Ecumenical Tensions of the Church in the West: A North American Perspective

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A North American Perspective

The problem

One of the many tensions under which the church in North America lives is that between its conviction that the church is universal and the current explosion of contextual theologies and ecclesiologies.[1] Repeatedly, as I lecture or write on theology from my own Hispanic perspective, I am asked: What does this mean for the unity of the church? What about its universality? The obvious concern is that as a multitude of contextual theologies develop and as concomitantly different forms of being the church emerge, the unity of the church will be further shattered, and the ecumenical gains of the last hundred years will be lost.

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What makes the question particularly urgent in the North American setting is that much of the current vitality in theology as well as in church life is lodged precisely among those groups which the more traditional ecclesiologies and theologies find disturbing: women, various ethnic minorities, and the poor. While enrolment in seminaries is fairly constant, the gender shift in the last two decades has been dramatic, showing the great vitality in feminine approaches to theology at a time when the more traditional male perspectives do not have the same drawing power. Most oldline denominations —Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, etc.— are declining in membership, and any increase is usually among ethnic minorities that are also quite critical of the traditional practices and polities of such denominations and are calling for substantial change. The same denominations tend to criticize ecclesiastical bodies of more

recent vintage that are making enormous strides among the poor and to attribute such strides to theological pandering —thus more permanently imprisoning themselves within their traditional middle-class confines.

Thus, when in 1981 a North American theologian wrote a book seeking to survey contemporary theology, he could find no better title than The Shattered Spectrum.[2] A common response to this shattering of the spectrum is to attempt to rebuild it. Seminary professors often describe the various theological options as a spectrum in which they determine the criteria for classification and in which, not surprisingly, they usually find themselves at the middle. Religious political activists of various stripes build their own spectra, in which the issues that are crucial to them become the criterion for classification. And, not to be left behind, emerging theological students in seminaries seek to put it all together into some sort of a spectrum, in which various positions can be classified on a one-to-ten-point scale —one being the most liberal, the most orthodox, the most radical, etc., according to each student's concerns.

Yet the fact is that no such spectrum can any longer be defended. Theologies no longer relate to each other as various points on a continuum but rather as stars in a galaxy, all somehow entwined and moving together, attracting and repelling each other in complicated ways that the mind can hardly grasp —and the whole being occasionally disturbed by a comet or some other body that seems to disrupt every conceivable pattern.

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It is within such settings that the criticism is often heard: As contextual theologies develop and as groups previously excluded seek to discover new ways of being the church, what will that do to the universality of the church and to that unity for which we have worked so tenaciously at least since 1910?

Universality and catholicity

There are many possible avenues to respond to that question. Yet, it seems to me that one that requires further exploration is the very notion of the universality of the church. Succinctly stated, the point is that while acknowledging that we are no longer living in the age of Christendom, we are still working from an understanding of universality that was defined within the parameters of Christendom but which we have not questioned with the same force with which we have questioned —or been forced to question— the very notion of Christendom.

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When the early church, before the time of Christendom, spoke of its own character and mission, it chose to call itself katholiké, a word which in most Western languages we have grown accustomed to translate as "universal" but whose meaning is quite different. By its etymology, "catholic" is that which is according to the whole —kath'holon. This clearly means that what is sectarian is by definition not catholic. I suppose we are all agreed on that. But I also submit that there is a sense in which the word "universal, " rather than being an adequate translation of "catholic," is its opposite. If “cath'holic" is the opposite of sectarian, too often what has been

meant by "universal" is the predominance of a sectarian view, to the point that it appears to be catholic.

To explain what I mean,[3] I would draw on the oft quoted passage from Irenaeus, in which he argues that, just as there are four winds, there must also be four gospels.

> It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the "pillar and ground" of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. From which fact it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that . . . contains all things, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one spirit. For this reason were four principal covenants given to the human race. . . .[4]

My professors of patristics ridiculed the passage, as if Irenaeus were simply arguing that, because there are four winds and four covenants and four of this and four of that, there must also be four Gospels. But Irenaeus is saying much more than that. The four winds he calls "catholic" winds. Since the phrase "catholic wind" makes no sense in English, some translations say, "four universal winds." But that misses the point. What Irenaeus is saying is not just that there are four winds but that the totality and the interplay of these winds makes wind catholic.[5] The north wind, for instance, is one of these winds. If, for some strange reason, all the other winds were to disappear, and only the north wind were to remain, that would make the north wind a universal wind, but the catholicity of wind would be lost.

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Let me give another example. If through a series of conquests someone were to establish rule over the entire earth, that rule would be universal, but it would not be catholic —it would not be "according to the whole.”

That is the basis for Irenaeus's argument, that there must be these different four Gospels, because the four of them together, in their difference, constitute the catholic witness to the Gospel, the "cath'holic" witness, the witness "according to the whole." If there were only one written Gospel, even though that Gospel might be perfectly orthodox, and even though it would become universal by default, it would not be "catholic.” It is precisely the variety of the Gospels that makes the canon of the New Testament "cath'holic."

Actually, the church knew full well, in developing the canon of the New Testament, that the four Gospels were different, that they did not agree on many matters. And that is precisely why all four were included in the canon: to counter the sectarians who had it all in place through the imagined witness of a single Gospel and to counter them with these four different Gospels that nevertheless testify to the same truth. The canon is catholic, not because it has extended its power over all the world as a sort of universal rule, but because it makes room for the multiform witness to the Gospel from the various perspectives of four different evangelists.

