Beyond Christendom

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It has often been said that the outstanding feature of church history during the nineteenth and early twentieth century is that, for the first time in history, Christianity became a truly universal religion. If that at is true, one could add that the great feature of church history during the latter part of the twentieth century, and during the present time, is that, for the first time in history, Christianity is becoming truly catholic. I know this may sound confusing to some, and perhaps even offensive to others, but I beg you to withhold judgment until I have had some time to explain what I mean by this.

Quite often historians of missions declare that the nineteenth century is the great century of Christian missions. That is questionable, for in terms of square miles as well as in terms of the number of new adherents, the missionary expansion of the sixteenth was at least equal to that of the nineteenth. Obviously, part of the reason why for so many of us the nineteenth seems so dominant is that we look at such things from the perspective of the Protestant North-Atlantic and therefore are particularly interested in the history of Protestant missions. But the difference between the missionary expansion of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries goes far beyond the matter of Protestant and Catholic. Put in a nutshell, the difference is that what the sixteenth century witnessed was the expansion of Christendom, while what the nineteenth and early twentieth saw was the beginning of the undoing of Christendom.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Christendom was fairly well defined. It was almost coextensive with Europe. By the end of that century, Christendom had expanded to include more than half of the Western Hemisphere as well as significant enclaves on the coasts of Africa and Asia. At least officially, these lands were Christian, and under Christian rule. And the borders of those lands were generally the same as the borders of the outreach of Christianity.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the situation had not changed much. Yes, Christendom had expanded in regions such as North America, and there were now Catholic missionaries in regions of India and China that could not be considered part of Christendom. But in general, the presence of the Christian church coincided with the presence of Christian governments, or at least societies that were traditionally Christian. During the early decades of the nineteenth century the Protestant missionary movement was closely connected with the expansion of Protestant Christendom, through the colonial expansion of the United Kingdom and other Protestant powers. Thus, it could be said that in this sense the expansion of the early nineteenth century was parallel to that of the sixteenth, with the difference that one was Roman Catholic and the other mostly Protestant.

But what was different about this second great wave in the missionary movement was that, while the sixteenth resulted in a vast expansion of Christendom, by the middle of the twentieth Christendom as a clearly definable portion of the globe had ceased to exist. By that time, very few governments remained officially Christian, and even in the nations where such was the

case, churches did not have the hegemony they once had. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was fairly easy to trace the outlines of Christendom on a world map. By the end of the twentieth, it was no longer possible.

Thus, the "great century of missions" resulted in the end of Christendom in the geographic sense.

Significantly, however, the dismantling of colonialism in the twentieth century did not bring about the dismantling of the churches founded during the heyday of colonialism. In areas of the Iberian Peninsula, the borders of those lands were generally the same as the borders of the outreach of Christianity. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the situation had not changed much. So, the shift in the center is nothing new.

What is new is that now there is no real center. When it comes to financial resources, the center is still in the North Atlantic. The same is true when it comes to other parallel resources, such as libraries, educational institutions, publishing houses, and the like. But when it comes to growth and vitality, as well as to theological creativity, there are new centers. There are Korean missionaries in Africa, South America, and the United States. Sub-Saharan Africa is providing Catholic priests to several European countries, including Ireland. Puerto Rico sends more missionaries to New York than all the boards of missions in New York send to the rest of the world. There are Central American missionaries in Europe and in Australia as well as in Africa. In

the field of theology, what is written in Peru, in Mexico, in Korea, or in South Africa is read and discussed in all the traditional centers of theological learning. The largest church buildings in the world are no longer in Rome or in London but in Brazil and Korea. In short, the unprecedented characteristic of our time is that Christianity has become polycentric in a way it has never been before.

This is what leads me to say that, if the nineteenth century was the time when the Christianity became a truly universal religion, the second half of the twentieth century, and the first decades of the present one, mark the time when it is becoming a truly catholic religion. Obviously, such a statement is based on a distinction between "catholic" and "universal" that is not commonly made. It certainly was not made by the leaders in my own Protestant church who, in order to avoid confusion, taught us to recite in the Creed, not "I believe in the catholic church," but "I believe in the universal church." They would then explain that "catholic" is the same as "universal," and that, since most people thought of the word "catholic" as referring to the Roman Catholic Church, it was better to say "universal."

