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The Struggle to State the Grounds of Authority in the Church: A Task for Practical Theology

Introduction

"The Christian Church is being rocked by an unparalleled crisis of authority." This was the diagnosis of the Protestant systematic theologian Eberhard Jüngel in 1972, a time marked by students' protest against authorities and a general questioning of tradition.¹ Twenty years later, his Catholic colleague Peter Hünemann commented on the results of the disciplinary measures which the German Catholic bishops in their reaction to Eugen Drewermann's controversial synthesis of psychoanalytical, mythical and Christian elements by withdrawing his right to teach in the name of the Church as well as his priestly functions from him: "The authority of the bishops, the legal processes of disciplinary measures in doctrinal matters in general and the other canonical measures were heavily criticized....In this process an immense erosion of episcopal authority was the result."² No doubt it would be easy to find similar assessments from American Catholic theologians, e.g. after the dismissal of the moral theologian Charles Curran from his teaching position at the Catholic University in Washington.

While in the Catholic Church the struggle with church authority is evidently connected with the much-debated role of the *magisterium*, still this conflict is not an exclusively Catholic problem. The Protestant churches as well have been faced with the question whether controversies in doctrinal matters should be dealt with by disciplinary measures. The Protestant Church in Germany at least has also dismissed ministers from their office as pastors — after a juridical process, however, in which theologians and members of the synod were

¹ E.Jüngel, *Die Autorität des bittenden Christus*, in: *Unterwegs zur Sache*, München, 1972, 179-188, 179. For Jüngel, "a responsible theology has to deal with this situation critically. It cannot withdraw from the existing ecclesial problems... either by attempting to patch up bruised authorities with postulates or by presenting the question of authority in the church as a superfluous one and one to be superseded by the postulate to abolish all authority." All use of authority, however, has to seek its model in the "authority of the pleading Christ" and to strive for insight and evidence instead of using force.

involved as well.³ The theses put forward by the Hamburg pastor Paul Schulz in his book "Is God a mathematical formula?" and by the feminist pastor and psychologist Jutta Voss in her book *The Black Moon Taboo* were both judged to be incompatible with Christian teaching on God and salvation.⁴

Even if all of these examples refer to quite different problems deserving a closer scrutiny of the issues at stake, it is still evident that conflict with authority and the loss of authority is a problem shared by all the Western Churches. The loyalty of church members to the position of their church leaders which could be almost automatically counted upon in the 1950s and 1960s seems to have greatly diminished.

I would suggest that these individual cases are symptoms of a wider phenomenon, and that practical theology has the task of bringing to our attention the structural roots of this process.

What are the **structural reasons** for the continual dwindling of authority? Here, 'structural' refers to the conditions and developments of modern society which are at work quite independently from any actual statement or measure issued by the Church.

In the first part of my paper, I will examine why recent research in the sociology of religion has proposed "individualization" as a broader and more appropriate category than "secularization," to describe the current transformations in the relationship between religion, society, the churches and their individual members.

² P.Hünemann, "Sind die Bischöfe überfordert?" in: Theologische Quartalschrift 172 (1992) 131-133, 131.

³ For an analysis and comparison of the disciplinary process in doctrinal matters (Lehrbeanstandungsverfahren) in the Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany, Austria and Switzerland see René Pahud de Mortanges, *Zwischen Vergebung und Vergeltung. Eine Analyse des kirchlichen Straf- und Disziplinarrechts*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1992, 213-225.

⁴ P.Schulz, *Ist Gott eine mathematische Formel? Ein Pastor im Glaubensprozeß seiner Kirche*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1977. J. Voss, *Das Schwarzmundtabu. Die kulturelle Bedeutung des weiblichen Zyklus*, Stuttgart, 1988, 4th ed. 1993. Jutta Voss was asked to explain how her idea of a "lunar-related transformative spiritual potency" (lunarbezogene, Wandlungen einleitende Geistpotenz, p.96) relates to the Christian doctrine of the divine Trinity in whose name she would lead Sunday services, baptize, and preach. Another point to be clarified was her position towards the reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper as founded in Jesus' deliverance of his life of which his blood is the symbol. For Jutta Voss, the blood of Jesus is the "male blood of killing" which has to be replaced by what according to her was its historical predecessor, the "biological mystery of the transformation of menstrual blood" (p. 50).

In the second section, I would like to reflect on the question: What is the theological basis for the authority of the Church? What legitimation both empowers its use and limits it?⁵

The authority of the Church is derived from and serves (or should serve) the authority of the Gospel. The Christian faith understands its truth not as something produced by human reason, but as something given. The Church in all its denominations, members and functions has to witness to and guard this truth given in history to humankind by God. As a truth given it is not at the disposition of the individual members.

Yet, if "individualization" as a fundamental characteristic of the system of modern society has the effect that each person has to make up her own view by choosing from and combining elements of the plurality of world views present, then the truth of the Christian faith threatens to become diffused. There is the danger that the Christian truth is more and more at the disposition and mercy of the individual's pragmatic needs.

The third part of my paper is devoted to the seemingly impossible task of reconciling the results of the sociological and the theological inquiries which are clearly at odds with each other. I will try to indicate perspectives for a way out of this dilemma both by presenting some of the theological reflections called forth by the crisis of authority and by stating for the ensuing discussion the questions which remain "open" (to use a euphemistic term), or rather painfully unanswered and pressing.

I. Religion in Contemporary Society: The Concept of Individualization

It is only recently in German-speaking sociology of religion, in a study on the role of religion in Switzerland published in 1991 and 1992, that the category of individualization has been proposed as a more adequate and more precise conceptualization of the transformations in

⁵ This second step corresponds to the task of exploring the "principles of the Christian tradition" in Dietrich Rössler's definition of practical theology. These principles are then to be related to the "insights of contemporary experience." (Dietrich Rössler, *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie*, Berlin / New York: De Gruyter, 1986, 3).

the relations between religion and society rather than the term "secularization".⁶

For many, the process of secularization is the leading factor in the loss of ecclesial authority. The major inadequacy of the concept of secularization, however, is the underlying assumption of at least some of its proponents that religion and modernity are mutually exclusive and that in the course of modernity's process of rationalization religion will eventually disappear. This prognosis has been shaken by phenomena such as the surge of new religious movements in the 1970s and 1980s and also by a higher stability of membership and adherence to the Christian churches than had been expected.

