

# Complex Connectivity and the Quest for Christian Community

## Young Scholars in the Baptist Academy Summer 2008

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### Introduction

Histories of twentieth-century Christianity will surely feature at least two major storylines. During this period, many historically divided ecclesial bodies began to meet in respectful dialogue, fell back from defensive doctrinal positions, and established various means for the pursuit of reconciliation. At the same time, burgeoning churches in the global South and East were making it much harder to deny that Christianity was truly a worldwide phenomenon, and not a merely Western export.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the century's most prominent institutional vehicle for intra-Christian harmony was founded as the *World Council of Churches* serves as a convenient reminder that these trends did not occur in isolation from each other. As is well known, the modern ecumenical movement began as nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries recognized that visible signs of the Western church's fragmentation on various mission fields undermined their attempts to witness to a gospel of reconciliation.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will not be dealing with issues of cultural diversity within global Christianity *per se* (i.e., the kinds of questions often addressed by theological treatments

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<sup>1</sup> According to eminent twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, "the Second Vatican Council is . . . the [Roman Catholic] Church's first official self-actualization as a world Church." Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II" *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), 717.

<sup>2</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defense of the South India Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1960). Newbigin was defending the creation of the Church of South India, which was formed out of an agreement between existing Reformed, Anglican, and Methodist churches to unite in a newly formed, single church. As an heir to a generation of ecumenical leaders for whom the Church's "mission" and "unity" were inextricable, Newbigin hoped Western Christianity would learn from this example as it turned to the task of re-evangelizing its own culture.

of “inculturation”). Rather, I am concerned with how the state of what Baptist theologian James McClendon called the “quest for Christian community” is illuminated by recent studies of “globalization” and its cultural effects. The histories of our increasing global interconnectedness and of the emergence of an ecumenical or post-denominational, post-confessional age within Christianity can be read together as a single narrative about the changing grammar of such terms as “near” and “far” and their impact on the formation and sustenance of particular ways of life.

We Christians certainly live in interesting times. Although traditional ecclesial rivalries now seem passé in many quarters, we have not experienced the “reunion of the Church” for which earlier generations fervently worked, hoped, and prayed -- or, more importantly, the unity Jesus prayed that his followers would exhibit in order that the world might believe (John 17). Deep differences remain today among those who claim to be “in Christ,” but locating these divisions and pursuing their reconciliation are difficult tasks. Time-honored ways of describing meaningful differences among Christians are being blurred, and it is unclear what categories, if any, will replace them.

My own ecclesial location among the small, strange tribe of “catholic Baptists” represents one response to this shifting terrain. These Baptists attempt to combine critical loyalty to the historic assortment of Christians called “Baptist” while also locating themselves as Baptists within the broadly construed “great tradition” of Christian theology rooted in the classic creeds of the first five Christian centuries.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I will claim that recent analyses of globalized culture help explain why such a tension-filled stance like “Baptist catholicity” is both possible *and* theologically

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<sup>3</sup> For an important articulation of this project, see Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

intelligible. The broader significance of this claim for contemporary Christian discipleship becomes clearer after noting how the shape of the contemporary ecclesial context and the cultural phenomena brought together under the heading of “globalization” resemble each other.

### **The End of Ecumenical History?**

For more than a century, various individuals and ecclesial bodies have sought the official reconciliation of divided Christendom under the name of “ecumenism.” While it has registered some notable achievements, the traditional ecumenical enterprise increasingly generates combinations of apathy and disillusionment. There seems to be widespread agreement that the limitations of its assumptions and methods have been exposed -- not only by various lines of theological critique, but by concrete ecclesial realities.<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, historic doctrinal divisions are increasingly perceived as having been transcended -- witness the historic 1999 signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, in which Lutherans and Catholics rescinded their mutual sixteenth-century excommunications. Yet such ecumenical advances seem like pyrrhic victories in light of other, more perplexing trends. Few today who desire the reconciliation of divided ecclesial bodies are placing their hopes in high-level dialogue. This is largely because the theological coherence of these supposed ecumenical agents is either contested (as seen in the thorny issue of the ground-level reception of official ecclesial decisions, including ecumenical agreements, within many historic, “vertically” ordered “churches”) or diffuse (as seen in the decentralized, “horizontally” ordered

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<sup>4</sup> This assessment can be found in many of the essays in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *The Ecumenical Future: Background Papers for “In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

Protestant ecclesial “movements” that, at least in a demographic sense, have adapted most successfully to the social and political conditions of modernity – e.g., evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, the “free church” tradition generally).

Classic ecumenism tended to picture Christianity as a set of discrete entities moving toward or away from some form of greater unity. The adequacy of this model is challenged by the fact that Christianity is becoming more integrated and, simultaneously, exceedingly fluid and pluriform. In the century or so since modern ecumenism took shape, has global Christianity become more unified or divided? The most accurate answer would have to be: “yes.”

There is a striking similarity between this ecclesial situation and other trends. A decade ago, political theorists debated whether the geopolitical moment should be described as the “end” of dialectical world-history via the triumph of liberal capitalism and democracy<sup>5</sup> or as the build-up to a prolonged “Clash of Civilizations” as the fires of ancient antagonisms reignited following the end of the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> Since there is substantial evidence to support both these readings, it seems somewhat nearer the mark to say that, at present, forms of human community are taking shape within mutually reinforcing, yet unevenly experienced, trends toward both cosmopolitanism and tribalism.

Over the last several centuries we have experienced the rapid deployment of technologies that connect human life around the world in dramatically new ways. Many have described these developments as the virtual shrinking of the scale of human community into a “global village” linked by the bonds of transnational economic exchange, cultural discourse, and civic association. However, the homogenizing

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

processes that some have described using phrases like the “Coca-colonization” of the world are matched by a concurrent sense of fragmentation. For example, more and more people are able to connect with each other through the internet, but by no means does this guarantee an increase in global solidarity or understanding. The same medium that allows for widespread connections enables the proliferation of individualized niches in which we may choose to limit our interactions to other self-chosen insiders. Cultural theorist John Tomlinson’s shorthand description of globalization as “complex connectivity” gets at this multivalent reality in which virtually all strangers are potential friends, while traditional neighbors and even family easily become strangers.