But the truth is that, while catholicity and universality have much in common, there are also differences between the two. Since I have written about this, I shall not dwell on the distinction. Suffice it to say that, etymologically, "uni-versality" has to do with moving in the same direction, while "cath'holicity" means "according to the whole," or "according to all." The term "catholic" is derived from two roots. The first is the preposition *kata*, which means "according to," and for

that reason what the Greek New Testament calls the *Gospel kata Matthaion* or *kata Loukan*, our English versions call the Gospel "according to Matthew" or "according to Luke." And the second etymological component of "catholic" is *holos*, meaning the whole, the totality, as in our present word "hologram." In consequence, universality tends to stress the uniformity, the presence of something in the same way in a wide variety of places, while cath'holicity points to a unity in diversity, to a unity beyond mere uniformity. (And, in order to stress that meaning, allow me from this point on to speak, not of "catholicity," but rather of "cath 'holicity.")

It is in this sense that the word was most often used in the second century. When Ignatius of Antioch, for instance, speaks of the "cath'holic church," what he is stressing is not that the church is everywhere but rather that this church "cath'holic" differs from the heretics against whom he is arguing, for in it there are a variety of people and of witnesses to the gospel, while among the heretics one is to follow a single teacher and a single teaching.

This is made most clear when early Christian writers refer to the emerging canon of the New Testament, with its variety of gospels, as the “cath'holic" witness to the gospel. In this case, what they are stressing is not their universal acceptance but rather their variety and their basic agreement in the midst of that variety. The term "cath'holic" in connection with the canon appears, for instance, in the oft-quoted passage in which Irenaeus is arguing for the inclusion of the Fourth Gospel in the emerging canon of the New Testament. Apart from its obvious significance for the history of the development of the canon, the passage is also quoted as an

example of the rather naive use of numerology in the ancient world: Since there are four winds and four corners of the earth and four faces to the seraphim, there must also be four gospels.

But in both of these usages, an important dimension of the passage is often missed. The passage is not only a witness to the early formation of the New Testament canon or an example of strange use of numerology. It also provides significant insight into the manner in which the early church understood the canon itself. A crucial word in that passage is precisely the term "cath'holic," employed not only to refer to the four winds but also to what Irenaeus calls the four covenants of Adam, Noah, Moses, and the gospel. The four “cath'holic” winds are required in order to make up the totality of wind. Certainly, at times the North wind will blow so strongly that it might seem universal, but this particular wind is not the totality of wind. The “cath'holicity” of wind requires that there be a variety of them, for it is the existence of all of them that makes them cath'holic. Likewise, each of the four covenants is presumably universal at a particular point in history, but it is the four covenants that point to the whole of God's dealings with history. Irenaeus's point then is, as he literally says, that God "has given us the gospel with four faces, but all tied together by the one Spirit."

(Parenthetically, it is from this passage in Irenaeus, and his notion of "faces" or "aspects" of the gospel as parallel to the four faces of the cherubim that has led to the traditional identification of each of the four Gospels with one of those faces: a human being, a calf, a lion, and an eagle.)

But all of this should not obscure the main thrust of the passage, where Irenaeus argues that the cath'holicity of the canon requires different Gospels, just as the cath'holicity of the wind requires that there be four different winds.

Thus, when the early church spoke of the cath'holicity of its canon, this meant not only that it was universally received but also that it included within itself a variety of perspectives. Clearly, the four Gospels represent different traditions within the early church—probably one centering in Syria, another in Asia Minor, etc. And, just as clearly, that early church that put these various books together into a single canon was well aware of their differences. Indeed, one could even argue that they were put together because of their differences, not despite them.

By their very variety, the four Gospels accomplished two things: First, they gave a more credible witness to the main issues at stake—just as in a trial a variety of witnesses are more credible than a single one. And secondly, and more importantly for my purposes here, they made it impossible for anyone to claim to be in full possession of the gospel, no longer needing correction. If I memorize the Gospel of Mark and imagine that now I am in full possession of the truth, along come Matthew, Luke, and John, to challenge and correct my vision. The quadriform witness to the gospel means that I always have to go back to that witness, that I cannot control it, that I always need to look at matters from a different angle.