In the religious context in France, e.g., Daniele Hervieu-Leger has drawn attention to the religious consciousness alive in French popular religion, in post-1968 ideological communities, and in the new religious movements. She points out the particularly modern elements in the ambivalent attitude of these movements towards modernity. Some of these movements

are the vehicles of an alternative rationality which is as much in harmony with as in contrast with modernity. This particular ambivalence with respect to modernity is visible in the affinity of these movements with the processes of privatization and individualization of beliefs, which is precisely characteristic of the situation of religion in modernity. It is visible in the mobility of religious networks that are founded on an associative basis, as well as in the emphasis that they place on personal experience and the individual's 'right to subjectivity'.

Still, she retains the term secularization, but with the important shift in accent that secularization means "no longer simply the 'decline' of religion but the process whereby religion organizes itself to meet the challenges left by modernity."⁷ The use of the concept of individuali-

⁶ M.Krügglener and P.Voll, "Säkularisierung oder Individualisierung? Variationen zu Faust I, Vers 3415ff." in *Pastoraltheologische Informationen* 12 (1992), 147-162. M.Krügglener and P.Voll, "Strukturelle Individualisierung - ein Leitfaden durchs Labyrinth der Empirie" in A. Dubach / R.Campiche (Eds.), *Jede(r) ein Sonderfall? Religion in der Schweiz: Ergebnisse einer Repräsentativbefragung*, Zürich: NZN Buchverlag, 1993, 17-49, 17-18. Cf. also 12.215-222. K.Gabriel judges this approach an "exception" also in German-speaking sociology of religion: "Although points of reference are to be found in the sociological classics, especially with Max Weber and Georg Simmel, in the sociological research of religion the concept of individualization as yet has hardly been used." K. Gabriel, *Christentum zwischen Tradition und Postmoderne*, Freiburg: Herder, 1992, 142, Fn.11.

American sociologists of religion have highlighted the individualizing effects of modern society and of Christianity, especially in Puritanism. Cf. R.Wuthnow, "Sociology of Religion" in N.J. Smelser (Ed.), *Handbook of Sociology*, Beverly Hills, 1988, 473-509, 486-87: "Thus modern bureaucratic states have generally advanced individuation through, on the one hand, standardization - especially through schooling

zation to interpret the ongoing changes in the interaction of religion and society has the advantage of not having to pretend to know the final outcome of the process.⁸ But this new concept is also more inclusive because it offers a general theory of society and treats religion as one among other cultural phenomena. The observations made on the changing role of religion can, therefore, also be verified in other cultural realms.

This modern tendency towards individualization has not gone unnoticed in practical theology. A theory for individualization in Christianity has already been put forth. Thus, before I talk about the sociological

and language uniformities - which makes persons relatively interchangeable with one another, and, on the other hand, through personalization, which attaches rights and responsibilities - such as voting and paying taxes - to the individual. In short, individuation in ideology and individuation in social structure seem to be prominent features of modern society." Although Wuthnow's description of religious individualism anticipates the results of the Swiss inquiry, still he does not advance the concept of individualization itself as the most basic category of interpretation: "In the case of religious individualism, the most general effect of a strong emphasis on the individual appears to be a tendency to 'decouple' the substantive tenets of any formalized set of doctrines or creeds. If religious belief is defined as a matter of individual interpretation, for example, then it becomes possible for particular ideas to be put together in a number of ways ... individualistic religious orientations are disaggregated at the level of the individual believer. Accordingly, for any particular individual, a highly integrated world view may exist, but the components of that worldview may be quite dissimilar from those of any other person's worldview."

⁷ D. Hervieu-Léger, *Religion and Modernity in the French Context: For a New Approach to Secularization*, in: *Sociological Analysis* 51 (1990), 15-25, 22, 15. Her "new definition" of secularization presents it "as a process of the reorganization of the work of religion in a society which can no longer satisfy (not temporarily, but structurally) the expectations it must arouse in order to exist as such, and which can find no better response (not temporarily, but structurally) to the uncertainties arising from the indeterminable quest for the means to satisfy these expectations." (24) Her description of the lasting significance of religion comes close to the functionalist view of religion that considers religion as a praxis of mastering contingency to which Krüggeler and Voll adhere (cf. Dubach / Campiche, *Sonderfall*, 27-32). Whether the category of individualization is proposed in order to replace the concept of "secularization" or whether it is only put forward as a more precise formulation, depends on one's understanding of "secularization." If it does not denote the complete "loss" of religion, but only a "change of its significance", then it would not imply any statement on the compatibility or incompatibility of religion and modernity and the term would not need to be replaced. Cf. P. Voll's reinterpretation of "secularization as individualization of religion" in his article "Vom Beten in der Mördergrube. Religion in der Dienstleistungsgesellschaft," in Dubach / Campiche, *Sonderfall*, 213-252, 226, 244, Fn. 1. 245, Fn. 10. Cf. also Wuthnow, *Sociology of Religion*, 475, and Gabriel, *Christentum*, 141-42, Fn. 10.

⁸ In their study on religion in Switzerland, the researchers Krüggeler and Voll explicitly refute the "misunderstanding that processes of modernization and individualization were linear developments which were therefore projectable into the future." ("Strukturelle Individualisierung" in Dubach / Campiche, *Sonderfall*, 18).

thesis on structural pluralism and structural individualization, I will recapitulate the theory of the three forms of modern Christianity put forward by Dietrich Rössler in his *"Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie"*.

1. *The threefold shape of modern Christianity*

Rössler describes the emergence of the threefold shape of present-day Christianity as a distinctly modern phenomenon: while the period of the Middle Ages was characterized by the idea of the *"corpus christianum"* and the "unity of church and world", in the 17th century, German Pietism (in this respect comparable to Puritanism in the English-speaking countries) proposed a concept of the church based on the distinction between the zealous and the lax. In this view of the church, "only the participation in the more rigoristic form of life which Pietism had made its program could count as participation in the church."⁹ The Pietistic separation between a markedly ecclesial form of religious praxis and the practices of the world led to the development of the three fundamental forms of present-day Christianity, one ecclesial, one public, and one private:

on the one hand an ecclesial Christianity emerged which tried to give itself a character of its own by adhering to a certain kind of piety; on the other hand a general or public Christianity remained which leaves a residue in uncontrolled traditions in texts, in conditions, in obligations and in publicly held convictions.¹⁰

This 'public Christianity' includes elements of what has been discussed as 'civil religion' in the United States.¹¹

The third form, "individual or private Christianity", is explained from the need of the individual church member to choose against the background of public Christianity between the various degrees and kinds of participation in ecclesial Christianity. Rössler concludes:

"This distinction had the consequence that the individual . . . must continue to seek . . . his or her own place between ecclesiastical and general Christianity. There is thus besides these two forms of Christianity an individual Christianity in infinitely many varieties which can hardly be

⁹ D.Rössler, *Grundriß*, 80-81.