It would have been much simpler to have only one Gospel. Then we would not have to deal with the vexing questions of conflicting chronologies, divergent genealogies, and even distinct

theologies in the various documents. It would have been easier, but it would not have been catholic; it would have been partial, sectarian, not "according to the whole."

I must confess that the notion of a single Gospel holds some attraction for me. The difficulty inherent in our present canon of the New Testament became very clear to me when I was a teenager. I had grown up in a church in which we were constantly urged to "bear witness" before others. I was attempting to do this among my classmates and had attained some measure of success when one of my atheistic classmates confounded me by pointing out a number of differences among the various Gospels. "What were the real names of the disciples?" he asked. "Where was Jesus born? How many times, with how many loaves and how many fish, did Jesus feed how many people? And how many baskets were left over? Was it seven, or twelve?”

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At that moment, how I longed for a single Gospel!

Then, rummaging through the library in our home, I found a book that was called *A Harmony of the Four Gospels*. Now I would really know how to put it all together and how to respond to my friend! But, as I began studying the book that was supposed to solve my problem, I discovered that the so-called "harmony, " rather than harmonizing anything, simply made it more difficult. There, side-by-side, I could see what the various Gospels said about each of the events in the life of Jesus, and they were clearly different! There I saw that the Beatitudes are followed in

Luke by a series of Woes that Matthew omits and that even the Beatitudes themselves are different in these two Gospels. There I saw also that what Matthew puts together into a single Sermon on the Mount, the other evangelists scatter throughout their books.

At various times, Christians have felt uncomfortable with the existence of four different, and equally authoritative, Gospels. The experiment of Tatian, to unite all four into a single document, was received with curiosity and even with enthusiasm in some quarters. But eventually it failed —as all similar experiments have also failed. The four Gospels are simply different, and there is no way to make them all say exactly the same thing at every turn.[6]

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Then there is another way in which Christians have attempted to correlate the Gospels. This other way is to take each of the Gospels as literally true, down to the last letter, and then to claim that the different narratives refer to different events. Origen of Alexandria declared that, since they are in the Gospels two different texts of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples two different prayers. Others have said that, since the details regarding the feeding of the multitudes do not agree in the various Gospel accounts, each of these accounts must refer to a different event. In more recent times, we are all familiar with the attempts to coordinate the genealogies in Matthew and in Luke by claiming that one follows the line of Joseph and the other the line of Mary.

(At this point, it may be well to open a parenthesis, and to make clear that what is true of the Gospels is also true of the rest of Scripture. In Genesis, for instance, we have two different stories of creation that are presented side-by-side, with no attempt to coordinate the two. My friend who asked, "How many people did Jesus feed?" could just as well have asked, "Which of the two stories is true? Did God make animals first, and then humans, as we are told in Genesis 1? Or did God first make man, then animals, and then woman, as we are told in Genesis 2?" And in this case again, Christians have tried to harmonize the two clearly different accounts by one of two procedures. The most common procedure, and the one that is followed today by most of the defenders of a so-called "literal" reading of Genesis, is to create a composite story, a mixture of the two that is different from both, and to claim that this is "the biblical account of creation." But the truth of the matter is that such a supposedly biblical account at many points must contradict one or the other of the two accounts. The other procedure is to claim that the two stories are literally and objectively correct, and on that basis, to assert that they refer to two different creations. It was thus that Origen solved the problem of the two different accounts of the Lord's Prayer.)

Closing the parenthesis, the point is that the very existence of four different Gospels, all canonical, or the existence of two stories of creation leads us to the conclusion that in the biblical canon truth is attested, not through unanimity and uniformity, but through a variety of perspectives, all pointing in the same direction.

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If that is the nature of truth in the Bible, the truth which theology seeks to speak has no right to go further than that. It, too, must reflect a number of perspectives. Furthermore, it, too, must acknowledge that it reflects a number of perspectives, and that its catholicity lies, not in its uniformity and unanimity, but rather in this variety of perspectives, which alone can provide a "cath'holic" theology —a theology "according to the whole."

Paraphrasing Irenaeus, one could say that just as there are many zones of the world in which we live and many catholic cultures, . . . it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, who . . . contains all things . . . has given us the Gospel under many aspects, but all bound together by one Spirit.

A parallel argument can be made regarding the early development of the notion of apostolic succession. As found in its earliest proponents, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, apostolic succession has an element of openness that it later lost. In general, the argument of these early proponents of apostolic succession as a test of truth was that if Jesus had any secret teachings to pass to anyone, he would have given them to the apostles, who in turn would have passed them to those successors to whom they entrusted the responsibility of leadership in the various churches. Thus, if one wishes to know what Jesus really taught and who Jesus really was, one must seek, not in the conventicles of the gnostics who claim a secret knowledge transmitted from Jesus to them in some hidden and confidential chain of succession, but in the open teaching of all the churches, based on the tradition of all the apostles. It has often been pointed

out that in this early stage of development apostolic succession does not focus on the physical chain of laying on of hands, but rather on the doctrinal connection and agreement with the churches that can claim such physical connection. What has not been pointed out with equal emphasis is that rather than a move for closure and exclusion, apostolic succession, as set forth in these early writings, argues for the openness of a common and varied tradition accessible through all the apostles.