This is disturbing. Already in the second century, even before Irenaeus expressed his argument for the authority of the four cath'holic Gospels, Tatian was sufficiently disturbed by it that he produced a compilation of the four Gospels into one, the *Diatessaron*. This notion of reconciling the four canonical Gospels was sufficiently attractive that, for a while in the Syriac-speaking church, the Diatessaron competed with the body of four different Gospels. But elsewhere it was never received as authoritative, and soon the Syriac-speaking church also abandoned it. In its wisdom, the church at large opted for a disturbing and cumbersome canon that includes four different Gospels as well as a number of other books whose theology does not always agree with the Gospels.

This is what is meant by cath'holicity. Cath'holicity is not universality. Cath'holicity is not achieved by mere geographical expansion. Cath'holicity, as Irenaeus would say, is a gift of the Spirit. In his words that I have already quoted, God "has given us the gospel with four faces, but all tied together by the one Spirit." The cath'holic canon of Scripture, with four Gospels representing different areas and different visions, reflects the faith of the church cath'holic, which includes many peoples, perspectives, challenges, and social conditions.

It is for this reason, and on the basis of this distinction between universality and cath'holicity, that, while the nineteenth century may be credited with making Christianity truly universal, the twentieth began to make it truly cath'holic. Most of the earlier expansion of Christianity understood itself in unidirectional terms: The sending church was creating a church elsewhere, and the so-called daughter church would replicate the mother church. We know that was not

the case. Crossing cultural and social borders always leads to change. The mission to the Gentiles involved a change in the very nature of the church and its self-understanding. The Germanic tribes who invaded the Roman Empire, upon accepting the religion of that empire, also changed it. The Catholic Church that Spain planted in Spanish America was never the same as the Spanish Catholic Church. In all these cases, there was an awareness that adaptation was taking place. But the general attitude was that, while such changes were inevitable, they were concessions to the newly converted peoples, for it was still the mother church that really had a correct and full understanding of the message and its implications for individuals and for society.

What is different about the last decades of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first, is that now we are aware that mission is a two-way street and that those who come to the gospel from other cultures, traditions, or social milieus will come to new understandings of the gospel that both challenge and enrich the life and theology of the church at large. Obviously, this is related to our realization that all theology is contextual and that part of what the contextual theologies of the emerging churches can do is make the older theologies aware of their own contextuality. It also has to do with the emerging map of world Christianity, in which what until recently were considered "mission fields" are now centers of mission, and what until recently were centers of mission are rapidly becoming mission fields. In brief, it has to do with the end of Christendom.

Thus, during the last two centuries we have seen the end of Christendom both in the geographic and in the theological sense. Geographically, it is no longer possible to draw a map of Christianity as it could be done even as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Theologically, the claim to universality of the dominant theologies of Christendom is being severely questioned by other theologies, coming mostly out of Africa, Asia, and Latin American but also from ethnic minorities and suppressed cultures within the former bounds of Christendom, and by women all over the world.

There certainly are dangers in the emerging situation. Two in particular must be mentioned.

First, there is the danger of Christianity breaking up into a myriad splinters, each claiming to be the true and correct one. We see this all around us. No matter how much success the ecumenical movement has, for every church that joins the various expressions of ecumenism, there are dozens of new ones, most of them claiming to have a particular hold on truth to which all others must agree. In this regard, the sixteenth-century anti-Protestant polemical point, that if people were allowed to read and interpret the Bible on their own, this would result in myriad different interpretations, and in an indefinite multiplication of churches, has proven to be true.

If we look at this situation through the lens of what I have said before about the contrast between cath'holicity and universality, one can say that the problem is that many of these new interpretations claim or seek to be universal. Each has the full understanding of truth, and its

mission is to make certain that all adhere to that understanding. True cath'holicity would allow for different experiences, different interpretations of the gospel based on them, and see them as contributing to the whole. Perhaps stretching Irenaeus a bit, one could say that the God who has given us the gospel with many faces, but all tied together by the one Spirit, is calling us to be a church with many faces but all tied together by the same Spirit.

But then, there is the second danger in the new situation. This is the danger of Christianity becoming amorphous with no set limits nor recognizable characteristics. This is parallel to a similar danger to which Irenaeus was responding. While one of the dangers posed by the heretics had to do with each group claiming its own views as the whole truth, there was also the danger that, since there are several Gospels, there would be no limits. Thus, there was always the possibility of interpreting Scripture in ways that would no longer be recognizable—as with the Ophites who made the serpent their hero, the Cainites who did the same with Cain, or Marcion who simply decided the God of Hebrew Scripture was not the supreme god. This is the reason why Irenaeus stresses four Gospels, and not an unlimited number.