Theologians have often traced the roots of the present ecumenical impasse to the atomizing epistemology and politics of liberal modernity, which have weakened the theological integrity of confessional traditions and spawned forms of Christianity that can by definition show no more than ad hoc fidelity to historic doctrines, ecclesial practices, and structures. The legitimate insights of such readings should not be discounted. However, the challenges “complex connectivity” poses for the contemporary “quest for Christian community” are double-edged. The threats come not only from the direction of anarchic individualism but also from impulses towards false and dangerous forms of unity. Moreover, they seem to have as much to do with material infrastructures like the interstate highway system or digital media as they do with problematic ideas.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I am not advocating pure materialism. I simply have in mind something like Alasdair MacIntyre’s claim that “the roots of some of the problems which engage the specialized attention of academic philosophers and the roots of some of the problems central to our everyday social and practical lives are one and the same . . . we cannot understand, let alone solve, one of these sets of problems without understanding the other.” [*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984 (36)]. Or, see this remark from Stanley Hauerwas:

That we live in an age in which the church is but another voluntary agency and theology, at best, one subject among others in the curriculum of universities is the result not just of mistakes in the thirteenth century [by scholastic philosopher-theologians like Duns Scotus and Francisco Suarez]

This paper argues that, since our highly networked form of life tends to detach particular ways of inhabiting the world from specific geographical and social places, historic forms of Christian division should not simply be wished away. Distinct ecclesial bodies such as denominations, confessions, and churches play an essential role by establishing structures of connection and maintaining stores of memory that can bind people together within time and space. Because the very existence of these separate bodies also reinforces the scandal of Christian division, this is a somewhat paradoxical claim. However, a critical, “catholic” loyalty to particular ecclesial bodies recognizes that these all-too-flawed and finite communities are uniquely able to provide the spatial conditions for the possibility of incarnate Christian fellowship and reconciliation.

To develop these claims, I will identify several helpful descriptions of globalization’s effects on the nature of our contemporary forms of life. These concepts can enable us to recognize the challenges and opportunities the current milieu presents for the Church’s (or churches’) participation in the Triune God’s “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5). I begin by describing the nature of this globalized context and notable theological attempts to deal with the “complex connectivity” it brings to the fore.

### **The Promise and Perils of Ecumenical Ecclesiology**

The modern ecumenical movement emerged in what Roland Robertson has called the “take off period” of modern globalization.<sup>8</sup> During the late nineteenth and early

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but of the effect of innovations such as the clock that intellectuals (exactly because we are intellectuals) are prone to discount. (Of course, I am aware that clocks are also the result of ideas). [With the Grain of the Universe: *The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology*: Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001, 35.]

<sup>8</sup> Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), 28. As Robertson notes, this convenient demarcation should not be taken to imply that “globalization” only refers to processes that began in the late nineteenth century. Not only have they been unfolding for some time, we can see similar patterns in other cosmopolitan historical-cultural moments. While qualifications

twentieth centuries, the now-familiar mapping of global space and time was institutionalized: transnational organizations plotted Cartesian lines of longitude and latitude, demarcated time zones and drew the international date-line, while nearly all countries adopted the Gregorian calendar and the seven-day week. These forms of global standardization facilitated the flows of commerce and data made possible by various advances in transportation and communication.

This era also saw the rise of various movements concerned with what Robertson calls the relationship between the “local” and the “pan-local”: e.g., the modern Olympic Games, the League of Nations, the Communist Internationale, the “Parliament of Religions” and the International Missionary Conference, precursor to the ecumenical movement’s “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work” gatherings. There was little consensus among these various groups on the proper relationships between the global, national (or “local”), and the trans- or international dimensions of human community. Nevertheless, “globalization” meant that they were all responding to a fundamental shift in the basic context in which people attempt to understand the world, locate their place within it, and act accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

We can see a similar shared awareness of a new context within twentieth-century theology. The realization that some kind of genuine unity already existed among presently divided churches; the painful acknowledgment of the ways in which concrete ecclesial practices obscured and opposed this unity; and the growing awareness of

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would need to be made, the “Hellenization” of the Mediterranean basin during the last few centuries before the common era certainly bears a resemblance to contemporary “globalization.”

<sup>9</sup> Robertson describes the complicated matrix in which we locate ourselves as a field defined by four poles: nation-states, the international system of societies, individuals, and humankind. In his view, “a ‘realistic’ view of the world as a whole must accept in principle the relative autonomy of each of the four main components . . . and acknowledge their constraint by the other three” (ibid., 25-26, my emphasis).

significant diversity within supposedly homogenous ecclesial bodies – all these combined to made it abundantly clear to many twentieth-century Christians that the seeking of reconciliation could not and should not mean a simple march toward uniformity.

Concurrent with these developments was a widespread ecumenical retrieval of the patristic notion that the church is best understood in terms of a “communion” (*koinonia*) that gains its character from participation in the life of the Triune God – a life in which both genuine unity and difference or distinction coexist peacefully and creatively.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this notable formal convergence (which leaves many crucial details unresolved), efforts to pursue real-world communion among divided Christian communities run into several difficulties in the current ecclesial environment. Both the obstacles and opportunities of what we might call “ecclesiology in an ecumenical key” reflect the broad patterns of responses to a globalized context.

### **The Universalization of the Particular**

Robertson argues that thinking and acting within a globalized horizon precipitates two responses. The first he calls the “universalization of the particular.”<sup>11</sup> This means that specific constructions or narrations of identity must take place against an increasingly global backdrop: distinctive stances have to justify their existence in light of newly abundant and easily accessible alternatives. This heightened awareness of pluralism often leads to a new search for fundamentals or universal foundations that can take both “conservative” and “liberal” forms.

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<sup>10</sup> A good historical survey of the development of communion ecclesiology, beginning with nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox thinkers exiled in France, can be found in the early chapters of Christopher Ruddy’s *The Local Church: J.M.R. Tillard and the Future of Catholic Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). For a contemporary Roman Catholic survey and analysis of the diverse appropriations of this motif, see Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Robertson, *ibid.*, 29.

Robertson's account provides a helpful heuristic for describing recent ecclesial developments within my own tradition. In the late twentieth century, Southern Baptists officially fractured into opposing "truth" and "liberty" parties.<sup>12</sup> Both sides gladly claimed these labels and both insisted that failure to affirm their version of "bedrock" Baptist principles would inevitably lead to disaster. While this story is often told in terms of Southern Baptists finally encountering "modernity,"<sup>13</sup> to analyze it in terms of globalized culture emphasizes spatial as well as intellectual considerations. By spatial considerations, I mean something like one's sense of "proximity" and "distance" and how one applies these categories to others.<sup>14</sup> The "universalization of the particular" refers to the disorientation that occurs when one's awareness of the number of lives and alternative ways of life that are intertwined with one's own rapidly expands.