¹⁰ Cf. Rössler, "Die Einheit der Praktischen Theologie" in K.E.Nipkow / D.Rössler / F.Schweitzer (Eds.), *Praktische Theologie und Kultur der Gegenwart*, Gütersloh 1991, 43-51, 48-49.

¹¹ The examples given by Rössler - such as the preamble of the German Constitution, the principle of a social market economy, the Christian implications of German folklore and literature - are only partly comparable to the "ostensibly religious practices and language that accompany American civic rituals" described by Lewis Mudge (in *The Sense of a People. Toward a Church for the Human Future*, Philadelphia, 1992, 231, Fn. 32).

defined in a precise way. At what point is a person really a church-oriented Christian and in which case is she no longer ecclesially oriented? ... The self-definition of the individual is, at any rate, a specifically modern task".¹²

What is the proper response of the Church with regard to these modern conditions, i.e. the private choice of degrees of involvement between general and ecclesial Christianity? Rössler demands that the Church "cannot make membership dependent on participation in its programs; at least, it has to respect all the baptized as its members and it cannot dispense itself from its responsibility for public Christianity".¹³ While highlighting, on the one hand, the "almost unlimited individualization of religious ideas and forms of life . . . which elude any kind of definition and schematic representation"¹⁴, Rössler draws attention on the other hand to the lasting significance of the institutional church. For "without ecclesial Christianity neither public Christianity would be able to survive in any identifiable sense, nor would an individual Christianity in the sense of the possibility of manifold varieties be imaginable"¹⁵. Thus, paradoxically, the more that civil and private religions thrive, the more important the ecclesial and explicit type becomes. The Church is needed in order to provide an identifiable interpretation and model of the contents of the Christian faith.

How do these practical theological insights into the development of the church in modernity compare with a sociological account of basic characteristics of modern society and of the place of religion within it?

2. *Structural Pluralism and Individualization*

On the cultural level, the consequences of the differentiation or segmentation of society are *structural pluralism* and *structural individualization*. The terms "differentiation" or "segmentation" denote the process of separation of different segments of society, such as politics, economics, science, education, and private life. Modern society is composed of segments which are juxtaposed and which, despite the

¹² D.Rössler, Die Einheit der Praktischen Theologie, in Nipkow / Rössler / Schweitzer (Eds.), Praktische Theologie und Kultur der Gegenwart, 49.

¹³ D.Rössler, Grundriß, 82. Indeed, the actual evolution of practical theology itself shows that the task for ecclesial praxis has not been restricted to the boundaries of the Church. Rössler's thesis here is that the major areas of practical theology were developed in response to the differentiations of Christianity in modernity: the fostering of religious education for the public form, the promotion of theories of worship and preaching for the ecclesial form and of pastoral care for the individual form.

¹⁴ D.Rössler, Grundriß, 82.

¹⁵ Cf. D.Rössler, Die Einheit der Praktischen Theologie: in Nipkow / Rössler / Schweitzer, Kultur der Gegenwart, 49.

repercussions they have on each other, form systems of their own. The consequence of this for religion is that it loses its role as the one belief system which links the different realms. Religion is now just one segment beside the others. Each segment has its own norms and laws. The segment of economics is ruled by the norm of efficaciousness, functionality, and profit. Science constitutes a segment with its own experts who follow a scientific kind of rationality. In this schema, religion belongs to the segment of world views which is relevant for the private lives of people, but which does not have any direct impact on the other segments. The rules of the business world, or of the legal and the political systems follow their own rationales. One effect of the differentiation of society is the emergence of *structural pluralism*, i.e., a pluralism produced by the processes of modernization.¹⁶ The social philosopher Otfried Höffe describes the origin of this feature:

Societies are considered pluralistic when the public realm consists in a highly differentiated system of intermediate groups, cooperatives and associations that mediate between the power of the state and the individual . . . Due to a long process of religious, political, cultural and social differentiation the relatively homogeneous and stable conceptions of values and living conditions of the so-called old European or preindustrial society have dissolved. . . More and more groups have developed interests, forms of actions, belief convictions and conceptions of reality which are not identical with those of other groups. Because of this basic pluralist feature societies are capable of developing many varied forms of self-realization. In contrast to homogeneous societies this variety creates more scope for individuals and groups, but also more areas of social conflict.¹⁷

¹⁶ Referring to German society (which seems more homogenous in its population than the United States or England and France), the sociologist of religion Karl Gabriel examines the difference between the cultural pluralism of the industrial society from the 19th to the middle of the 20th century and since the 1960s. The earlier pluralism had "limits which were based in the social structure and essentially consisted of a pluralism of group cultures which were relatively closed in themselves. Even traits of the unified culture such as the belief in progress and the welfare state program at least existed in differently accentuated and oriented group-specific versions . . . With the dissolution of the milieus of large groups and of traditional forms of production and living the cultural pluralism of the industrial society undergoes a fundamental transformation and takes on a new character. The opening of the group milieus initially contributes towards a greater homogenization of culture. A central factor in the melting of the group cultures specific in class and denomination are the media, especially television. It is the media in the first place that create and maintain a group-transcending, homogenized horizon of cultural focuses. This homogenized background in turn offers the basis for new cultural differentiations and thus for a new, more radical cultural pluralism." Gabriel. *Christentum*. 133-134.

¹⁷ O. Höffe, *Strategien der Humanität. Zur Ethik öffentlicher Entscheidungsprozesse*, Freiburg, 1975. 18-19.

A second characteristic of differentiated societies is *structural individualization*. In his book "The Society of Risk" (1986) the sociologist Ulrich Beck traces the development from industrial society towards the "risk society" of fully developed modernity.¹⁸ The greater range of individual and political choices has also brought about greater risk. With regard to the individual person, the concept of individualization denotes the transition from preset patterns and courses of life which are predetermined by the class and the gender into which a person is born, to 'individualized' biographies. In former times, one's social position and gender prescribed certain courses of life and led to so-called 'normal biographies.' These 'normal biographies' are presently dissolving. A person can and must choose her course of education, her living arrangements, her degree of participation in society. In every-day life as a consumer she can choose from a wide range of goods and services. Under this aspect, individualization is a gain in freedom.

On the other hand, all these choices and decisions are controlled by the need to make one's living; i.e., they are subjected to the demands of the job market. For the sake of their own material survival people are forced to make themselves the center of their own life planning. Personal ties such as being attached to one's partner or family, to a neighborhood, a workplace, to a regional culture and landscape are subordinated and often sacrificed to the requirements of the job market in order to secure one's market-mediated existence. There are both waves of individualization and the experience of collective fates like mass joblessness and processes of de-qualification.