This means that, contrary to what has often been understood and also contrary to what has often been practiced, the catholicity, to which the canon of scripture and the succession of the apostles attests, requires openness. To many today, the question most often asked regarding the canon is, what right did the church have to close the canon? And apostolic succession is most often used as a means to exclude those who cannot claim a physical linkage of ordinations going back to the apostles. But when the canon was formed and when apostolic succession was first proposed as a criterion of true doctrine, it was not so much a sign of closure as it was a sign of openness. Indeed, the people against whom the canon was put together and against whom the notion of apostolic succession was proposed were mostly people who held to a secret doctrine, supposedly passed on by Jesus to one of his disciples in secret and continuing in secret until the present times. In some cases, that doctrine was supposedly attested by an also secret gospel —or, in the case of Marcion, by an abridgement of one of our four Gospels. Over against that, by insisting on a variety of gospels, and on the entire succession of all the apostles, the church was insisting, not on closure, but on openness; not on a secret doctrine passed on by a

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single apostle and now deemed to be universal, but on the open doctrine of all the apostles, with their variety of perspectives, of experiences, and even of theologies.

What does this mean for us today? It clearly means, first of all, that to accept the limits of perspective, to give up any claim that any particular theology is universally applicable, is the only way in which theology can be truly catholic. And it means also, as a corollary to the first, that we should be neither surprised nor ashamed if we discover that there are in the church today a variety of perspectives on the same gospel, and that these perspectives cannot be reduced to a single systematic whole.

This is particularly relevant today, when we are beginning to discover that theology is influenced, not only by culture but also by gender, by class, and by several of the other factors that determine the various ways of being human. Faced by the explosion in Third-World theologies, in feminist, womanist and *mujerista* theologies, in ethnic minority theologies, and a host of other such theologies, many are raising the cry of alarm over what some call the "Balkanization" of theology. If all of these so-called contextual theologies are to be taken seriously, they argue, what will become of the unity of the theological enterprise? Is diversity to be promoted at the expense of unity?

To this concern, one must answer, first, that theology has always been contextual. The problem is that one particular context has been considered "normal," and that therefore the theology

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written within that particular context has been considered normative and not contextual. In other words, that universality has passed as catholicity. What in fact is happening is not that a theology that was equally valid in every context is now been challenged by theologies reflecting various partial contexts, but rather that theologies that reflected a particular context, but which nevertheless took themselves to be universal, must now be placed side-by-side with theologies reflecting other equally particular contexts.

Secondly, one may answer this particular question by pointing out that the very notion that diversity is somehow the opposite of unity implies a wrong understanding of the nature of Christian unity. Christian unity, like the unity of the New Testament canon, must be unity in cath'holicity, not unity in uniformity or universality. Unity in uniformity takes one particular perspective and makes it universal. Borrowing from a Pauline image, in such unity the eye expects the entire body to be eyes and has little use for hands or feet. Unity in cath'holicity, on the other hand, is the unity that is based precisely in diversity, for it is on the basis of the diversity of its members that the body can really be one. It is also important to remember that the Pauline image does not mean simply that the eye has to accept the ear but also and foremost that the body needs both members, and that without the eye the ear, as part of the body, also suffers. To ask, which is more important in the church, unity or diversity makes as much sense as asking, what is more important in marriage, unity or diversity. A marriage can be one precisely because those who share in it are different, and because in their difference they complement and enrich each other.

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In the context of our inquiry regarding mission within Western culture, this means that if we are concerned about how to witness in an increasingly hostile society, we should seek to learn from the wisdom and experience of Chinese Christians who lived through the cultural revolution; if we are concerned about the transmission of the faith to the younger generations, we might ask the Russian Orthodox Church, whose babushkas and whose liturgy did precisely that in conditions at least as difficult as any we face; if we are concerned about our urban centers and the increasing absence of the church from them, we probably have much to learn from Pentecostals in Sao Paulo. In any case, we certainly must not think that we can respond to the great challenges of the present situation in the North Atlantic as if the wisdom and experience of the North Atlantic itself would suffice.

Diversity, however, has its limits, just as there is a point in a marriage beyond which diversity threatens unity and just as the "cath'holic" canon of the New Testament has its limits. In arguing for the four Gospels, Irenaeus is arguing, not only for a variety of perspectives but also for the limits of the canon. He is saying not only that all of these four Gospels must be included but also that all others must be excluded. Why? Because he is arguing not simply for the limitation of the canon to the ideal number of four but also for the exclusion from the canon of various other gospels that were circulating in his time and that contradicted the divine economy. The canon involves not only the openness that I have pointed out but also a closure. Not every gospel is to be admitted as a true witness to the cath'holic faith. It is not a matter of letting Valentinus and Marcion have their say, together with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is a

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matter of allowing for a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences, while at the same time keeping it all focused on the divine *oikonomia*, on God's self-disclosure.

In the early church, heresy is anti-cath'holic, not only, nor primarily, because it is dissenting doctrine but rather because it is dissenting doctrine that claims to be universal; because it claims that its teaching is so much better than those of the rest of the church that it and it alone has the right to universality.[7] Thus, one could even claim that, while heresy claims universality, orthodoxy claims catholicity.