In his account of late-twentieth-century Southern Baptists, historian Barry Hankins brought spatial dynamics to the fore by arguing that it is highly significant that key leaders of the insurgent conservatives or fundamentalists in this Baptist civil war were educated in Northern universities *outside* the Southern Baptist heartland.<sup>15</sup> There they were exposed to radical intellectual diversity -- including aggressive secularisms and relativisms -- to which they responded by adopting rationalistic theological critiques of modern culture honed by northern evangelicals. Believing that fundamentally similar

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<sup>12</sup> See R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "A Conflict of Visions: The Theological Roots of the Southern Baptist Controversy," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7:1 (Spring 2003), 4.

<sup>13</sup> In her research on the SBC conflict, sociologist Nancy Ammerman found that an individual Southern Baptist's "response to modernity" (defined in terms of religious pluralism and openness to change) largely determined how he or she sided in the SBC conflict. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 150-155.

<sup>14</sup> A recent theological engagement with spatial questions and the Church's relationship to various "imagined communities" such as the nation-state can be found in William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Barry G. Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

ideologies were now insinuating themselves *within* their own fold, these agitated conservatives saw any Baptist unwilling to subscribe to strict biblical inerrancy as a subversive who would eventually undermine “the faith once for all delivered to the saints.” Meanwhile, embattled “moderate” Baptists became wary of calls for conformity and suspicious of anyone reticent to affirm the formal right of all Christians to interpret the Bible for themselves.<sup>16</sup> Both sides responded to a new situation of potential fragmentation (i.e., the chaos “out there” was increasingly present “in here”) by making Baptist identity a matter of affirming increasingly abstract doctrines.<sup>17</sup>

The “universalization of the particular” does not simply lead to polarization, however. We can posit a third alternative in addition to exclusivistic and relativistic responses to “complex connectivity”: hybridization. Put simply, to speak of hybridity is refer to a state in which entities once considered pure or distinct are combined in unexpected ways. Such combinations are a familiar part of mundane, contemporary existence. As part of his famous (and now nearly two-decades-old) description of the “postmodern condition” Jean-Francois Lyotard claimed that “eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats

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<sup>16</sup> In an oft-cited example, (moderate) Baptist historian Walter Shurden defined the “Baptist identity” in terms of four “fragile freedoms”: soul freedom, Bible freedom, church freedom and religious freedom. While he insists that each freedom must be paired with a corresponding responsibility, it is not clear how such formal, procedural principles could entail normative criteria for such obligations. Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Again, this is not to say that one could not find numerous instances of earlier Baptists sounding much like their late twentieth-century heirs in either party. However, it seems to me that the widespread sense of a rapidly shifting context, leading to divergent, ideologically-charged responses, makes more sense of the actual fragmentation that occurred than attributing the split to a sudden influx of “evil”, “stupid”, or “mean” Baptists.

McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong . . . ."18

Ecclesiological hybridization can take both "high" and "low" forms. "Communion ecclesiology" understood in the broadest sense can be read as an attempt to avoid the extremes between narrow, authoritarian uniformity and unbounded pluralism that dissolves into anarchy. Nuanced ecclesiological proposals created by ecumenically responsible theologians critically absorb elements popularly associated with other Christian traditions and frequently challenge their own tradition's historical identity-markers and practice -- including time-honored polemics that reduce other traditions to caricature. Ecumenically sensitive Baptists seek to counter the notion that the church is a mere aggregate of individual believers,<sup>19</sup> while Catholics have increasingly taken pains to avoid implying that the church is analogous to a multinational corporation that sends out operating directives to thousands of local "franchises."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1988), 87.

<sup>19</sup> For recent examples of Baptist advocacy of a more robust ecclesiology see, *inter alia*, "Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24:3 (Fall 1997): 303-310. (Printed as an appendix to Curtis Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Re-Envisioned?" in *ibid*, 273-309.); Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003); Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Although Miroslav Volf used then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) as a foil against which to define his "free church" communal ecclesiology, he acknowledged that Ratzinger stands firmly with twentieth-century Catholicism's departure from polemically shaped Tridentine emphasis on the church as "institution." For Ratzinger, Eucharistic communion provides the clue to the church's nature as neither merely "hierarchical-institutional" nor "organic-mystical." See Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 42.

However, Volf would have faced a much different challenge if he had taken as his dialogue partner veteran Catholic ecumenist J.M.R. Tillard, whose major ecclesiological work is titled *The Local Church*. Tillard understood the "universal" church to be a "communion of communions" (or "church of churches") modeled on the fellowship created by the spirit at Pentecost. He claimed that the primitive church of Jerusalem was already fully "catholic" because it possessed a genuine pneumatic, Eucharistic communion. Thus, he concluded, the universal dimension of the church does not precede and structure the nature of its local realization (a simplified version of Ratzinger's position); rather, the two aspects imply each other in a way that defies easy systematization. Tillard, *L'Eglise Locale: Ecclésiologie de communion et catholicité* (Paris: Cerf, 1995), 553. Translated and cited in Ruddy, *op. cit.* 61.

From the perspective of those used to relying upon traditional caricatures, the vast middle ground between these clear extremes looks like an incoherent mess: do Baptists privilege the solitary individual or not? Are Catholics ecclesial triumphalists or not? The Second Vatican Council finessed the thorny issue of ecclesial boundaries within an ecumenical horizon by teaching that the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” Church of Christ uniquely “subsists” within, but cannot be identified with, the Roman Catholic communion.<sup>21</sup> This is a potentially rich conception, but the tensions it seeks to maintain are difficult to sustain outside the minds of those trained to appreciate such scholastic distinctions.<sup>22</sup>

The “universalization of the particular” means that previously assumed identities must be renegotiated in light of a crowded, global horizon. Speaking broadly, the search for adequate justification of specific sets of convictions in the face of “complex connectivity” leads to formally similar exclusivisms and universalisms *or* to nuanced, hybridized stances. A second mode of response to a globalized context helps explain why ecclesiological hybridization unavoidably takes place on multiple levels.

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<sup>21</sup> *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Most of my Catholic undergraduate students know very little about the specifics of their own tradition, but they are keenly aware – most likely because of awkward experiences during the celebration of the Eucharist in mixed company – that it is different from some monolithic thing called “Protestantism.” Those able to articulate differences that go beyond vaguely recalled Eucharistic terminology know that these divisions also have something to do with issues of “Bible” vs. “Church” and/or “faith” vs. “works.” At the same time, it’s by no means clear that they experience these alternatives as lived convictions that distinguish themselves from Protestants.

This gets to the concern at the heart of this paper, and identifies a dilemma no doubt encountered by countless contemporary teachers of theology: is taking students straight to the discussion of revelation in *Dei Verbum*, for example, or assigning the Joint Declaration on Justification an example of “cheap grace” because the long, hard work of *ressourcement*, and repentance that went into them is absent? Disputes that were once considered church-dividing issues have been transcended, yet we by no means agree on everything. Today’s default ecumenism (outside certain circles) makes it hard to communicate why theology matters, since we are often compelled to qualify what so many of the past passionately held.