The consequence of this process in which education, mobility of place and flexibility of time are prime assets is that "the social internal structure of the industrial society — social classes, family forms, gender roles, marriage, parenthood, working career — and the psychological patterns of behavior that go with them melt down and change"¹⁹.

¹⁸ U.Beck, Die Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne, Frankfurt, 1986, esp. 115-119. Beck's thesis is that the industrial society which we normally identify with 'modern society' "really only represents a half-modern society. It is partially a society of estates or social position, and partially an industrial society" (118). The transformation of which we are contemporaries consists in "setting women and men free from the social forms of industrial society - class, social layer, family, gender-related conditions." (115).

¹⁹ Beck, Risikogesellschaft, 115.

With familiar ways of life dissolving, the stabilizing functions which these institutions offered have to be taken over by other services, such as counseling institutions and informal networks.²⁰

Therefore, individualization is a double-sided gift of modernity "The increase of options, of possibilities of consciously choosing forms of life [Lebensgestaltung] is matched by an increase in risks and constraints".²¹ In addition, the conflicting norms of the segments of a functionally differentiated society — e.g., to function competitively in the workplace, to be a caring and sensitive parent, partner or friend — and the pluralism of values which encourages an attitude of non-commitment and consumerism make the formation of a stable identity a difficult task.

Yet precisely by placing this task of mediation on the shoulders of the individual members does modern society succeed in functioning. This is pointed out by Krüggeler and Voll, members of the research team on religion in Switzerland, when they describe individualization as

a mode of socialization which corresponds to the basic structure of modern society [i.e., functional differentiation] . . . What might appear to the individual person as an enlargement of her scope of action, from the perspective of society turns out to be a precondition . . . for the modern level of division of work and social complexity. Only if the mediation between the various subsystems is taken over by the individuals and is not regulated in detail by institutions, only then is a large-scale functional differentiation of social subsystems possible.²²

3. *Individualization in religion*

What are the chances for the acceptance of the authority of a religious tradition under these conditions in which choosing and deciding have become basic cultural modes of life?²³ The effects on religion can be summed up in the two terms "institutionalization" and "bricolage".

²⁰ Cf. K. Gabriel, Tradition im Kontext enttraditionalisierter Gesellschaft, in Dietrich Wiederkehr (ed.), *Wie geschieht Tradition? Überlieferung im Lebensprozeß der Kirche*, Freiburg: Herder, 1991, 6988, 80: "The consequences of the dissolution of milieus . . . are highly ambivalent. Apart from an immense widening of the individuals' scope of freedom and options and thus an individualization, the loss of milieus also entails demanding problems of orientation and new dependencies: dependencies from one's individual success at school, from the job market, from the mass media, from counseling institutions of various kinds."

²¹ Krüggeler/Voll, *Strukturelle Individualisierung*, in: Dubach / Campiche, Sonderfall, 25.

²² "Strukturelle Individualisierung, in: Dubach /Campiche, Sonderfall, 24-25.

²³ An early reflection of this situation can be found in Peter L. Berger's *The Heretical Imperative*, New York: Doubleday, 1979.

Deinstitutionalization can refer to the rejection of the organizational character and the normative claims of the churches, as well as to the modern thrust to de-center tradition and reappropriate it (or some of it) on subjective terms. It does not mean "the replacement of a traditional religious standards of beliefs by a new non-religious world view. Rather, it claims that the religion which was historically institutionalized in Christian denominations and churches is decreasing in favor of a diffused religiosity, on the one hand, which evades doctrinal and organizational fixation, and a variety of minority religions on the other hand which find their profile against this diffusion and are based on individual decision." The result of this is that the "social form of religion changes from an institutionally and disciplinarily controlled religion towards one which can be actualized according to individual needs".²⁴

Another aspect of deinstitutionalization is that the Christian religion even in Western society is losing its former "monopoly" on religion. "It is no longer possible to present in a binding way a unified normative model of religious orientation. Normative claims of religious organizations must first be reconstructed by the individual person as his own obligation and effort"²⁵. In this context, dissent assumes an important function. To voice one's disagreement with regard to parts of a certain tradition can also serve the need to ascertain one's own individuality. "Traditions and the institutions that embody them still count as points of reference for individual self-descriptions, but their given resources [Vorgaben] are only taken over according to an individual's subjective 'conviction' and their adequacy in particular situations. Here it is this accentuation of a difference in respect to the offers of a certain tradition that can be used to build up a specific identity"²⁶.

Bricolage refers to the realm of diffused religiosity and marks the patchwork way in which the individual person assembles his own belief from different sources.²⁷ A syncretistic religion is the result. Its difference from the syncretism of popular religion is explained by Robert Wuthnow in the following way:

²⁴ Krüggeler/Voll, Strukturelle Individualisierung in: Dubach / Campiche, Sonderfall, 32.

²⁵ M. Krüggeler, Inseln der Seligen: Religiöse Orientierungen in der Schweiz, in: Dubach / Campiche, Sonderfall, 123. Cf. also Gabriel, Christentum, 142-150.

²⁶ Krüggeler / Voll, Strukturelle Individualisierung, in: Dubach / Campiche, Sonderfall, 26. Cf. their summary of tendencies in the transformation of religion and options for the Churches, 43-47.

²⁷ Cf. Krüggeler, Inseln der Seligen, in: Dubach / Campiche, Sonderfall, 93-132, 102, 115. Dubach, Nachwort: 'Es bewegt sich alles, Stillstand gibt es nicht' in: Dubach / Campiche, Sonderfall, 295-313, 304-307.

If religious belief is defined as a matter of individual interpretation, . . . then it becomes possible for particular ideas to be put together in a number of ways. The effect of this decoupling is somewhat similar to that accomplished in popular religions but at a different level of ideological organization. Whereas popular religions tend to be disaggregated by virtue of their intrinsic aphoristic quality and lack of formal codification, individualistic religious orientations are disaggregated at the level of the individual believer.²⁸

In line with this sociological research, is there a way in which the authority of a religious tradition would appear acceptable and worthy of consideration to the contemporary person? Leaving aside the fundamentalist reaction to processes of modernization, what seems to be impressive in a religious tradition for most actual or potential believers is not its claimed authority, but its credibility. For Robert Schreiter in his reflection on "local theologies", credibility is the most important condition for the functioning of a tradition within a culture, for crediting it with authority. In his analysis, credibility is judged according to the ability of a tradition to treat the problems that the society faces: "It will be accepted if the manifest concerns of the tradition match the manifest problems of a culture . . . it must be evident to the members of a culture that their concerns are the tradition's concerns"²⁹.