All of this may seem a long digression in my argument. The reason to point it out is that today once again, as at many other times throughout the history of the church, we tend to be dismayed by the variety of views and interpretations of the gospel and therefore seek a definition that will clearly determine what is acceptable and what is not, who is in and who is not. But even though the unavoidable task of seeking to be obedient in our own time and

situation requires that we must constantly make decisions in that regard, in the end, the consensus, as well as the limits of that consensus, will be determined by the same Spirit who, according to Irenaeus, bound together the four faces of the gospel. Like Tatian, we may feel we need a sort of ecclesiastical Diatessaron. Like Tatian's, such a *Diatessaron* may be of temporary use. But, as in the time of Tatian and of Irenaeus, what binds the four faces of the Gospel, and thus makes the church cath'holic, is the Spirit—and not our definitions. This Spirit who speaks through the church in Antioch and in Ephesus, in Sri Lanka and in Brazil, is the one who grants the church the gift of cath'holicity.

If we then return to our central topic, which is how the present reality is reflected in the way we read Christianity's canonical texts as well as in the way we read the entire history of Christianity, we can readily see that the variety of perspectives and contributions is a sign of true cath'holicity, manifested in many ways. And it is manifested in just about every major Christian tradition. The decision of Vatican II to have the liturgy celebrated in the vernacular of each land and to have conferences of bishops in those lands develop liturgies suitable to their own culture is a clear sign of what is happening throughout the Christian world since the middle of the twentieth century. The councils of Trent and Vatican I had clearly asserted the universality of the Roman Catholic Church and had done so by stressing its uniformity in liturgy as well as in theological curriculum, theology, and governance. Now Vatican II, while still seeking to retain that universality, made great strides in the direction of a fuller cath'holicity—a cath'holicity that includes various seemingly divergent voices and practices. Significantly, the council that took

such steps was not simply reflecting the wishes and expectations of Rome. Practically all the documents that the Roman curia had prepared beforehand were sent back for radical revision—and sometimes even sent back to newly formed commissions. And this was not just a matter of the mood of the time. It was also a matter of the actual representation in the council itself of a large number of prelates from the poorer nations of the world and from beyond the former bounds of Christendom. In other words, it was a matter of a greater degree of cath'holicity, not just in policies but also among those determining those policies.

It is not necessary to say much about the impact that such cath'holicity has had on every aspect of church life and on every field theological scholarship. Biblical scholars have become more aware of the subversive nature of certain texts, probably written in subtle protest against existing societal orders. They have become more aware of the degree to which agendas, hidden even from the researchers themselves, mark the results of their supposedly objective research. The following words, written by an Old Testament scholar late in the twentieth century, would not have been written in the nineteenth:

> The massive datum is that biblical scholars of the last two centuries have been firmly located in the middle class and have synthesized their scholarly humanism with bourgeois capitalism and, furthermore, have done so with surprisingly little sense of the inherent tensions and contradictions in such a synthesis.[1]

The implication is obviously that scholars living and working in different social and cultural locations would both question and enrich the studies and findings of more traditional biblical scholarship.

[1] Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 11.

The same is true in the field of theology, where theologians from Latin America, Africa, and Asia are being read and studied throughout the world, including many of the traditional centers of learning in Europe and North America. Their critique of much of traditional theology can no longer be ignored by such centers of learning. This has gone to such a point that in some extreme and deplorable cases, the epithet "white, male, Anglo-Saxon" is used as a pejorative in order to disqualify those whose opinions are not welcome. But leaving such extremes aside, all one has to do is look at the lists of courses of major universities and seminaries, where one would find courses that would not have been there fifty years ago: "Feminist theology," "Black theology," "Latin American theology."

But resistance from the traditional centers has not ceased. Sometimes this is official and overt—as in the case of the repeated attempts by then Cardinal Ratzinger to condemn Latin American Liberation theologies—and sometimes it is more subtle and even unconscious, as in schools that offer a course on "Feminist theology" and another on "Theology" without adjectives, as if there were a feminist theology and then another that is non-gender-specific. In other words, there is a universal, general theology, to which all others are little more than marginal glosses. Thus, while the twentieth century did much to lead us to a deeper level of cath'holicity, there is still much work to be done and many lessons to be learned.