## The Particularization of the Universal

What Robertson calls the “particularization of the universal” means that, in response to globalization, seemingly everyone, everywhere must take up the task of constructing an identity and its constitutive way of life, since familiar landmarks, such as culturally established religions, are losing their orienting capabilities. In his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, “emergent church” leader Brian McLaren describe what he hopes a forthcoming Christianity can be. The work’s subtitle celebrates the hybrid possibilities that arise when static forms of the past are transcended. It reads:

Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN.<sup>23</sup>

This kind of contemporary theological hybridization is often described in terms of post-denominational consumerism or “cafeteria” spirituality. The language of consumerism is important and helps provide an important critical lens, but it often carries overtones of automatic judgment. Read charitably, McLaren’s attempt to transcend seemingly parochial options in search of a more comprehensive faith is as much a well-intentioned response to sustained encounters with Christian diversity as is ecumenically sensitive reflection done by highly trained theologians. It certainly should be asked whether all the elements of McLaren’s “generous orthodoxy” *can* be combined simply because we want to combine them, but this does not necessarily imply a crass, consumeristic mindset in McLaren that others can easily avoid.

The apparent lack of critical rigor in his synthetic Christianity says something about the places to and from which McLaren is writing. While he commends it to others

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<sup>23</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.

and, presumably (as a pastor), his own congregation, McLaren's generous orthodoxy is his own concoction. He does not propose that a specific denomination or theological tradition attempt to move toward this vision.<sup>24</sup> His hope is that individual Christians will be inspired by it as together they move beyond the narrow confines of the past into the "emerging" church of the future.

Changes within shared ecclesial locations like denominations provide the backdrop for the "particularization of the universal." The Pew Forum's recent study of American religion found that, if transfers across Protestant traditions are included, nearly half of all Americans presently identify with religious traditions other than the ones in which they were raised.<sup>25</sup> Since economic realities often compel many Americans to relocate multiple times, many such denominational "switchers" may not simply be trying on and discarding various ecclesial options as their taste fluctuates. The decision to join churches with different affiliations when moving to new places could simply reflect awareness that many denominational brand names provide limited assistance in describing specific congregations and the Christians within them.

The growth of "non-denominational" churches and this dwindling of denominational distinctiveness make the search for what Baptists have traditionally called a "church home" an increasingly individualized matter made on the basis of a number of ad hoc considerations.<sup>26</sup> While it might seem that ideological-political (i.e.,

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<sup>24</sup> This is not entirely accurate, since McLaren is writing from within and to a certain segment of "evangelical" Christians, most of whom have always understood formal ecclesial commitments to be secondary to their personal Christian experience shared with others across denominational boundaries.

<sup>25</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Sociologists debate whether or not American religion is entering a "post-denominational" era. While some pronounce the demise of denominational distinctiveness (e.g. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988]), others note that this dilution can be seen as the outworking of denominational logic itself, as denominations, by definition, must at a

“conservative”, “liberal”, “radical”) or aesthetic (“low”, “high” or “popular” worship styles) labels are now more decisively descriptive than the theologically rooted identity-markers denominations have often emphasized (e.g. modes of baptism, convictions about such things as sin, grace, and providence), the reality on the ground cannot be reduced to a single pattern. Individual Christians and particular congregations increasingly reconfigure these various elements as they deem appropriate.

### **Globalization as Deterritorialization**

To speak of the “universalization of the particular” is to refer to the fact that this situation of complex connectivity implies something new for what it will mean to be, for example, Baptist. Conversely, the “particularization of the universal” means that what it will mean to be Baptist is being constructed by individual Baptists and groups of Baptists at increasingly local levels, who may or may not consult with each other, and who have an astonishing variety of materials from which they can and must choose as they do so. These simultaneous and mutually reinforcing dynamics are captured within Tomlinson’s claim that globalization is generally experienced as a process of “deterritorialization.”

Deterritorialization refers to the gradual erosion of the “natural” link between culture and particular geographical and social spaces. Increased mobility and the implementation of technologies that bring distant forces and messages into our most intimate spaces reveal particular, “given” ways of life to be highly contingent and fragile.

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minimum *behave* as though their existence is penultimate, and certainly provisional, in light of other tasks: supporting the pursuit of personal spirituality, providing spaces for individuals to experience “community” in impersonal urban and suburban contexts, establishing opportunities for service to the broader society, etc. (Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 54-55). A recent comprehensive study of American congregations draws a complex picture: denominational identification has waned across the board; however, the trend is more pronounced within certain segments than others (i.e., “mainline protestants” are more likely to retain specific denominational affinities than are “conservative protestants”). See Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chap. 7.

To return to recent Southern Baptist history: at one time Southern Baptist liberals and conservatives may have disagreed, even vehemently, but there was still a shared culture binding them together as Southerners, and a network of institutions, literature, and memories binding them together as Baptists across various disagreements. If we attend to the processes of deterritorialization, it becomes clear that the causes for the denominational fight can partially be explained by the fact that after World War II -- due to demographic shifts, the expansion of national media culture (television, radio, etc.), and other factors -- “Southernness” (or “Southern Baptistness”) began to be understood less as a “given” than as a fragile “distinctive” needing to be defined and protected.

It is not easy to say whether this episode of deterritorialization represented progress or decline. The subsequent fragmentation of (Southern) Baptist life has irreparably damaged numerous lives and harmed Baptists’ witness to the gospel. Things that were often held together in practice, if not in theory – doctrinal seriousness, spiritual passion, intellectual curiosity, the pursuit of peace and justice, evangelical concern – are even harder to combine when Baptists exist in small fragments. However, the dissolution of the Southern Baptist subculture is a large reason why we have so many Baptist students studying theology in conversation with other theological traditions and seeking new forms of ecclesial reconciliation within the wider church.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Southern Baptists did not simply have an inculturated Christianity, their faith was tragically accommodated to endemic social sins of racism and violence.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> As a Southern Baptist theologian who spent most of his career outside the South and outside Baptist institutions, McClendon led the way in wrestling with the question of Baptist and/or “baptist” *theological* identity in an ecumenical context.

<sup>28</sup> As I tried to emphasize in last year’s paper for this gathering, I recognize the need to be mindful that my default use of “Baptist” tends to assume a certain normativity for the *Southern* Baptist heritage and, more importantly, has severely limited usefulness in describing the convictions of African-American Baptist traditions.

