesiological description and passage of ecclesiological argument direct language about God, Christ, and Spirit’, in order to achieve the ‘conversion of intelligence from love of temporality’.⁷⁵ Such a position, however, clearly interrupts any ecclesiology seeking to make failings on the part of the church — such as those describe in the novel *The Bishop’s Man* — a substantial matter for theological reflection.

III. Why Ecclesiology Cannot Live by Doctrine Alone

One way to summarise Webster’s critique of Radner is to recall the scene from the *Bishop’s Man*, where the bishop tells Father MacAskill to ‘Keep your eye on the ball’, and not allow himself to be distracted by critics of the church. As Webster labours to immunise his

⁷³ J. Webster, ‘Theology and the Peace of the Church’, in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), n.28, p. 164.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁷⁵ Webster, ‘In the Society of God’, p. 221.

theology of the church against what he perceives to be the dangers of a ‘naturalised ecclesiology’, the medicine he recommends brings with it some harmful side-effects: a reiteration of a theology of the invisible church that is described without reference to the failings of individual Christians who make up ‘visible’ churches; a marginalization of the theological relevance of the perceptions and experiences of historical churches by those in and around them; a theology of creaturely agency that eliminates corporate categories in favour of a highly individualistic portrait of divine-human relations. Thus, although Webster’s writing on ecclesiology offers some significant cautionary criticisms of prominent trends in the field, at the same time, his dogmatic approach to the theology of the church also brings into view the problematic consequences of sequestering theological method from empirical observation and inquiry.

To be fair, Webster does not argue directly that ethnography has no useful purpose; rather, his assertion is that its use ‘requires metaphysical clarification’. Ethnography, in other words, needs to be disciplined and regulated by dogmatic theology. But when Webster adds that, ‘Ethnography may find itself frustrated by the concealed, secret character of the church’, so that ultimately the church remains ‘indiscernible’,⁷⁶ it is clear that he thinks it cannot finally contribute in any meaningful way to ecclesiology, and that attention to the practices and experiences of empirical churches in fact reveals little about the nature of the true church.

This is to say that, rather than deny that the church can sin, or that churches can be studied with empirical methods, Webster simply argues that these matters are ultimately irrelevant to ecclesiology. Only dogmatic expositions of the doctrine of God can contribute to serious

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 222.

ecclesiological debate. At this point, one could develop a criticism of this position in a number of directions: discussing the extent to which it implies what Fulkerson calls a ‘trickle-down’ approach to theology;⁷⁷ or by noting that the theoretical production of dogmatic theologies occurs in particular contexts, so that it is problematic to imply that some account of the doctrine of God itself remains free from social-historical influences.⁷⁸ Here there is space for only two other brief considerations. The first notes that Webster’s ecclesiology defends a theological account of the church’s *future* identity by severing it from the church’s *present*. This problem comes clearly into view when it is observed that, although Webster’s approach is useful for criticising the instrumentalisation of ecclesiology, it is far less able to address the church’s sinfulness.⁷⁹ The second issue to highlight is the way in which Webster’s doctrine of revelation is mediated solely through doctrine and Scripture, but not through the lives of those constructing doctrines or reading the scriptures.

3.1 *Confession for a Church without a Present*

By ordering ecclesiology solely according to his doctrine of God, so that considerations of church practices and failings become largely irrelevant, Webster essentially constructs an eschatological ecclesiology devoid of a present. According to him, in view of the danger of mistaking present life for the fullness of reality, ecclesiology must be converted from its ‘love

⁷⁷ Fulkerson, ‘Interpreting a Situation’, p. 128.

⁷⁸ J. L. Segundo, *The Community Called Church*, trans. J. Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973).