In this regard, the increasing exodus of women from the Catholic church should be taken as a clear sign that the manifest concerns of the tradition do not match the concerns of many of its members. But the credibility of a tradition is also judged by its immediate suitability for personal needs. It threatens to fade if it is seen to be at odds with what seems to be the modern person's holy grail, one's personal right to choose and to revise one's choices.

In my judgment, the theological problem with individualization is not that it confronts the individual with the need to decide for herself what she believes and how she wants to live, instead of allowing herself to be carried along by habit and convention. The call for personal decision is well in keeping with the authority of the gospel. The danger that structural individualization poses for the Christian faith — as well as for any other consistent system of meaning — is the diffusion of the contents of its message. Without the challenge and the possibility for correction which the wider community of the church could offer the Christian truth can easily be reduced to the individual's psychological needs for survival in the contradictory demands of a segmented society.

²⁸ Wuthnow, *Sociology of Religion*, in: Smelser, *Handbook*, 485.

²⁹ R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, New York, 1985, 107.

Against the backdrop of this sociological research it becomes evident that what is needed amid the syncretizing and diffusion of world views is an identifiable witness of the Christian faith in order to know what counts as "Christian" even if one adopts a selective attitude towards it. Therefore, the church as a visible social body with a particular shared belief has an indispensable function also for those who are neither engaged in its communities nor participating in its offers.³⁰

II. **The Theological Grounds of Authority or: Which Truth? Whose Authority?**

So far, we have seen that the reason for the factual, empirical difficulty of the church to assert its authority in contemporary society lies in the structural individualization and pluralism inherent in the process of modernization. In this context, any statement of authority must appear like an unwarranted attempt to exert ecclesial, clerical, or hierarchical power. But what is the theological justification for the church's claim to authority? Drawing on recent debates in fundamental and dogmatic theology, I will first discuss its fundamental reason and measure, which is the authority of God's revelation. Secondly, I shall consider how the contents of this revelation prefigure the style and the structures in which it should be mediated, i.e. proclaimed and lived. Thirdly, I will suggest how the authority of the gospel calls for the effort of the Christian faithful to examine and distinguish between adequate and inadequate interpretations and actualizations of its saving truth.

1. *Authority and the Experience of God's Revelation*

The theological reason for the authority of the church is the divine authorship and authority of Christian revelation. Not human reason or human ingenuity is the source of this revelation but God's self. Edward Schillebeeckx states how in the human experience of God's revelation the distinction between human receptivity and divine agency is present:

Revelation takes place *in* historical human experiences *in* this world, but at the same time it summons us *from* what we take for granted in our limited world . . . This experiential structure of revelation is expressed . . . in the Christian revelation, which had its beginning in a historical en-

³⁰ A theological reflection of this sociological fact can be found in Peter C. Hodgson's *Revisioning the Church. Ecclesial Freedom in the new Paradigm*, Fortress Press, 1988, 104-105: "without their ecclesial essence, the churches would be merely human, social institutions; and without the ecclesial community, God's redemptive,

counter of human beings with a fellow man: Jesus of Nazareth. In him, something that we could never have conceived of appears in a most surprising way in our history. Nevertheless, what could not have been conceived of by human persons appeared in the immanence of our historical experiences. In the encounter with Jesus, the authority of the (Christian) experience which he called to life coincides with the authority of the divine revelation.³¹

Schillebeeckx expounds the experiential and practical character of revelation correcting the traditional instructional approach which interpreted revelation as the divine issuing of supernatural teachings. Yet, at the same time he takes pains to distinguish between the human experience itself and God's self as the content of this experience which gives it its authority: "So for believers, revelation is an action of God as experienced by believers and interpreted in religious language and therefore expressed in human terms . . . The all-pervasive, authoritative element of revelation in this complex context is not this interpretative experience itself but what can be experienced in it"³².

From Schillebeeckx's account two insights regarding the authority of the gospel can be drawn:

1) The identity of the Christian faith depends on the fact that the human experience of revelation is not self-produced but given³³. It is an event effected by God. It is this truth "that the church has to cherish

liberating power would become historically actual only in diffused, anonymous forms".

31 E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ. The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, New York, 1980, 62.

32 E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 78.

33 Yves Congar groups several instances under the qualification as "given." "The first such level is that of the given, the datum: Scripture, witnesses of the Tradition, formulations of the magisterium. These documents have been composed in a certain language issuing from a particular cultural setting an historical and social context. . . The given comes in bulk, not sorted and packed." (Y. Congar, *Towards a Catholic Synthesis*, in *Concilium* 148 (8/1981). Who has the Say in the Church? 68-80, 75). It is important, however, to distinguish between the fundamental given datum, God's self-communication in the person of Jesus, and the "statements which try to express the significance and meaning of the story of Jesus in his proclamation, his being killed and being resurrected". (Th. Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte. Eine Skizze zur Soteriologie*, München 1988², 230). Pröpper's hermeneutical thesis is that the meaning of all the testimonies on Jesus Christ first has to be reconstructed by relating them to his story whose truth these testimonies seek to express. This does not only refer to the witnesses of tradition, but also to the earliest witness in the Scriptures. The Scriptures remain norma normans for all the ensuing Christian tradition; yet, they are themselves interpretations of what has happened in Jesus, God's final self-revelation.

— God's eternal self-revelation in the historical form of the dead but risen Lord, Jesus Christ"³⁴.

2) This basic truth of the Christian faith can only be expressed in finite and surpassable human terms which have to be judged for their adequacy. The procedures of how this is done concretely in cases of conflict, i.e. which body or which single person gets to bear the authority of the gospel in their right to decide, differ from one Christian church to the other. Any attempt of judgment, however, presupposes complex hermeneutical reflections on how to actually identify what remains identical in the Christian tradition³⁵.

However complex the task of judging the adequacy of new interpretations may be, it belongs to the church's commission to stand up for this truth that has been entrusted to it. The witness of the church to the gospel obviously includes more than the theoretical task of grappling with contradicting claims to authentic interpretations of the message of God. Since it is a determinate, identifiable truth which is not compatible with all other positions, the church also has to be alert to what is inconsistent and contradictory. To give an example for mutually exclusive concepts which also make a difference in praxis: one cannot believe in the Jewish and Christian God considered as the Lord over all of history and at the same time have a fatalistic view of the world. These are two basic convictions between which a Christian who strives for the consistency of his faith has to choose³⁶.

2. *The Mediation of the Authority of the Gospel*

That the authority of the church is intended to serve the authority of the gospel,³⁷ it has consequences for the style and structures of the

³⁴ Cf. E.Schillebeeckx, Church. The Human Story of God, New York, 1990, 214.