In response to deterritorialization, “local” practices are both abandoned with greater ease (cosmopolitanism) and defended with heightened intensity (tribalism). It is crucial to recall that both of these stances are responses to a new awareness of particular places *as* particular or local. The “local” has not disappeared; particular ways of being church are not gone. However, the way in which we can inhabit such “places” has changed.

### **Deterritorialized Post-denominationalism as “Phantasmagoric Space”**

According to Tomlinson, much of our everyday, “local” experience now takes place amidst what Anthony Giddens calls “phantasmagoric space.” This means that many of the familiar features we are “at home” with in everyday life are often “not unique to that locale and part of its ‘organic development’ but, rather, features that have been placed into it by distanced forces.”<sup>29</sup> A few examples of such intimately familiar yet eerily ubiquitous spaces would include big-box retail stores, fast-food restaurants, coffee-shop chains, suburban housing developments, and “local” television newscasts that follow a highly predictable format. These “phantasmagoric” elements contribute to the perception that globalization is creating a homogenized monoculture in which we are both “everywhere” and “nowhere” at the same time. While such claims are overstated, they point to the fact that the nature of particular places is altered by “complex connectivity.”

The “distanced” forces that transform the local nature of being church into something like “phantasmagoric space” include mundane things like media outlets that bypass denominational borders and purvey both “high” and “low” Christian cultural

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<sup>29</sup>Tomlinson, 107-108, drawing from Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 141.

commodities directly to individuals and congregations. These media provide connections to new liturgical practices and various alternatives for theological formation: my Baptist church recently performed Mozart's "Coronation Mass," while the nearby Catholic parish advertises a Eucharistic celebration featuring music from the evangelical "praise and worship" genre; mass-market publishing helped make the *Left Behind* series a runaway bestseller and Southern Baptist megachurch pastor Rick Warren a cosmopolitan ecclesial figure, while avid readers of the prolific and provocative Stanley Hauerwas have been leading the way toward a theological convergence between "evangelical Catholics" and "catholic evangelicals."

In the present moment, many congregations and individual Christians inhabit historic denominations and churches while doing something like "defecting in place." Such defections occur when the deterritorialized, "phantasmagoric" elements of contemporary church life encourage many Christians to "locate" themselves via reference to abstract, deterritorialized communities such as "evangelicalism"<sup>30</sup> or abstract notions of the orthodox or "catholic" tradition. This goes for ecumenically sensitive Christians and congregations who are scandalized by what they perceive to be their traditions' often parochial theologies, impoverished liturgies, and culturally domesticated discipleship, as well as the many others who associate "denominationalism" with petty politics that distract from the development of personal spirituality or the pursuit of justice and community.<sup>31</sup> These responses are understandable and perhaps inevitable, but they come at a cost.

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<sup>30</sup> Orthodox Presbyterian historian D.G. Hart argues passionately against treating *evangelicalism* as an ecclesial body capable of carrying the weight of a tradition. See *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> I do not claim that the two groups are so easily distinguished.

### From “What is the Church?” to “Where is the Church?”<sup>32</sup>

The 1961 New Delhi gathering of the World Council of Churches affirmed that the Church of Jesus Christ receives unity as both a gift and a task from its Lord. This unity is “made visible” as all Christians “in each place” are joined by the Holy Spirit in and through the practices of the primitive church sketched in Acts 2.<sup>33</sup> As with “communion,” these criteria for genuine ecclesiality are not particularly controversial and could be endorsed by a wide spectrum of Christians. Most of the subsequent debate over this claim has dealt with the doctrinal, sacramental, and structural preconditions for “visible unity.” Less attention has been paid to what it means for this unity to be displayed “in each place.”<sup>34</sup> This is a particularly important question, since “deterritorialization” and its transformation of the nature of particular places raises a challenging set of concerns for the pursuit of ecclesial communion.

The traditional theological “mark” of catholicity provides one way to discuss why the church must take seriously its concrete location in the world. Since catholicity means something more like “wholeness” and not simply geographical extension, it entails multiple dimensions.<sup>35</sup> Drawing from Ephesians 3:18, Avery Cardinal Dulles discussed catholicity under the aspects of height (the church receives and participates in the fullness

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<sup>32</sup> “Where is the Church?” was the title of a recent doctoral seminar in which I participated, led by Prof. Vincent Miller, to whom I am indebted for introducing me to several of the texts cited in this paper.

<sup>33</sup> “[T]he unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all . . . .” Cited in Lesslie Newbigin, “What is ‘a local church truly united?’” in *In Each Place: Towards a Fellowship of Local Churches Truly United* (Geneva: WCC, 1977), 15.

The second half of the affirmation points to the “universal” dimensions of this unity: “. . . and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.”

<sup>34</sup> Though see the essays included in the work cited in the note above.

<sup>35</sup> “Catholic” is derived from from the Greek *kath’ olou* – “according to the whole.”

of God), depth (it incorporates the fullness of creation within the work of redemption), length (it extends throughout time), and breadth (it extends throughout space).<sup>36</sup>

It was such a *qualitative* conception of catholicity, especially catholicity as “depth,” that led veteran Catholic ecumenist J.M.R. Tillard to insist that the Pentecostal church of Jerusalem was already fully “catholic,” since the Holy Spirit had formed a new creation, a reconciled fellowship in which previously divided things and people were now held in communion. Because of this, he claimed, as it moves through time and space, the Church cannot subsequently become more catholic, though its catholicity might be realized or displayed in new ways. The church is to be a unity *in* and *for* each particular place as well as *across* and *among* the various places that exist. In Tillard’s words,

each of [the local churches] is therefore the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of God. They do not establish it in forming the sum of its realizations. Each *is* the Church in being the authentic presence of the *ephapax* [“once for all” – cf. Rom. 6:10] of the apostolic Church in one of the places and times where humanity lives its destiny. The Church is not multiplied. The Spirit integrates into the fullness of Pentecost the *places* of human destiny.<sup>37</sup>

As Tillard hints, “place” does not just specify particular coordinates of latitude and longitude, but a specific site of human habitation. Places are tied to stories about what people have done and do there. Geographical-cultural regions are these kinds of “places” in our everyday language (e.g., where, exactly, do “the South” or “the Midwest” begin or end?). Just as “history” does not generally connote a mere string of consecutive events but some sort of meaningful narrative,<sup>38</sup> the “places” that hold any interest for us

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<sup>36</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>37</sup> *L’Église Locale*, 553. Cited in Ruddy, 61. Ruddy also footnotes this elaboration from Tillard: “how is the Church *multiple* and not *multiplied*? Extending Augustine’s intuition of the homogeneity between the Eucharistic body and the ecclesial body, one may say that in one hundred Churches there is no more of the Church of God than in the Church of Jerusalem, just as in one hundred Eucharistic breads there is no more of the body of the Lord than in one single Eucharistic bread” (*L’Église Locale*, 75).