⁷⁹ It is notable that Mark Chapman makes a related point when discussing Webster’s position on the nature of theology; see: M. Chapman, ‘On Sociological Theology’, *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 15.1 (2008), p. 8.

of temporality'.⁸⁰ But in ordering the theology of the church solely according to its eschatological future, Webster withdraws from the church the capacity to be questioned or challenged by its current members, but also by its current neighbours. Ecclesiology becomes blind to the present, in order to preserve the purity of the church's future. To make this point is not essentially to privilege the social-historical as the fullness of reality (as Webster might worry); it is simply to refuse to quarantine present experiences within the churches from the fullness of God's created order. This point — which cannot be fully developed theologically here — could be articulated in a number of ways: through a discussion of the problem of 'docetism', and how a church without a present reality risks importing a version of that Christological error into ecclesiology;⁸¹ or, this issue could also be explored through the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, which traditionally has emphasised how the risen body is not utterly distinct from the historical creaturely body.⁸² Here, however, I advance a different consideration, which is to link the problem of the absence of the church's present in Webster's ecclesiology with the practices of the confession of sins and spiritual discernment.⁸³ Such a move does not necessarily demand a radical modification of Webster's

⁸⁰ Webster, 'In the Society of God', p. 221.

⁸¹ Webster's own discussion of docetism in theologies of scripture are relevant here: *Holy Scripture*, p. 20-21. Barth criticizes ecclesiological docetism in *Church Dogmatics* IV.1, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p. 653. See also, however, N. M. Healy, 'The Logic of Karl Barth's Ecclesiology', *Modern Theology* 10 (1994), pp. 253-270.

⁸² J. Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996).

⁸³ I have discussed confession's relation to ethnography elsewhere: C. C. Brittain, 'Ethnography as Ecclesial Attentiveness and Critical Reflexivity: fieldwork and the dispute over homosexuality in The Episcopal Church', in C. B. Scharen (ed.), *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 114-137.

primary theological commitments, but only the suggestion that he misdiagnoses the value of (and consequence of neglecting) ethnography for ecclesiology.⁸⁴

The confession of sin is both an individual and an ecclesial act emphasizing the seriousness of one's present way of living while holding open the recognition that the promise of the fullness of reality lies beyond the failings of the immediate moment. In this way, confession bridges the present and future. It emphasises the interruption of human presumptions, which Webster rightly argues is urgently required in ecclesiology, while also granting attentive weight to immediate sins and struggles – not just of individuals, but of the church itself – which Bergen and Radner demonstrate is sadly lacking in many theological reflections on the church. Webster argues that the church can only adequately understand itself when attending to the God it worships; but empirical studies of the Christian community may assist the church to recognise what it currently is, which offers another key component of self-understanding. Moreover, the practice of confession reminds the church that what it assumes of God may be false or self-serving, so as to invite faithful scrutiny of its understanding of its doctrine of God.

This is one reason why ecclesiology cannot live by doctrine alone. For the church cannot presume that God will reveal Godself only through *the theologian's* understanding of the divine nature, but rather that discernment of the Spirit's activity should include attention to the lived experiences of the contemporary church: its challenges and failings, as well as its joys and successes. Father MacAskill experienced little support from his church's doctrines

⁸⁴ It may be that the limitations in Webster's theology of the church could be repaired by supplementing it with a pneumatology of church practices'

in the novel *The Bishop's Man*, at least until his observations about the experiences of the human beings around him interrupted his former assumptions. By that time, he was too disillusioned to find new nourishment in the teachings of the church. With the help of ethnography and other empirical studies, ecclesiology may be reinvigorated and refreshed, so that it might better serve the needs of the contemporary churches. This is achieved by assisting the church to be attentive to itself, in the sense emphasised in the Pauline letters: 'Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith' (2 Cor 13:5). Such examinations may result in provocations, be an occasion for repentance, or even spur renewal.

3.2 God's Revelation and Spiritual Discernment

Focusing on the potential of ethnography to nurture the practice of confession also brings into focus the extent to which Webster's understanding of revelation – as God's self-revealing to human creatures – is generally limited to the mediations of Scripture and doctrine.⁸⁵ It is through the reading of the Scriptures, guided by a properly ordered doctrinal account of how God reveals Godself, that Christians are said to encounter the divine. Webster describes the dynamic in this manner in order to fend the errors he perceives in anthropological approaches to practices of reading, or in reader-response criticism. The focus of ecclesiology, he urges, must remain on the initiative of divine action, not on the intentions or habits of human beings.

⁸⁵ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 11-17.