³⁵ This task involves "a historical reconstruction of the history of tradition of the Christian faith." Cf. Pröpper, Erlösungsglaube, 230-235.

³⁶ Another example from the scene of modern syncretism is the Christian belief in resurrection and the esoteric and the Hinduist belief in reincarnation which are mutually exclusive. To give reasons for this thesis, however, would involve a discussion of the implications of resurrection and of the Christian view of the human person.

³⁷ This is clearly stated by Yves Congar: "The category that must govern all our research is that of the 'life in the truth of Christ', not that of infallibility. Infallibility - a terribly weighted term which we need to use very warily - is a function of truth. We must not make infallibility the foundation stone of our structures and make truth a function of it." (76) With reference to the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution Dei Verbum he clarifies: "The very texts of the magisterium itself never cease asserting that the magisterium is helped to guard and teach pure et integre only 'id quod traditum est', 'what has been handed down'. We know the words of Dei

church's witness. The way in which the church proclaims the gospel must be in keeping with the message of the gospel which invites the free assent of its hearers. That the gospel takes human freedom seriously and that this has to make a difference in church structures is emphasized across denominational borders. But because of statements from the Vatican urging obedience towards the teaching decisions of the magisteriums, recently especially Catholic theologians have found it necessary to underline the principle of freedom in the mediation of the gospel. They relativize the magisterium's quest for obedience by reflecting on the essence of faith, by highlighting the role of reception and non-reception by faithful as a criterion, and by critically analyzing the concept of tradition. Gabriel Daly gives an insightful comment on the limits of institutional authority posed by the inner nature of faith:

As Christians we are committed to the conviction that the truth we profess is the truth which sets men and women free. Such truth can never be authentically professed on purely extrinsic grounds, because the freedom it engenders is ab initio an interior one. This kind of truth demands an unforced and unfeigned inner assent which cannot be produced by any extrinsic authority.³⁸

By reminding the church of the freedom of conscience to which it subscribed Avery Dulles gives an immanent critique of present practices of the Catholic church leadership:

There is a temptation for church authorities to try to use their power of governance to stamp out dissent. . . . It inhibits good theology from performing its critical task, and it is detrimental to the atmosphere of freedom in the church. The acceptance of true doctrine should not be a matter of blind conformity, as though truth could be imposed by decree. The church, as a society that respects the freedom of the human conscience, must avoid procedures that savor of intellectual tyranny.³⁹

Verbum §10: The magisterium is not above the Word of God . . . it listens to it devoutly, guards it religiously, and explains it faithfully'. The criterion of truth is 'id quod traditum est'; the magisterium of the Church is fundamentally a magisterium of Truth itself." Concilium 148 (8/1981), 76.

In their reply to the Vatican *Instructio* to Catholic theologians the German-speaking Catholic dogmatic and fundamental theologians likewise insist that "Theology sees itself, as well as the ecclesial magisterium, bound not primarily to obedience as such, but to the authority of the truth." (*Stellungnahme der Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschsprachigen Dogmatiker und Fundamentaltheologen zur >Instruktion über die kirchliche Berufung des Theologen< der Kongregation für die Glaubenslehre* (24. Mai 1990)" in D. Wiederkehr (Ed.), *Wie geschieht Tradition?*, 173-176, 174).

³⁸ G. Daly, Which Magisterium is authentic? in: *Concilium* 148 (8/1981) 52-55, 53.

³⁹ A. Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism. Current Challenges in the Theology of Church*, San Francisco, 1988, 108-09.

This freedom of conscience is a principle invoked both by Catholic and Protestant theologians. The Catholic theologians Wolfgang Beinert defends of faithful dissent as follows

"The deepest reason for the legitimacy of the non-reception of magisterial directives by individuals on the philosophical level is the virtue of *prudentialia* which includes the duty to critical distinction, on the theological level the *primacy of conscience* and the *freedom of the act of faith*".⁴⁰

The Catholic fundamental theologian Hermann J. Pottmeyer analyzes:

The teaching magisterium can sharpen the tension by pressing the demand for obedience in a way that violates the faithful's conscience of truth. Reception, which can only occur in free agreement, is not enhanced in this way. The solving of the conflict can only happen through a process of dialogical understanding . . . In the final analysis, the magisterium can only demand obedience towards God and God's Word⁴¹.

The former general secretary of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, Lukas Vischer, summarizes the position of the Commission with regard to cases of conflict:

If there are juridical structures regulating such discipline [in matters of faith and morals], they should be strictly subordinated to the calling and mission of the Church and not allowed to deteriorate into juridicism, limiting the freedom of conscience of individual church members and ministers. Disciplinary measures which may be necessary to maintain the clarity of the Church's message must not contradict the ethos of freedom which is characteristic of the New Testament.⁴²

Schillebeeckx's conclusion from the way in which "God rules in history, ... in the utmost respect for human freedom" with regard to church structures can count as expressing an Interdenominational consensus: "The functioning of ministerial authority must ... be organized in such a way that the liberating authority of the Lord Jesus, which is

⁴⁰ W. Beinert, Die Rezeption und ihre Bedeutung für Leben und Lehre der Kirche in: Wolfgang Beinert (Ed.), Glaube als Zustimmung, 15-49, 43.

⁴¹ L. Sartori, What is the criterion of the *sensus fidelium*? in: Concilium 148 (8/1981) 56-60, 58, concludes: "The classical theological thesis of 'receptio' requires, therefore, to be broadened and deepened. The active reaction of the believers (whether in consensus or in dissent) can in fact be described as true *locus theologicus*, in which it is possible to read the force of the transmitted Word, to grasp its original resonances and ever new implications."

⁴² H.J. Pottmeyer, Rezeption und Gehorsam - Aktuelle Aspekte der wiederentdeckten Realität 'Rezeption' in: W. Beinert (Ed.), Glaube als Zustimmung, 51-91, 78.

⁴³ L. Vischer, How does the Church Teach Authoritatively Today? (Abbreviated version of the report of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches from the International Ecumenical Consultation in Odessa, 1977, in: Concilium 148 (8/1981) 1-10, 6.

abidingly present, can come into effect time and again in the life of the Christian community of faith.⁴³

Another theological reason for the right and necessity of the Christian Church to transmit the gospel to each new age in creative freedom is put forth by the Swiss Catholic dogmatic theologian Dietrich Wiederkehr. After broadening the concept of tradition from the hierarchy to the whole church, he sets out to rescue it from the danger of "religious Darwinism":

"It is especially the Catholic understanding of tradition, reinforced by the promise of the Spirit (a promise that can lead to ideology), which is in danger of regarding the *factual* course of tradition as the course tradition was meant to take. . . Besides the possible and the real correspondence to the given situation there are in church history undeniable moments of refusal, neglect and failure by the church, where tradition has been a betrayal."