<sup>38</sup> E.g., the “60’s” as a particular cultural-political-intellectual moment does not correspond precisely to the years 1961-1970.

generally cannot be neatly demarcated by a team of surveyors using tools designed to be used both everywhere and nowhere in particular.<sup>39</sup>

Thinking in these ways about space helps us understand the relationship between theology in an ecumenical key and the reconciliation of particular Christian communities. Recent attempts to transcend traditional, particular ecclesial loyalties from within them face a perplexing dilemma: how to rejoin pieces that crumble when grasped too tightly? Conciliatory ecumenical dialogue helps to dissolve the very solidity of the ecclesial traditions it assumes in order to proceed. At the same time, the increasing instability within historic ecclesial bodies intensifies a longing for genuine (or “generous”) unity among more and more scattered fragments. These and other obstacles would seem to expose the limits of the traditional discipline of “ecclesiology” to articulate, correct and negotiate the shape of “the Church” using the tools of dialectical exchange and conceptual clarification.

In addition to establishing certain basic answers to the timeless question, “What is the church?” theology must also consider the questions, “Where is the Church?” and “What is God doing with the Church?”<sup>40</sup> Both these questions require theological discernment of the present historical context. If the Church exists when Christian communion is present in a particular “place,” how should Christians, in their various ecclesial locations, respond to the challenges posed by globalization and its

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<sup>39</sup> Using his own technical vocabulary, Jesuit philosopher Michel deCerteau distinguishes between “places” which are officially mapped using Cartesian logic (similar to Giddens’s “phantasmagoric space”) and the “spaces” carved out by the people who move within and across them. For Certeau, “space” is “practiced place.” Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, “Part III: Spatial Practices,” trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984: 91-130.

<sup>40</sup> This second question is at the heart of Nicholas Healy’s call for “practical-prophetic” ecclesiologies rather than ahistorical “blueprint” or “epic” ecclesiologies. Healy stresses the necessity and the risk of *theological* discernment of the ecclesial context via critical engagement with academic disciplines such as the social sciences. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

detritorializing tendencies? In order to discern the proper shape of the contemporary “quest for Christian community,” this last section draws an analogy from a highly qualified defense of the cultural politics of postcolonial nation-states.

### **Place, “Peoplehood” and the Necessity of “Given” Culture**

Many of the governments that formed out of former Western colonies have emphasized their links to atavistic notions of culture and ethnicity in order to gain and maintain popular legitimacy. Such tactics helped provide the social cohesion for successful liberation movements in the past and currently enable resistance to the forces of global capitalism and global culture industries. They may also be used to prop up oppressive political regimes and justify dehumanizing cultural and religious practices. Aware of these multiple effects, critical theorist Pheng Cheah argues that those who recognize the importance of preserving these endangered social spaces are forced to conclude that postcolonial nationalism is “a risky self-innoculation where the vaccine could also be poisonous.”<sup>41</sup>

In light of the preceding discussion, I want to claim something very similar about participation in the particular, divided, socially embodied forms of Christianity we have inherited. Institutionally circumscribed denominations, hierarchically-led churches, and confessional traditions may indeed give cause for theological scandal by frequently resorting to shallow theological identity politics or, *mutatis mutandis*, gross bureaucratic pragmatism for the sake of social harmony. Nevertheless, they represent spaces and structures that can enable reconciled and reconciling communion (*koinonia*) in the various “places of human destiny.” Their ability to bind people together through practices that require a certain “territorialized,” embodied presence with others makes

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 322.

these historic ecclesial bodies crucial places for the pursuit of genuine Christian fellowship -- even while individual members and congregations can and must form important ecumenical (“cosmopolitan”) friendships that provide painful reminders of the ways in which the church, speaking theologically, remains genuinely divided.

Cheah directs his critique at certain thinkers inclined to welcome globalization as an unqualified process of emancipation. Many postmodern or postcolonial theorists appreciate the ways in which deterritorialization erodes assumptions about the givenness of “culture” held by Western colonialists (who tend to identify their version of “civilization” with the progressive development of a universal human culture) and by romantics or nationalists (who want to defend particular ways of life, in their distinctive integrity, as intrinsically good). Unsurprisingly, those who reject cultural universalisms *and* relativisms tend to focus on the alternative of hybridization.

As Cheah notes, there are two primary ways in which the language of hybridity can be used.<sup>42</sup> The first way serves as a critical tactic: to stress the inevitability of hybridization is to acknowledge that dynamic interaction is embedded in the human condition and part of the complex fiber of lived reality. Cultural borders are also cultural bridges. For example, medieval Christian theology took the form it did in part because of sustained encounters with Muslim and Jewish thought, as representatives of all three traditions were wrestling with the inheritance of classical metaphysics.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cheah’s primary criticisms are directed toward postcolonial literary-cultural critic Homi Bhabha. To a lesser extent, he takes issue with anthropologist James Clifford, whose article, “Traveling Cultures” critiqued anthropological methods that privilege static metaphors of “dwelling” and ignore the constant negotiations with others that go into cultural production. (cf. Clifford, “Traveling Cultures” in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler eds., *Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), 96-116.)

<sup>43</sup> E.g., David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God, Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

To speak without qualification about pure, timeless cultural essences is to commit what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” Similarly, the finely textured reality of different kinds of ecclesial locations often remains opaque to academic theological discourse about “the Church.” The post-Reformation discipline of ecclesiology – staking out normative accounts of the church vis-à-vis one’s rivals -- struggles to account for the diachronic and synchronic richness of particular living traditions and the complicated assortment of motives that lead people to leave, join, or remain within them.<sup>44</sup> It is difficult, if not impossible, for ecumenical attempts to describe ecclesial communion to remain mindful that the ecclesial parties seeking reconciliation are themselves densely woven communities vigorously debating who they will be in the future.<sup>45</sup> Ecclesiological hybridization in its “high” and “low” forms attempts to account for the inadequacy of ecclesial and denominational ideal-types.

Likewise, Cheah acknowledges the need to subvert reified culturalisms. However, the other use of “hybridity” moves past its employment as a critical tool into the adoption of another kind of grand theory for explaining what culture is “really all about.” Salman Rushdie, controversial author of *The Satanic Verses*, speaks for those

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<sup>44</sup> As many have stressed, since the Reformation-era fragmentation of Christendom, it has frequently been assumed that one moves from systematic reflection on essential doctrine, to ecclesiological implications, to the seeking of membership in the now-correctly-discerned true church. This rationalistic account of church allegiance has played a especially distinctive role in the self-understanding of those ecclesial traditions that practice “believers’ baptism”, but it obscures the much more complicated ways in which conversion and commitment are actually experienced.