If this understanding of cath'holicity is accurate, it follows that universality as most commonly understood, rather than an accurate translation for catholicity, is its opposite. Any particular perspective, no matter how successful in imposing itself on others, in anti-cath'holic in the same measure in which it claims universality for itself. And any particular perspective, no matter how different from the normative, which stands ready to be part of the whole and to make a contribution to it, must at least be given the opportunity to do so. (Note that here I advisedly use the term “perspective” rather than "doctrine,” "teaching," or "opinion.” As will become clear later, I am not arguing for a doctrinal latitudinarianism in which all teachings are equally acceptable.)

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Christendom and universality

Quite understandably, from an early date the threat of heresy tempted Christians to confuse catholicity with universality. The process is embodied in the very biography of Tertullian, whose arguments against the sectarian claims to universality on the part of Marcion and the gnostics eventually led him to his own sectarianism —to such an insistence on the universality of a particular experience and perspective that Tertullian himself could no longer remain in communion with the church at large.

Yet, if the challenge of heresy provided the temptation, it was the advent of Christendom that provided the institutional opportunity and the means to substitute universality —that is, the universality of a single perspective— for catholicity. The process is well known and need not be detailed here, A few highlights will suffice. Already at the Council of Nicaea and the years of controversy that followed, the agenda of the emperors was to reach a single universal formula so that the church could be the cement of the Empire. Ironically, the more the emperors sought such unity the more it eluded them —witness for instance Zeno's *Henotikon* of 482 and Heraclius's promulgation of the *Ecthesis* in 638. By 865, Pope Nicholas I could claim that Rome alone held and contained all that God had ordered the universal church to hold and contain.[8] (Note the combination of the "alone" and "universal," so contrary to the spirit of catholicity as described above.) By the time of Gregory VII, Rome's claim to universality was closely parallel to the notion of imperialist conquest, and so Gregory could boast that "the law of the Roman pontiffs has conquered more lands than that of the emperors."[9] In short, as a contemporary

historian has put it, "universality had been the hallmark of the Roman Empire, and then also of the Christian church that grew within it.[10]

Then came the Renaissance, the Reformation, and modernity. The dream of "one flock under one shepherd" was shattered, at least in its political and ecclesiastical manifestations. But the insistence on universality became even stronger. Paradoxically, the beginning of the end of Christendom brought with it an ever more insistent quest for universality.

In the United States, the story is somewhat different. The United States emerged together with modernity and soon developed what could be called an "anti-Christendom" form of Christendom. The United States rejected the union of church and state that was traditional in much of Europe. Instead, it developed a society in which no particular church had special authority, but the religious community in general did, where an ill-defined but clearly understood sort of "mainline Christianity" was the norm, and where the great debate was between two modern forms of Christianity: fundamentalism and liberalism.

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Modernity and universality

It could be argued that modernity, with its insistence on objective and demonstrable truth, emerged as a response to the shattered certainties of the medieval world. When the world became twice as large and twenty times as varied as had previously been thought; when the

earth began to move, if not on its foundations, at least on its axis; when the ancient authorities no longer had authority, an alternative certainty was sought. And that certainty was modernity.

The famous point of departure of Cartesian philosophy, to doubt everything except that which is proven to be indubitable, is much more than a methodological point of departure. It is also the expression of the existential angst of the post-medieval world, when neither scripture nor tradition provide security, and when neither church nor state have final authority.

When Descartes set out to doubt everything, he was simply acknowledging the mood of his time. And when he found the answer to his doubt in the strictly rational mathematical method, he was also expressing the response of modernity to the existential angst of uncertainty. Thus, one dogmatism replaced another, and the medieval world gave way to the spirit of modernity.[11]

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What we are witnessing today is the breakdown of modernity, and, in spite of an unavoidable existential angst, we would do well not to hasten to new universal solutions.

The passing spirit of modernity is a spirit of universality. Truth, as Descartes would have said, is that which can and must be acknowledged by any rational mind that does not allow itself to be obfuscated by the senses. The paradigm of truth is mathematical truth, such as 2+2=4. All else is passing, dubitable, secondary.

The problem is that universality is never universal. Significantly, the age of modernity is also the age of colonialism. It was the age in which Western civilization spread throughout the globe, claiming to be a universalizing influence. Colonizers and missionaries alike believed that they were creating a new world based on a common faith and common culture. But, after all is said and done, what the Spanish conquistador understood by "universal" was Spanish religion and power, so that he himself was closer to being "universal" than the Aymará whose lands he conquered. Likewise, to this day the descendants of Dutch settlers in South Africa believe that they are more "universal" than the Hotentots who were pushed into the hinterlands.

Even so-called mathematical truth is not as universal as it might seem. And here I might quote Dr. Jürgen Moltmann.

> Of course we say 2x2=4. But for some, two days of work times two days of work easily equals eighty dollars; for others it equals only eight dollars. Practically, 2x2=4 is something different in East Harlem than in Wall Street, and in Botswana something different than in Tübingen.[12]

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Someone might object that in these words Moltmann is confusing mathematical truth, which is universal, with socioeconomic truth, which is not. But that is precisely the point. No one lives in the pure realm of mathematics. Those who have the leisure to do purely abstract mathematical calculations must still eat. The difference is that, while they are worrying about their equations and calculations, others are growing and preparing their food. To claim, therefore, that abstract mathematical truth is somehow higher than the concrete truth to which Moltmann refers is in itself a sociopolitical statement, no matter how objective it might seem.

Today, there are many indications that modernity has run its course. No longer is it taken for granted that Western culture is superior to all the rest, that it must teach its ways to the rest of humankind, and that this somehow justifies colonialism and conquest —as in the ideologies of "the white man's burden" and "manifest destiny."