He then locates the right and the duty of each age to go beyond the existing tradition in its interpretations of the Christian faith in the very fact of tradition itself:

The great ages of the church, of the praxis of faith as well as of intellectual fruitfulness, were not the times of sterile continuation or fashionable adjustment but the times of risking new steps and simultaneously of open argument. Tradition only exists because there has always been more than tradition. This paradoxical conclusion is to say that the tradition of the past is unjustly played off against its new actualization, that it rather is the strongest warrant for contemporary transformations/interpretations. Because each new present moment was recognized despite all the rich offers already given in tradition, because of this each time new tradition originated. The right of the church in previous times is also the right of the present church.⁴⁴

This freedom to create and not only to conserve tradition as well as the need to appropriate the Christian faith in a personal way are very much in consonance with the message of the gospel. Moreover, these insights seem to be in keeping with the results of the sociological analysis of contemporary society. Karl Gabriel describes how the mediation of traditions is changing:

Practically all inherited deposits of tradition [*Traditionsbestände*] lose their *matter-of-course* validity. Traditions are at one's disposal, but they have to be *chosen*, one has to *decide* on them. . . Without a minimal degree of reflection no process of tradition can succeed anymore. Who-

⁴³ E. Schillebeeckx, Church, 216

ever considers this insight scarcely new and exciting, should realize that it means something very different if a small academic elite treats traditions in this way or if for almost everybody traditions in principle a matter of choice and have therefore become contingent.⁴⁵

Yet, the freedom emphasized by so many theologians does not necessarily exclude the need to set limits to interpretations in order to preserve the gospel in its character of being a given and identifiable truth. On the background of individualization with its tendency towards diffusion and syncretism, not every case of ecclesial authority can be dismissed as illegitimate use of power and an unfounded rejection of a rightful claim to *aggiornamento*.

3. *The Teaching Authority of the Church in Cases of Conflict*

Lukas Vischer in his summary of the Faith and Order Commission's report on binding doctrine in the church rightly places the source of unity in the churches' practice of faith, in its *orthopraxis*. The "primary root" of unity lies "in the Eucharistic fellowship and in the common mission and witness of the Church"⁴⁶. Although he warns against imposing uniformity, he still sees the need for authoritative teaching:

Obviously, pluralism must not be misunderstood as 'indifferentism' or 'relativism'. The Church must also know how to say 'no'. Faithfulness to the apostolic witness implies that there may be unfaithfulness. Obedient listening and the desire to teach aright call for the recognition that sometimes the line between truth and error must be drawn. . . . Often the churches, afraid of possible divergences in their ranks, tend to withdraw from authoritative teaching. They try to preserve peace and unity by avoiding critical issues rather than by taking positions on matters of faith and justice. But there is no escaping. They need to hazard peace and unity and dare to confront error and unrighteousness. Controversy within the Church and conflict with evil in the world may be inevitable if the Church is to be faithful to its Lord.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ D.Wiederkehr, Das Prinzip Überlieferung, in: W.Kern et al. (Eds.), Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie, Bd. 4, Traktat Theologische Erkenntnislehre, Freiburg, 1988, 100-123, 110. 116-117.122

⁴⁵ K.Gabriel, Tradition im Kontext enttraditionalisierter Gesellschaft, in: D.Wiederkehr (Ed.), Wie geschieht Tradition?. 69-88. 81.

⁴⁶ "The growing variety of interpretations may cause the problem of diffusing the visible unity of the Church's teaching and call into question the Church's identity. The acceptance of pluralism does not necessarily militate against unity. Authoritative teaching should seek to maintain the Church in unity, yet not impose uniformity nor deny creative difference. The oneness has its primary root in the Eucharistic fellowship and in the common mission and witness of the Church." Concilium 148 (8/1981) 6.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* 6-7.

Avery Dulles derives the need for a "unified authoritative leadership" from this:

"The apostolic ministry of supervision is permanently necessary for the Church so that it may articulate its faith and co-ordinate its efforts as Christian mission may require. Without a unified authoritative leadership, the church would disintegrate into a plurality of movements having, indeed, a certain common inspiration but incapable of adopting a clear corporate stand on any controversial issue".⁴⁸

But while one acknowledges the need for authoritative decisions, one cannot absolutize it. Even legitimate decisions have inherent limits. As Schillebeeckx reminds us:

In serious situations of conflict and thus in exceptional circumstances, definitions of church order, which are in fact necessary for the concrete and practical life of the church community of faith . . . can never resolve the religious and theological question of the authentic place where . . . the concrete effectiveness of the Holy Spirit can be demonstrated. Not even the church authority has a special charisma here; it has the authority to settle unresolved questions for a time — in order to even out polarization.⁴⁹

III. Conclusion

Our *sociological* inquiry in Part One alerted us to the fact that despite the growing individualization and syncretism of world views in modern society — which probably are here to stay — the institution of the Christian church remains important because it gives an 'official' picture of what it is to be Christian. The *theological* reflection in Part Two reminded us that the authority of the church is there to safeguard the truth that has been entrusted to it, the salvation of humankind in Jesus Christ's revelation of God's loving self. If the mission of the church is to live by and mediate this truth, then it has to set its witness to the Christian God against the current postmodern aestheticisms that avoid existential questions, existential decisions and engagements. Contemporary culture might happily say "Yes to religion, but No to God" (J.B.Metz).

⁴⁸ A.Dulles, *Successio apostolorum - Successio prophetarum - Successio doctorum* in *Concilium* 148 (8/1981) 61-67. 62.

⁴⁹ E.Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 227-228. In the fact that God's revelation took human freedom seriously he finds "intrinsically ecclesiological reasons which impel the church of Jesus Christ to follow the nonauthoritarian, vulnerable, even helpless, rule of God"(221). He also reminds the church of Thomas Aquinas' insight: "The power and rule of Christ over human beings is exercised by truth, justice, and above all, love"(222).