In the course of this argument, however, Webster suggests that ‘we shall not be able to make much headway if we determine in advance any dogmatic considerations of what “reading” is’.⁸⁶ This is due to his view that one’s encounter with the presence and action of God ‘is in its deepest reaches *sui generis*’. By extension, why restrict such encounters to the act of reading, or to constructions of doctrine? Does it not seem to follow that Webster’s concern to avoid establishing in advance any assumptions about how the reading of Scripture ‘works’ ought to be extended to precluding presumptions about how the Spirit is working within the church and in the lives of its members? While Webster’s warning against the dangers of divinising church practices is well taken, one ought not to imagine that focused ecclesiological attention on the activities of the church necessarily results in their reductive instrumentalisation. Brief reference to some of the church’s traditions of spiritual discernment illustrates how such practices are often intimately related to pneumatology. The contemplation of the Caremlites, for example, is commonly referred to as a ‘practice’, but in their understanding, this activity is understood to be performed, not by the individual her or himself, but by God in the believer.⁸⁷ Similarly, in the ‘practice’ of the Ignaitian Exercises, the process intends to support the individual seeking to discern the will of God by trying to ensure that any decisions made are not driven by ‘inordinate attachments’.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

⁸⁷ See, for example, ‘The Interior Castle’ in *The Collected Works of Teresa of Avila*, trans. K. Kavanaugh & O. Rodriuez (Washington, D.C.: I.C.S. Publications, 1980), as discussed in S. Coakley, ‘Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology’, in M. Volf & D.C. Bass (eds.), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 78-93.

⁸⁸ See, for example: P. Endean, ‘Ignatius of Loyola, prayer and Scripture’, in P. Ballard & S. R. Holmes (eds), *The Bible in Pastoral Practice* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), pp. 275-285; P.L. Gavrilyuk & S. Coakley (eds), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

By analogy, the spiritual practices of discernment and the confession of sins help illustrate the significant ecclesiological role for ethnography. For the attentive observation of the experiences of particular human beings in particular church contexts potentially enables the corporate recognition events that interrupt assumptions or result in joyful surprise, which otherwise might go unacknowledged or unappreciated. Ethnography can thus contribute to the church's confession by deepening its awareness of its own failings and limitations, and to corporate spiritual discernment. For, in a manner not unlike the Jesuit spiritual practice of identifying both the consolations and desolations in one's personal spiritual life, ethnography is potentially one way that the church can attend carefully to the blessings and failings that it is presently experiencing corporately.⁸⁹

The significance of such a contribution is evident in MacIntyre's novel, in the way in which Father MacAskill's attentive observation of the lives of his parishioners illuminates the sufferings and struggles that his church institution would prefer to ignore. Such a calling to account of the church's failings is a crucial ecclesiological task. Webster's neglect of this problem suggests that his warnings against the limitations of social scientific methodologies ought not to lead theologians to throw the baby out with the bathwater. He misdiagnoses the danger that ethnography represents to ecclesiology, and thus fails to notice the contributions it can make.

4. Conclusion

⁸⁹ See the special issue of *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 45.1 (Spring 2013).

This discussion has made a case for the significance of ethnography for ecclesiology. It has done so through an engagement with the ecclesiology of John Webster, which directly challenges the relevance of ethnographic methods for a theology of the church. The approach of the essay is a rather indirect route to make an argument for why ecclesiology cannot live by doctrine alone, but it was undertaken out of recognition of the importance of Webster's warning against reducing theology to an uncritical embrace of the apparent 'givenness' of observable empirical facts. Moreover, attending to the limitations of Webster's position helps to sharpen recognition of ways in which ethnography can potentially contribute to ecclesiology. Gaps in Webster's ecclesiology were particularly illuminated by interacting with debates over whether the church itself can sin, and with reference to MacIntyre's novel *The Bishop's Man*. Far from rejecting Webster's critical theological concerns, the case for the ecclesiological role of ethnography made here extends Webster's concern to foster proper attentiveness to the activity of God by seeking to ensure that Christians have the resources to address their church in a manner not unlike how Father MacAskill is finally able to challenge his bishop: 'You haven't been entirely honest with me'.⁹⁰ Simply put, ethnography can help the church be more honest with itself. By assisting the church to undertake the disciplines of the confession of sins and corporate spiritual discernment of God's presence and activity, ethnography deepens rather than dilutes the theological task of ecclesiology.

⁹⁰ MacIntyre, p. 283.