The supposedly rational justification for past colonialism, however, is only an illustration of what we are increasingly coming to understand, namely, that supposedly objective rationality reflects the perspective and the interests of the observer.

To further complicate matters in the case of theology, modernity appeared precisely at a time when, for a variety of reasons, the traditional place of what the medieval world used to call "the queen of the sciences" was seriously threatened. The acrimonious debates at the time of the Reformation, the atrocities of the Thirty Years' War, of other conflicts fueled by theological differences, and the impossibility of adjudicating among competing theological claims on the basis of pure reason did not commend theology to the modern mind. The ironical situation in which theology found itself illustrated by a debate as to the authority of Scripture vis-à-vis tradition that eventually led to a situation in which neither scripture nor tradition had much authority.

In response to the accusation that theirs was not a science, theologians strove to develop a theology that was objective and, in its own way, scientific. The more traditional theologians

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insisted on the objectivity of Scripture, much as chemists insisted on the objectivity of their experiments and found themselves in a constant rear-guard action vis-à-vis the detractors of the Bible. Those at the other end of the spectrum devised a method of reading Scripture which was in fact a capitulation to the spirit of modernity.[13]

What has been happening in the last few decades is that modernity has run its course and has proven to be much less than it had promised. Already half a century ago Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset was warning us about the limits of supposedly objective and universal rationality. "Reason," said he, "is a narrow band of analytical clarity between two unfathomable strata of irrationality." Then he continued, "In spite of appearing otherwise, rationalism is in fact an attitude characterized, not by observation, but by command. In rationalism, thinking is not mere seeing; it is legislating, commanding."[14] And elsewhere, referring to what we today would call modernity, he said, "reason was . . . a belief. For that reason, and only for that reason —certainly not for other attributes and graces peculiar to it— could reason compete with the religious beliefs that until then had held sway." [15] At his time, particularly in Spain, Ortega was faulted for being a "perspectivist," which was understood as little more than veiled relativism or agnosticism. Yet that is not what he intended. Rather, he sought to free reason to take into account what he called "vital reason" or "historical reason" –that is those elements of life and context that affect our reasoning, no matter how objective we claim to be.

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What Ortega insinuated then –and was generally ignored because, after all, nothing of value could come from Spain [!]— has now become part of the common inheritance of Western culture. Without ever having read Freud or Marx, most people in Western societies are well aware that supposedly objective reasoning reflects subconscious psychological and material interests. While the power of modernity still is quite visible in those areas where objectivity seems most unassailable —the physical sciences and technology— in other fields, and clearly in matters religious, modernity is rapidly making way for post-modernity.

Contextuality and catholicity

If we now return to the question posed at the outset of this paper, namely, how the current explosion of contextual theologies and ecclesiologies threatens or seems to threaten the universality of theology or the unity of the church, the first point to be made it that to a large measure such threat does not come from contextual theologies as much as it comes from the very inner dynamics of modernity and of modern Western theology. Quite apart from the challenge of contextual theologies, the demise of the myths of modernity means that theology will no longer be able to claim to be an objective science or discipline —a development that we should all welcome.[16] Thus, much of the unease behind the question of the manner in which contextuality threatens universality and unity has to do, not with contextuality, but rather with the inner dynamics and dis-ease of the perspective from which the question itself is posed.

At a deeper level, however, the question is crucial. It has to do with the very definition of universality and therefore of unity. Universality as defined in the context of Christendom, and

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then reinforced in the context of modernity, is clearly incompatible with the proliferation of contextual theologies and ecclesiologies. But, as I have tried to show above, such universality is also incompatible with true catholicity. Catholicity, on the other hand, --and also universality if understood in terms of catholicity— requires the variety of perspectives and experiences reflected in the very canon of Scripture, and, therefore, contextual theologies are not only compatible with, but also a necessary requirement for, true catholicity.

This does not make things easy, just as having four different Gospels and two stories of creation and claiming that all of them are God's Word does not make things easy. But to simplify matters by cutting the Gordian knot and claiming that a particular theological expression is to be taken as universal would be as faithful to the task of theology as a Diatessaron can ever be faithful to the canon of scripture.

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Contextuality and extra-modernity

There is, however, another side to the coin. The quadriform canon of the Gospels is an expression not only of openness but also of closure. Irenaeus would never have said that, since there are already four Gospels and they differ, we must also accept Valentinus's *Gospel of Truth*, just because it is different. Nor would he say that, since the church in Rome celebrates Easter at a different date than the church in Ephesus, this means that we must also accept the church of Marcion —even though it rejects much of the central meaning of Easter.

It is at this point that contextual theologies —or at least the sort of contextual theology that I seek to represent— find it necessary to part company with much of the contemporary postmodern discourse. According to such discourse, now that the grand metanarrative of Western modernity has proven to be unsustainable, we must learn to live without metanarratives. In a way, that is very liberating, for the grand metanarrative of the West told many of us that our cultures were inferior and that for our own good we must be subjected to colonialism and imperialism —political, cultural, and economic. But at another level it is quite oppressive, for if there is no metanarrative of justice there is no fulcrum that the oppressed can employ for their own liberation. The net result is that no matter whether in modernity or in postmodernity those who now hold the reins of power and the strings of the purse will still hold them, and those who are now unemployed and hungry will continue being unemployed and hungry.[17]

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Significantly, one of the leading voices of postmodernity has stated that postmodernity is the state of knowledge in the most highly developed societies.[18] In other words, that postmodernity comes after modernity and that those whom modernity left out will also be excluded from postmodernity.