The trouble with calling the faithful to witness their faith "against" the arbitrariness of orientations in present-day culture, however, is that it presupposes a unity in Christian experience, outlook, and praxis that does not exist.⁵⁰ Therefore, what seems to be the most pressing problem in the situation of an individualized Christianity in individualized Western societies is how to foster the identity of the Christian faith within the church, i.e. how to deal theologically and practically with the personal interpretations of the Christian message on the borderline between private and official Christianity. Prominent examples of this are the cases of conflict mentioned in the beginning — Eugen Drewermann and Jutta Voss putting forward in the name of the church their individual syntheses of Christian and other traditions. Obviously, everyone claims that they are giving a truly authentic interpretation of the Christian message of God which is true both to their conscience and to the demands of the time. How can one decide whether their work anticipates a future consensus? Often enough in church history, the dissidents were the ones who helped to pass on the authentic moments of the tradition. One criterion which can be ascertained easily is whether they do engage in dialogue, argumentation, whether they discuss the questions posed by others.

But is it enough for safeguarding the given truth of Christianity to demand from the various groups of Christian faithful that they keep up communication between each other and with Christian tradition — instead of falling into the "aggressive monotrationalism" that can mark hierarchical just as well as contextual theologies which only pay heed to the experience of their own circle.⁵¹

Nicholas Lash even envisages the possibility of different creeds, although these have to contain "essential elements of the Christian narrative". But, basically, the unity of Christian faith is expressed more in

⁵⁰ "Faith is now being articulated and lived in a multitude of apparently incompatibly forms, some deeply communal and morally engaged, some radically privatistic, each bearing witness to an apparently different version of the gospel". L.Mudge, *Sense of a People*, 75.

⁵¹ This danger is particularly evident in the "communities of feeling", the new religious collectives in Western culture. Cf. K.O.Frh.v.Aretin, E.-W.Böckenförde et al., *Die kirchliche Sprachverwirrung in ein Pfingsten verwandeln*, in: *Herder-Korrespondenz* 46 (1992) 172-175, 173. Cf. also I.U.Dalferth's criticism of the "dissolution of distinct theology into (pseudo)religious irrationalisms and projects of wholeness" in his *Kombinatorische Theologie. Probleme theologischer Rationalität*, (*Quaestiones Disputatae* 130) Freiburg, 1991, 13. Also Mudge's judgment remains cautionary: "It remains to be seen whether what is particular and local is for that reason more likely to be authentic" (*Sense of a People*, 71).

procedure than in substance, in communication, mutual criticism, and acceptance.⁵²

Once "the irreducible diversity of culture and memory, history and experience, language and thought-form, is taken seriously then, as Karl Rahner has remarked, 'There will be no longer any single and universal basic formula of the Christian faith applicable to the whole church.' In these circumstances, the unity of the Creed, no longer "maintained by subscription to one single formula, will be maintained by continual quest for mutual recognition. The stories that differently express different experiences will not be verbally identical. But, if each creed, each 'abbreviated statement' of faith, containing what are taken to be the essential elements of the Christian narrative, is to be a *Christian* creed, . . . and not a narcissistic celebration of a nationalist, sectarian or particularist egotism and self-interest, then it must be offered as, and be capable of being accepted by others as, a different version of the same story, not a different story."⁵³

Robert Schreiter offers a more substantial definition of unity. "Cultural diversity among Christians is a fact. At the same time, however, Christians believe that unity is one of the signs of God's church. What unity means in the concrete is differently understood, but it does involve the Pauline 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all' (Ephesians 4:5).⁵⁴ He also puts forth five criteria by which to judge Christian performance: its cohesiveness, the worshiping context, the praxis of the community, the judgment of other churches, and the challenge to other churches.⁵⁵

I would like to conclude my inquiry with the concern expressed by Lewis Mudge and commend his questions to our discussion:

⁵² The willingness of local groups and churches to engage in communication is not a matter of course. Schreiter points out what gets lost without such dialogue: Solutions are "reached without the benefit of dialogue with the tradition, to the detriment of the entire body of Christ: the local church has lost the opportunity to have its response to the gospel tested, challenged, or affirmed; the larger church may have missed an important incarnation of Christ in culture... The complexities of cultural difference are often confused by relations of power. But there is a growing danger that more and more in the future there will be no dialogue with tradition at all. More facile models of contextualization will be pursued, and blame will have to be placed on both sides of the erstwhile dialogue." (Local Theologies, 101)

⁵³ N.Lash, Theologies at the Service of a Common Tradition in Concilium 171 (1/1984) (Different Theologies, Common Responsibility. Babel or Pentecost ?), 74-83, 80.

⁵⁴ R.Schreiter, Local Theologies, 102.

⁵⁵ R.Schreiter, Local Theologies, 117-121.

"If not by the methods of Cardinal Ratzinger, how *shall* the church determine what is faithful and authentic and what is not? . . . The church faces life-or-death issues, issues around which cluster questions of basic integrity, and faithfulness to the gospel. But the issues in different parts of the world are not the same. . . It is not merely a question of adaptation or application of the gospel to circumstances, but rather fundamental differences of perspective, divergent ways of conceiving what the gospel is about. When pluralism reaches a certain point, contextuality begins to become more important than tradition, more important than any ideal or essential unity the faith may possess. How far along this path is it legitimate to go?⁵⁶

front people's moral and pastoral problems. In particular, sexuality is given a prominence as great as the major life events of birth and death, but then is reduced to discussions of copulation – who does what with whom where!

Perhaps I speak too harshly, yet undoubtedly the combative word "struggle" fits this topic area well, both in terms of the history of the debates and in terms of much contemporary discussion. In an audience of this kind I need not labour the point about our history. We must all be aware of the early Hellenisation of Christianity and of the Neo Platonic dualism, with its fear and contempt of bodily matters, which influenced the teachings of the Fathers. Origen likened the opening of the vagina to the gates of hell and castrated himself for the kingdom's sake; Jerome wrote, "I praise marriage and wedlock, but only because they beget celibates". But most significant, perhaps is Augustine's description of prelapsarian sexual intercourse. In the ideal state there would be no spontaneous male erections, rather:

These members . . . would be moved by the command of his will, and the husband would be mingled with the loins of his wife without the meditative stimulus of passion . . . Thus it would have been possible to inject the semen into the womb through the female genitalia as innocently as the menstrual flow is now ejected.⁵⁷

Thus the struggle with sexuality within certain aspects of the tradition has been at a very basic level its spontaneity and power were seen as inevitably corrupting, the epitome of temptation leading to the commission of sin. Allied to this was a powerful gender bias, so well documented now by feminist theologians. Eve the temptress was to be found in every woman. The alleged irrationality of women made them

⁵⁶ L.Mudge, *Sense of a People*, 88, 74-75. He concludes: "Clearly we need some new means of interpreting the life of Christian communities which come together in innovative ways around issues of human well-being and destiny in today's world (88)... What theological method, in touch with tradition, yet open and creative, might be adequate for making sense of this new situation?" (75)