But I suppose I have been invited here mostly as a church historian, and therefore I must devote the rest of my allotted time to the matter of how all this affects or should affect the field of church history. I know no better way to do this than by means of some autobiographical reflections. I am somewhat reluctant to do this, for I grew up in a culture in which you were not supposed to speak about yourself, and if you did, you were asked if you had no grandmother—for it was your grandmother, and not you, who was supposed to talk about you. But as I reflect on the changes that have taken place in the field, I know no better way to summarize and illustrate them than speaking of my own experiences and changes—and, in any case, my grandmother is not here!

It was 57 years ago, in Cuba, that I took my first course on church history. We had two main textbooks, both in English and both written by respected scholars. They taught me much. But one day, talking to my professor, I complained that I could not find myself or my church in those books. They both seemed to be leading to North-Atlantic Protestantism as the outcome of the entire narrative. So, I suggested to my professor that he write a book on church history that did not make us a marginal offshoot of all the rest. He was an excellent professor, and he would have been quite capable of doing so. But he simply threw his arm over my shoulder and said, "My son, that will never be possible. The Latin American Protestant community is too small. Such a book would have little market and therefore would not be published." I accepted his words and did not remember them until fairly recently, when I began reflecting on the changes that have taken place in the map of Christianity during my lifetime. And it suddenly dawned on

me that the book that had not been feasible half a century ago has indeed been published, and many others like it.

Then, in 1961, as I was beginning my teaching career, the World Council of Churches made a grant to a publisher in Argentina to produce a limited number of theological textbooks in Spanish, and I was asked to write one on the history of missions. This was not a field that had interested me much during my graduate studies, and, frankly, it did not interest me much when I began working on that book. After all, I was a historian of Christian doctrine, perhaps even a church historian, but certainly not a historian of missions!

But then, as I wrote that book, and later as I reflected on it, it dawned on me that the criteria for distinguishing between church history and the history of missions had little to do with the past and everything to do with the present from which one studied and wrote history. Why was it that the conversion of Constantine and the Roman Empire was part of standard church histories, but the conversions of Edessa, Armenia, and Ethiopia were not? Why was it that the Jesuit struggle against Protestantism in Europe was part of standard church histories, but Jesuit missions in India and Paraguay were not? Why was it that the Thirty-Years' War in the seventeenth century was part of Church history, but the controversy over the Chinese rites at roughly the same time was not?

When one thinks of it in such terms, it is obvious that the main criterion for such distinctions lies, not in past events themselves, but rather to the degree to which those writing church history find their own roots in such events. The controversy over the Chinese rites is not part of church history for North-Euro-American historians. But the Thirty-Years' War certainly is, because many of the ancestors and many of the traditions of such historians are very much connected to that war.

This means that in many of our theological curricula there is a parallelism that we seldom see between what we do in the field of theology and what we do in the field of history. In theology, we offer courses on "feminist theology," "Latino theology," and so on; and then we also offer courses on "theology" with no adjectives. In the field of history, we offer courses on church history and the history of Christian Thought, and then we also offer courses on the history of missions or on the history of the expansion of Christianity. And, just as in the field of theology, such a practice implies that the more generally and traditionally accepted theology is normative, and all others are footnotes to it. In the field of history, we imply that ours is the history of Christianity and that the rest are like branches moving out from the main trunk. Quite obviously, there is a degree to which this is unavoidable. All of us are heirs and expressions of our own history and traditions. All of us stand within specific cultural and social realities. All of us are affected by such legacies and such realities. What is avoidable is the blindness of imagining that ours is the normative theology—with no adjectives—and that ours is a history to which the others are marginal notes.

At about the same time that I was reflecting on the place of the history of missions within the history of the church, I was also involved in a series of discussions within the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches on the need for an ecumenical history of Christianity, The goal of such discussions was not to write a particular book that would be the ecumenical history of Christianity but rather to discern what would be the marks of such an ecumenical history. At that point, the emphasis was on a history that, no matter the historian's own theological persuasion, would give a fair hearing to other traditions.