That may well be the case. That will probably be the case. But what must be pointed out is that even at the height of modernity, the vast majority of humankind was left out of it —or was at least excluded from its benefits. In the colonizer/colonized relationship, if the colonized were

brought into modernity, it was mostly so they could be exploited—not so they could be agents of their own history. In the United States, Native Americans and more than half of Mexico were "modernized" much against their will. African Americans built much of the wealth of the nation but were excluded from it. For most of these people, modernity was neither a reality nor a dream but rather a nightmare. Those at the centers of power said that they were "pre-modern"; but in fact, they were extra-modern —they were excluded from modernity except as objects on which to exercise the powers of modernity.

Significantly, it was among such extra-modern people —both in the United States and elsewhere— that Christianity made some of its most significant numerical gains in the last century. In the United States, some of the most vital and active churches are now among African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Korean Americans. In the wider church, it is clear that the numerical centers of Christianity are no longer in the areas that a few decades ago boasted of being bastions of modernity as well as strongholds of Christianity. And it is precisely from such extra-modern people that the theologies and the ecclesiologies are emerging that now lead some to raise the possibility that they may be a threat to the universality of doctrine and to the unity of the church.

The question, however, is where is the greatest threat. Is it coming from these traditionally extra-modern people who are now interpreting the Gospel from their own perspective and seeking to make their contribution to the church at large? Or is it coming rather from those

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whose understanding of universality, albeit traditionally supported by power and prestige, is however contrary to true cath'holicity, and therefore, ultimately sectarian? Also, in the North American context, is the reason why these contextual theologies are rejected or relegated to the level of theological curiosities that they are heterodox, or is the real reason that, being extra-modern, they threaten the remnants of prestige that the modern, "mainline" denominations still have? Is it perhaps, in the case of the United States, that they threaten even the remnants of American Christendom that still survive?

Christians in the United States who belong to various ethnic minorities have sometimes allowed themselves to be swayed by the currents of modernity, but by and large many of them have been sufficiently marginalized from such currents that they may properly be called extra-modern. A significant element in African-American Protestantism, for instance, was never really involved in the fundamentalist-liberal debates of past decades —and the same is true of many Hispanic Americans. It is this element that has come forth in recent decades in the forms of Black theology, Hispanic theology, and the like. What both modern and postmodern theologians find disconcerting about these theologies is that they do not fit into the parameters and classifications of either modernity or postmodernity. Fundamentalism can easily be understood, classified, and dismissed. The same is true of liberalism. But these contextual theologies are quite different and do not fit the established molds. Hence the accusation that they threaten the universality of the Gospel and the unity of the church.

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At least some of these theologies, however, are highly cath'holic in their understanding of their task of scope —and the same may be said of the ecclesial practices emerging from them. This is what I intended to convey with the metaphor, already employed above, of a variety of perspectives .[19] A variety of perspectives implies that there is a landscape. It implies also that the landscape can only be known from particular standpoints and is not knowable either per se or in toto. That there is a landscape means that truth is not, so to speak, “up for grabs,” a matter of personal taste or arbitrary decision. That it is a landscape implies that no one —no individual or group of individuals— can claim full and universal knowledge of it. The best we can do in that direction is to search for a cath'holic consensus in which different perspectives contribute their own insights into the landscape, thus enriching and correcting each other as well as the whole. In this metaphor, the landscape stands for God's activity in the world —what God has done, is doing, and intends to do. The landscape is a given. It is the metanarrative that some post-moderns would urge us to surrender but that we as extra-moderns and as Christians will not give up. The perspectives are the various contextual theologies —actually, all theologies, for there can be no such thing as a non-contextual theology. None of them has a greater claim to universality than the rest. Any that claim to have an objective, universal view of the whole are sectarian and heretical, no matter how orthodox in their formulae.[20] Any theology that refers to a landscape that is recognizable as the same, no matter from what perspective, and that is willing to recognize its own contextuality and particularity, to contribute to the whole, and to be shaped by the whole, has a place in the church's quest for and expression of its cath'holicity.

Mission Dei and the Acts of the [Apostles] Spirit

Significantly, much of the theological material on which I have drawn in the early pages of this essay in order to clarify the meaning of cath'holicity comes from the second and third centuries. This was a time before Christendom, when the universality and the nature of the church still had to be defined. I am convinced that, as we now stand historically at the other side of Christendom, we have much to learn from the work of Christians such as Ignatius of Antioch, Justin, Irenaeus, and even Tertullian. But we must also be aware of some of the momentous decisions that were made at the time, which paved the way for Christendom and for the later narrowing of the concept of universality: of these, probably none as unnoticed and yet as significant as the work of the unknown scribe who decided to add at the head of Luke's second book, the two words, "*Praxeis apostolon*," Acts of the Apostles. For centuries, these two words have dominated our reading of that book and, therefore, our understanding of the church and its nature. Ever since that time, we have learned to read Luke's second book as the history of the church as an institution and as the model and the guideline for the proper organization of the church. What Luke probably intended as a book about the Spirit's mission through the church became a book about how the church was organized under the guidance of the Spirit. The election of the seven in order to attend to God's mission in doing justice between the widows of two different groups became the election of the first seven deacons. What was the conversion of Peter through the power of the Spirit –so that he could see the universal scope of the Gospel— became the conversion of Cornelius. What was the gropings of the church –under the guidance of the Spirit— to deal with the relationship between Jew and Gentile became the

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"Council of Jerusalem." Thus, the book was used to argue about and to establish the authority of bishops, deacons, and councils but seldom to reflect on how God's mission both uses and upsets all human institutions.