<sup>45</sup> As we saw, Volf elided intra-Catholic debates over the relationship between the Church’s local and universal dimensions in order to have a stable Catholic dialogue partner against which to define his own free church position. Volf acknowledges this general problem, and makes a case for his decision to treat Ratzinger as representative of the current Catholic position – an argument whose force has obviously increased in the last decade (23). Curtis Freeman also points out that Volf also did not extend the same “manners” to the free church or “baptist” tradition, as his presentation of John Smyth’s views shows only cursory familiarity with Smyth’s developing ecclesiological convictions. Curtis W. Freeman, “Where Two or Three are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31:3 (Fall 2004): 259-272.

who celebrate globalization as making possible a fresh alternative to the hegemony of “pure” cultures:

Those who oppose [the Satanic Verses] most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with different cultures will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. *The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas . . . . It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it.<sup>46</sup>

Such celebration of hybridization as a sufficient cultural politics forces complex, lived reality into an essentialized dichotomy between dishonest claims for “purity” and conservation on the one hand and the invigorating, authentic, drive toward hybridity and flux on the other.

The paradigmatic examples of “hybridity” as this kind of positive force are usually taken from the cultural tactics of exiled and diasporic colonials who ingeniously subvert the cultures of metropolitan powers from within (e.g., African slaves brought to these shores who combined elements of their traditional cultures with those of “white America,” thereby creatively challenging and reshaping the mores of their captors). However, Cheah joins others in noting that hybridity theory has little to say to those for whom deterritorialization has not meant mobility, but imprisonment, when the locality they cannot escape is at the mercy of distant, powerful forces.<sup>47</sup> As has frequently been observed, within economic globalization, financial capital and cultural goods (movies, television, etc.) may now move freely across political borders, but people are not always granted the same rights of passage.

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<sup>46</sup> Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991), 394. Cited in Tomlinson, 142.

<sup>47</sup> See Tomlinson’s discussion of Clifford, 28-29, 129.

Deteritorialization can be experienced as a one-way process of the local being colonized by a hegemonic power that gives the false appearance of universality: children being raised by Hollywood's version of "family values"; members of historic ecclesial traditions adopting broadly evangelical forms of piety via the influence of generically "Christian" media. While a globalized, deterritorialized food culture allows the earth's wealthiest inhabitants to eat what they want when they want it, other residents of the world may have had to alter their local agricultural habits (and diets) in response to global economic demand, without enjoying similar benefits.<sup>48</sup> In light of such considerations Cheah argues that postcolonial nationalism represents a form of "given culture" which cannot be abandoned, because it provides the space for solidarity and resistance among those who, in complex ways, receive their life and identity from a particular place.

As an example of those who must critically inhabit such "given" cultures, Cheah points to Muslim feminists who walk a tightrope between various Islamic nationalisms -- that may sporadically inflame patriarchal sentiments in order to strengthen their political position vis-à-vis both the West *and* rival, deterritorialized Islamist movements with even more sharply defined cultural goals -- and the cosmopolitan, universalistic discourses of feminism and human rights. The conflictual situation of being a Muslim, a woman, and a member of a fragile political community leads many to conclude that "a feminist . . .

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<sup>48</sup> It is worth reflecting on the fact that in the Northern hemisphere, Lent coincides with the time in which food stores traditionally grew thin. While I reject the assumption that the deterritorialization (and "de-temporalization") of this practice guarantees that it will be more "meaningful" for those who are now free to *choose* to engage in an annual season of fasting, it cannot be denied that the "meaning" of a Lenten fast changes, or at least takes on different resonances within this different form of life. For one thing, it is much less "natural" to conceive as Lent as a *corporate* penitential discipline. (On the importance of corporate penance and the challenges to its recovery, see Ephraim Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004], 206-207.)

cannot dismiss the postcolonial nation-state even if she has to criticize it.”<sup>49</sup> This is so because significant political change for everyday people requires working at the level of cultural practices (local politics, etc.) embodied in a shared form of life (however contested many of its particulars may be). Such complex combinations of habits, sentiments, and institutions, held together under present circumstances by the territorializing function of post-colonial nation-states, are not simply “given” (there is no “Muslim culture” *per se*), but neither are they sustained purely by human intentionality and, thus, able to be transcended through creative discourse alone.

Similarly, the theological and ecclesiological hyper-hybridization made possible by deterritorialization cannot be simply affirmed. Discussions of ecclesial communion have often led to great progress in ecumenical understanding and the abandonment of fixed, opposing ecclesial identities. However, in such cases it is discursive theology that is reconciling or relativizing historical divisions, and it is generally individual Christians themselves (whether professionally trained theologians or not) who are doing the transcending of earlier, more limited horizons. The actual human communities whose lived convictions they attempt to articulate and examine critically are to a certain extent left behind. It is not clear that they can or will be replaced by corporately embodied forms of life that are more “generous” or “orthodox.”

Trans-local entities like denominations, communions, and churches (we should also include universities)<sup>50</sup> are complex, inhabitable spaces, full of diversity and debate

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<sup>49</sup> Cheah, 319.

<sup>50</sup> Academic theology has always had a cosmopolitan, deterritorialized character. It responds to questions and concerns that often go beyond immediate pastoral need. For a detailed historical description of the differences between earlier forms of monastic and patristic theology and the scholastic theology that came to dominate in the high middle ages, see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1961).

made possible by a collection of embodied practices. They also require the acquisition of certain skills to live well within them. As we have seen, the deterritorializing forces of our present cultural moment threaten these ecclesial places in multiple ways.

Congregations made up largely of “switchers” threaten to blur denominational identities as fewer members are carriers of deep, trans-generational memory. Ease of mobility and the close proximity of numerous ecclesial alternatives decreases the likelihood that members will see the need to develop the patience to sustain participation in rough-and-tumble debates over what present faithfulness entails in light of a rich, yet particular heritage.