Now, I have become convinced that a truly ecumenical history of Christianity must give a fair hearing, not only to various theological traditions, but also to various cultural and social settings. I do not know enough about Canadian history to be able to offer an example from it, and therefore I beg you to allow me to offer an example from American church history. An ecumenical, cath'holic, history of Christianity in the United States must speak not only of the origins and developments within various denominations. It must also recognize that the manner in which such history is usually written, as beginning from the northeast and then moving south and west, must be corrected by another history, mostly African American history, that begins from the south and moves north, and by a Latino history that begins from the southwest and moves north and east. A truly ecumenical history must take into account the variety of Christian traditions, not only in the theological sense but also in the cultural and social sense.

Concretely, this has meant that during the last few decades the teaching of church history has moved more and more in the direction of integrating what used to be called the history of missions into the general history of the church. This is a positive development, and one which must be encouraged as we move beyond Christendom. Again, since my grandmother is not present, I might add that this is part of what I have tried to do in some of my writing and teaching, (Although I must confess that in my writings, I often make concessions to the realities of theological curricula.)

Also, in the last few decades, historians as well as theologians and biblical scholars have taken to heart the call to do their work, so to speak, "from below," or "from the bottom up." This means that groups who have been marginalized for social reasons—the poor, women, ethnic minorities—have much to contribute to our various fields of study. So much has been written about that that there is no need to dwell on it. However, along similar lines, what we church historians have generally failed to do is to write history, so to speak, "from the edges in," or from the periphery toward the center. Just as in any attempt to do theology "from below" we must begin by paying special attention to voices that have been traditionally suppressed by the social and hierarchical order, so in doing church history "from the edges," we must begin by paying special attention to the edges, to those areas, both geographical as well as cultural and social, where people are learning of the Christian faith, where they are hearing, interpreting, and living it out of their own cultural and social context, where they are giving it new meanings—or discovering in it heretofore hidden meanings—that may be of value for the

church at large. In all this, we often fail to notice that it is most often at the edges, and not at the center, that the most significant and creative developments within the history of Christianity take place. Very little, if any, of the New Testament was written in Jerusalem. The New Testament was written mostly at the edges, in those places where Jew met Gentile, where the meaning of the faith in a totally different setting was at stake. Much later, when Christendom yearned for a reformation of the church, and when most expected such a reformation to come from popes or councils, it came in its Protestant form from a second-rate university town in semi-barbaric Germany and, in its Catholic form, both from Germany and from the equally marginal Iberian Peninsula. We cannot understand these events without realizing the degree to which they reflect conditions, so to speak, at the edges. We cannot understand what is taking place today in the world-wide church without taking into account what is happening in today's edges. This is what I mean by a history from the edges, or from the outside in.

This has been done to some degree in those cases where the edges and the resulting encounters led to forms of Christianity that eventually became dominant. Thus, it is inconceivable to study early Christianity without taking into account how people in the Hellenistic world saw it, what attracted or repelled them, how they eventually influenced the shape of Christianity. The same is true when we think of the early Middle Ages and the Germanic peoples meeting Christianity. There are similar studies about practically every such encounter—how the Aztecs understood Christianity, how and why they accepted it, how they changed it, or how the Koreans or the Ibos have done the same. But historians have often

marginalized such studies, giving them a nod of approval and then moving back to the history of what has become the central stream of church history.

Thus, the task of the next generation—a task that may well take more than a single generation—is to develop a church history that includes these various perspectives and experiences. But here again a caveat is necessary: Here, too, the distinction between universality and cath'holicity must be maintained. The goal of such a task is not to produce a new standard version of the history of Christianity—a sort of historical *Diatessaron*. It is rather to allow the various histories and the various Christianities that have emerged from such histories to be heard; or, so to speak, to become part of the new canon of church history. This will not be an entirely concordant canon, just as the books in the canon of Scripture do not always agree among themselves. But it will be a wide variety of histories, all contributing to the whole.

This will not be a comfortable sort of church history. It will be as discomforting as a canon that includes four Gospels that do not always agree among themselves. But, just as the multiple witnesses in the canon lead to a fuller picture of the gospel, so will this new history lead to a fuller understanding of this cath'holic, multifaceted tradition of which we are part. And let us not forget that, uncomfortable as this may be, in the end it may well prove to be a gift of the same God who, as Irenaeus would say, has given us the gospel in these various forms, all tied together into one by the Spirit.