At this point, I would add that I am convinced that there is in Acts much irony that we miss precisely because we read it as an institutional rather than as a missionary document. Peter stands up among the believers and, as a true organizational conservative, argues that they must be twelve and sets criteria that candidates for the vacant post must fulfill –except that, if one reads Luke's first book, one sees that the eleven themselves did not meet these criteria. The church complies, and elects Matthias, whom Luke pointedly ignores from that point on. The twelve are criticized for their handling of the material resources of the community, and they suggest that seven be named for that task, while they, the twelve, continue preaching. Yet the very next thing that Acts tells us is that Stephen, one of the seven, is preaching –indeed, the longest sermon in the entire book of Acts is by Stephen, who is not even supposed to be preaching! Peter the apostle has a vision in Joppa, and Cornelius the centurion has another in Caesarea. Later, Pope Nicholas I would argue that, since only Peter had the vision of the cleanness of the unclean, only to him and to Rome belonged the supreme authority.[21]

But in fact Acts tells the story with unmitigated irony. Cornelius's vision comes first, and he sees "clearly"; Peter's is unclear, to the point that Acts describes it as "something like a large sheet" (10: 11) or as "the thing" (10:16). Cornelius is given Peter's address down to the last detail

(10:5—6); Peter is told only to go with the men who have come for him (10:20). Nicholas I, reading Acts as the fundamental document to establish the church's *ordo*, missed the irony in the contrast between the two visions —an irony that should have shown him that the church finds itself in its mission and can claim to be apostolic only to the degree that it is faithful to its "sendness."

The book of Acts is not about the church as an institution. It is rather about the Spirit who uses the church for the *missio Dei*, even in ways that the church neither expects nor likes. And one of these ways is precisely the affirmation of the cath'holic nature of God's mission.

To conclude, allow me to refer to the most quoted passage in the entire book of Acts, the story of Pentecost. There are many elements in that story. But what stands out as we discuss the multiplicity of perspectives that makes the church cath'holic is that, according to the book of Acts, what the Holy Spirit did was *not* to make it possible for all sorts of people to understand the language of the earlier disciples. No. What the Spirit did was to make it possible for Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and all the rest, to understand what those earlier disciples were saying, "each in their own native language." Peter and the rest do not have control over the translating action of the Spirit. It is the recipients, these people from all over the world and with a wide variety of languages and perspectives, that attest to the unity of what is being said when they declare that "in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." God's deeds of power, about which all these people hear, are presumably the same that Peter

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and his companions are proclaiming. But Peter and the rest have no control over what they actually hear. What they hear are the words *in their own languages* that the Spirit gives them to hear.

In that very event of Pentecost, the Spirit is affirming what I have been calling "cath'holicity," over against what is usually understood by "universality. " Had the Gospel been simply a universal message, to be spread out throughout all the world, regardless of people's languages, cultures, and perspectives, the Spirit would have made the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and all the rest, to understand the language of the disciples --presumably Aramaic. But, according to the book of Acts, that is not what the Spirit does. From the very beginning of the life of the church, the Spirit makes it possible for all to hear in their own native languages and presumably also then to proclaim what they have heard and seen in those same languages. I do not know if there was an Aramaic-only movement in first century Palestine.[22] But, if there was, in Pentecost the Spirit pronounced a resounding "No!" over it. No. You do not all have to become like the first disciples. No. You do not all have to speak the same language or pronounce the same words. No. You shall hear, and you shall speak "about God's deeds of power," each in your own native language.

This is not a comfortable position to be in, just as it was not comfortable for me to have to deal with four different Gospels. Sometimes I wish there were only one Gospel in the New Testament. Sometimes I also wish that theology could speak once and forever with an eternal,

objective, universal, changeless voice. Sometimes I even wish I were God! But we are not. We are pilgrims along the way, limited in our perspectives, limited in our pronouncements, and yet rejoicing that those limits, too, are somehow a manifestation of God's loving grace. Amen.

Endnotes

1. For an excellent survey and typology of such theologies, see Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

2. Lonnie D. Kliever, *Shattered Spectrum: Survey of Contemporary Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981). While acknowledging that there have always been differences of opinion in the church and among theologians, Kliever said: ". . . in the modern era, theological disagreements have usually occurred along fairly predictable lines. The varieties of theological outlook roughly took the form of a spectrum, ranging from the conservers on the right to the liberalizers on the left." Then he went on to show that this spectrum no longer holds. He argued that the spectrum probably began to break down with the emergence of Barth and his generation, many of whom could no longer be neatly placed along such a spectrum. But the final shattering came in the sixties and seventies, with the emergence of a series of theological perspectives of such variety that the spectrum could no longer hold them: theologies of secularity, of process, of liberation, of hope, of play; narrative theologies, ethnic theologies, feminist theologies, womanist theologies, third-world theologies, etc.