Deterritorialization is often interpreted as liberation, since it reduces the degree to which individuals and smaller social groups must adapt themselves to a particular social and cultural terrain. Yet such constraints can force us to recognize that the convictions of others cannot simply be avoided and must be dealt with truthfully and lovingly if one is to live Christianly in a particular “place.” McClendon calls the established means of connection represented by denominations, ecumenical agencies, and leadership structures “agents of peoplehood” that enable Christians to recognize themselves as caught up in God’s creation of a new humanity gathered in and from all places.<sup>51</sup> A great contemporary concern is that anxious attempts to “universalize the particular” and “particularize the universal” -- apart from the disciplines established by such structures—

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However, the university is also a particular place or social space. To adopt the scholar’s habit is to locate oneself within a specific historical community. The ecumenical manners that lead to careful ecclesiological nuances can be understood as intellectual virtues. They are nurtured and sustained in a space that, at its best, prizes patient dialogue and guards a certain leisure for considered reflection

<sup>51</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 370.

will be reduced to the shrill assertions and scapegoating methods of identity politics<sup>52</sup> or the frictionless freedom of deterritorialized, cosmopolitan hybridity.

One of the most significant findings of a recent comprehensive study of American congregations is that those churches whose members continue to identify with a particular historic tradition are marked by the fact that they use denominationally supplied or mandated educational and liturgical materials (hymnals, missals, the Book of Common Prayer, Sunday School literature, etc.).<sup>53</sup> These are ways denominations can sustain their ability to (re)territorialize space and bind people together in somewhat tacit ways. For “catholic Baptist” theologians, another re-territorializing tactic could be mining the resources of Baptist history for examples and dialogue partners, despite the often off-putting theological and spiritual idioms in which these predecessors express themselves. Such efforts show solidarity with contemporaries who also trace their inherited faith to those figures.

To identify oneself as a catholic Christian who is also unavoidably “Baptist” is to acknowledge a shared heritage with a diverse assortment of believers. Last year, I noted my concern that the upcoming “New Baptist Covenant” would highlight a problematic, reified version of “Baptist identity” that vitiates the pursuit of genuine covenant community. After attending the event this past January, my convictions in this regard were not changed (to a certain extent my concerns were validated), but I was struck by two realizations. First, despite my discomfort (as a somewhat deterritorialized theologian) with the ways in which many would articulate and defend Baptist

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<sup>52</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> Ammerman, chap. 7.

“distinctives,” one would be hard-pressed to find more committed, theologically-serious laypeople than those who faithfully attend denominational gatherings to do such things as listen to missions reports, vote on officers and policies, etc. Second, since in the mysteries of providence, I carry the name “Baptist” with so many African-American Christians, this identification provides a slender thread of solidarity across one of our most scandalous contemporary ecclesial divides: the racialization of American Christianity.

When explaining why, despite his deeply “catholic” (in a “qualitative” sense – especially catholicity as “length”) and sacramental convictions, he remains a committed Baptist, Steve Harmon did not spend the bulk of his justification for staying put defending the continued necessity of timeless Baptist principles.<sup>54</sup> Rather, he stressed the importance of fidelity to the churches and people who have helped make him the Christian he is. In this, Harmon joins many others in insisting that any true ecumenical reconciliation will come through the long, slow recovery of a much fuller sense of catholicity within particular traditions, enabling them to recognize and embrace each other much more easily.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows why the dynamics of globalization make an ecclesial stance like “baptist catholicity” theologically intelligible as an attempt to pursue the fullness of Christian communion within and across fragile social spaces. We are more tightly connected today to more people in more ways with greater immediate consequences than ever before. However, the same infrastructures (cultural, economic, political) that make

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<sup>54</sup> Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, chap. 10 (“‘What Keeps You from Becoming a Catholic?’ A Personal Epilogue”). To be sure, Harmon does mention the current Catholic position on women’s ordination as an important convictional disagreement that would give him pause.

these connections possible pose tremendous challenges to the formation of enduring bonds of mutual understanding and reconciliation. By maintaining specific structures of connection and safeguarding stores of (contested) memory, inherited ecclesial traditions can resist the “deterritorializing” tendencies of the present cultural moment and bind people together within and across time and space. Theological discernment of the signs of our times leads to the chastening insight that the various separate forms of Christian community must be inhabited in hope and not abandoned, despite the fact that our ecumenical age exposes their idolatrous and provincial tendencies in ever new ways.

This is often a painful stance. Deep friendships are forming across traditional ecclesial lines. Moreover, it often seems unclear whether Baptists will remain a distinct form of Christian communion or whether various Baptists will be absorbed into other, more amorphous categories. “Staying put” may thus mean experiencing the demise of a tradition.

Cheah calls postcolonial nationalism “both medicine and poison . . . a double-edged structure that, instead of being transcended, is made necessary by neocolonial globalization.”<sup>55</sup> We can easily substitute denominationalism in this seemingly tragic assessment. While Christians cannot remain content with the language of tragedy, we must avoid presumptive, and therefore false, hope. Theological engagement with critical analyses of globalization helps us distinguish between ecumenism as a form of disembodied cosmopolitanism, and the patient and penitent pursuit of reconciliation in the complex and increasingly fragile “places” in which Christian *koinonia* must become incarnate.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 314.

Although ecclesial fluidity has increased, it remains the case that some believers do continue to “stay put.” Yet, in the rarefied air of traditional ecclesiological debate, one is hard pressed to hear voices arguing that there are theological warrants for remaining within a flawed church. However, to put it mildly, there would seem to be quite a bit of authoritative precedent for adopting the frequently painful stance of patient, critical loyalty to the historical community in which one finds oneself.<sup>56</sup>

This is the fundamental contention of Episcopalian priest-theologian Ephraim Radner, who provocatively argues that a theological description of the present state of Christian community must conclude that the Church, the one Body of Christ referred to in scripture, is genuinely divided. As with ancient Israel, he claims, this state of division is a judgment, and the proper response is patience and repentance, since reconciliation can only come through divine grace, via something in the nature of a death and resurrection.<sup>57</sup> Within Radner’s providential, typological reading of divided Christendom as divided Israel, “staying put” in the provisionally necessary yet flawed fragments of the church is not a tragic fate, but a providentially ordered destiny: a sharing in the suffering of Christ, whose own body was broken on the cross to bring the world reconciliation.

The “quest for Christian community” has always been a pilgrimage across difficult and disorienting terrain. Contemporary deterritorialization only reinforces this state of near-bewilderment. However, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously declared,

Where will the call to discipleship lead those who follow it? What decisions and painful separations will it entail? We must take this question to him who alone

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<sup>56</sup> For example, the prophet Jeremiah experiences death in exile together with the community he warned of impending judgment. Most importantly, however: Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the annual festivals and acknowledges the temple’s legitimacy, while passing judgment on its leadership (thereby, almost certainly ensuring his arrest and execution, in which he would take judgment upon himself as the suffering representative of Israel).

<sup>57</sup> Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

knows the answer: Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows where the path will lead. But we know that it will be a path full of mercy beyond measure. Discipleship is joy.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 40.