3. I have explored this particular dimension of catholicity, as well as the passage from Irenaeus and its implications, in *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), pp. 18—23. In the same book, there is an attempt to relate this to the "Great Commission" as well as to contextual theologies: pp. 27—29.

4. *Adv. haer*. 3.11.8-9 (ANF, 1:426-427). In order not to make this quote exceedingly long, a section has been omitted, as shown by the use of ellipsis points. This is a discussion of the particularities of each of the four Gospels, relating them to the symbols that have become traditional: a lion, a man, a calf (later an ox) and an eagle. (The gender-specific language, I might add, is the result of translation, and is not found in the original Greek.)

5. For this reason, the ANF translation quoted above, "four principal winds, " while not as close to the literal meaning, is probably better than "four universal winds."

6. Historian Hans Lietzmann has expressed the early response to this situation. "The fact of there being four gospels, however, had its disadvantages. As far as the Church was concerned, there was only *one* gospel, only one message of God to mankind, and the question arose as to why it was divided up among four books. Further, why were there so many repetitions, and also incompatibilities and apparent contradictions, in the various gospels? Surely the ideal state of affairs would be *one* gospel in one book. That was perhaps the case in the earliest period when the Synoptic gospels were confined, each to different regions, some using one gospel and some another. Marcion had permitted only one gospel book to be used in his church. About A.D. 180 two men commenced a practice which the Church employs to-day, whenever popular preachers attempt to revitalize religion by teaching "Bible history"; out of the four records, they make a

single text. The first to do this was bishop Theophilus of Antioch; his work has disappeared without trace. On the other hand, the second enjoyed great success: he was Tatian, a pupil of Justin. His gospel harmony of 'the Four', known as the *Diatessacon*, arranges sections of all four gospels as a continuous gospel story. . . Nevertheless the Church as a whole refused to accept any such abbreviation of the gospel texts." *The Founding of the Church Universal*, vol. 11 of *A History of the Early Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1938), pp. 98-99.

7. Significantly, when the word "catholic" first appears in ancient Christian literature in connection with the church (*Ad Smyr*. 8.2), Ignatius is arguing against those who do not care about the agape (6.2) and who withdraw from the eucharist (7.1). These people practice *merismös* —division, partiality, sectarianism— which is the root of evils (7.2).

8. *Regesta Pontificium Romanorum*, 2796: "*ipsa sola Romanorum urbs, apud quam eiusdem apostoli corporal is praesentia sedule veneratur . . . suscepit . . . ac continet in se . . . quod Deus universal em ecclesiam suscipere ac continere praecepit*."

9. *Reg*. i i .75: "*Plus enim terrarum lex Romanorum pontificum enim imperatorum obtinuit*."

10. Janet Nelson, in J. H. Burns, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, England, University Press, 1988), p. 230.

11. On this score, see Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987). I thank my friend and colleague Walter Brueggemann for calling my attention to this work in his own book, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 3-5.

12.In Ewert H. Cousins, ed., *Hope and the Future of Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress: 1972), pp. 58-59. Compare this with Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*, ii. 7.20, where he asks whether there is some knowledge that is common to all rational beings: *utrum inveniatur aliguid quod omnes rationantes sua quisque ratione atque mente communiter videant.* His answer (and much later Descartes's answer) is that numbers fulfil that requirement of rational universality: *ratio et veritas numeri omnibus ratiociantibus prasto est*.

13. As one of the leading biblical scholars of our time has said, "The methods in which we have been schooled inevitably operate with hidden criteria (modern rationalism) that decide beforehand what would be included in a text. This method has devised respectable strategies for disposing of what is unacceptable to the modern consciousness . . . The outcome of historical criticism is most often to provide a text that is palatable to modern rationality, but that in the process has been emptied of much that is most interesting, most poignant, and most 'disclosing' in the text." Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation*, p. 58.

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14. "Ni vitalismo ni racionalismo," in *Obras completas* (Madrid: Revista de occidente, 1947), VI: 277-79.

15. "História como sistema, *Obras*, VI: 46.

16. There are other ways of expressing this point, and I offer them here for those who might prefer them. One is to speak of theology not so much as knowledge but rather as wisdom —in an earlier theological vocabulary, theology as *sapientia* rather than *scientia*. Another would be to say that it is impossible to speak of the living God without at the same time and by the same act speaking to the living God —or, in traditional grammatical terms, that the name of God must always be spoken in the vocative, for when it is spoken only in the nominative it is no longer the name of God but rather the name of an idol.

17. On this point, and in general on the relationship between Hispanic theology in the U.S. and p-postmodernity, see my essay "Metamodern Aliens in Postmodern Jerusalem," in Ada M. Isasi-Diaz and Fernando Segovia, eds., *Aliens in Jerusalem* (tentative title) (Chicago: Fortress, forthcoming).

18. François Lyotard in *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

19. A metaphor that I have explored and applied more fully in the book, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

20. Mark Taylor has put it epigrammatically: "Real heresy is not getting it wrong but getting it wrong in isolation." In S. Amirtham and J. S. Pobee, eds., *Theology of the People: Reflections on Doing Theology in Community* (Geneva: WCC, 1986), p. 124. I would add that trying to get it right in isolation is in itself wrong.

21. In the continuation of the quote given above, note 8: "*Petro special iter ostensum est, ut ea mactaret et manducaret, illi soli iussum est*."

22. For my non-American readers, this is a reference to the "English-only" movement, which has gained much strength in the United States in the last ten to fifteen years.

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