THE CHURCH'S RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND ITS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MISSION

FRANCIS SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA
The Catholic University of America

THE MISSION of the Church is at the center of much contemporary theology.[1] One basic theological issue is the relation between the Church's mission and its religious identity. How does any activity or ministry relate to the Church's religious identity? Unless its ministry expresses this identity, the Church fails to be church. The recent loss of membership within American churches has been attributed to their focusing on social issues rather than on their religious message.[2]

This essay will explore the specific issue, how the Church's political and social mission relates to its religious identity. First, it will raise the basic theological issue by analyzing distinct interpretations of the relation between religious identity and social or political ministry. Second, it will offer hermeneutical reflections on an adequate methodology and will propose how the interpretative nature of religion and the Wisdom development of Christology can provide a basis and guideline for elaborating the Church's Christian religious identity in relation to a social ministry. Third, without touching on the complex relations between morality and legality, church and state, policy and strategy,[3] it will point to the basic correlation between the Church's tradition of a social mission and its political mission.

DIVERSE INTERPRETATIONS

Improper Mission

The Church's mission to the world is often contrasted with its proper religious mission. In this view the social or political mission is inauthentic, not a proper mission. Insofar as churches increasingly engage in a social or political mission, they increasingly fail their proper mission. Previous

---

[1] Cf. Michael Fahey, "The Mission of the Church: To Divinize or To Humanize?" *Proceedings CTSA* 31 (1976) 56–69; Lothar Rütti, *Zur Theologie der Mission* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1977); Thomas Kramm, *Analyse und Bewährung theologischer Modelle zur Begründung der Mission* (Aachen: Missio Aktuell, 1979); Roger D. Haight, "Mission: The Symbol for Understanding the Church Today," *TS* 37 (1976) 620–49, and the response by Robert T. Sears, ibid. 649–51.

[2] Cf. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972; 1977 edition with the new preface); Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969).

[3] Cf. Charles Curran, "Theological Reflections on the Social Mission of the Church," *The Social Mission of the Church: A Theological Reflection*, ed. Edward J. Ryle (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America, 1972) 31–54.

papal statements, since modified, have reflected this conception. Pope Pius XI wrote to M. D. Roland-Gösselin that "the objective of the Church is to evangelize, not to civilize. If it civilizes, it is for the sake of evangelization."[4] Pope Pius XII referred to the Church's "strictly religious, supernatural goal."[5] *Gaudium et spes* states that Christ gave his Church "no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose which he set before her is a religious one."[6]

The critics of political and liberation theology likewise fear that the Church's mission has been equated with a social mission.[7] They object that advocacy of specific social and political agenda is a surrender to the agenda of the world. Will D. Campbell and James Y. Holloway proclaim: "Our Holy Marches on Washington and Selma and our mandates to Capitol Hill are Babel now."[8] Why? Through such actions the Church skirts its primary responsibility to evangelize. It substitutes immanent for transcendent concerns. It replaces the gospel of love and forgiveness with social reform, legislative change, and political programs. The law replaces the gospel.[9]

A dichotomous model underlies these criticisms. Evangelization and civilization, transcendence and immanence, gospel and law, religion and politics are clearly distinct and separate. The religious and supernatural goal of the Church is contrasted with political and social goals. Priests and ministers become "pagans in the pulpit" when they neglect the distinctively religious Christian message.[10]

This position's advantages and disadvantages can be seen from its diverse traditions. The Neo-Scholasticism of the nineteenth century emphasized the distinction between the natural and supernatural. Each order had its distinct goal. The roles of church and state were clearly

[4] *Semaines sociales de France* (Versailles, 1936) 461–62; quoted in Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America, 1966) 264, n. 192.

[5] Pius XII, March 9, 1956. The Church is not given "any mandate or fixed any ends of the cultural order" (*Acta apostolicae sedis* 48 [1956] 212).

[6] *GS* 42 (Abbott, *Documents* 241). The same document, however, affirms that "the Church is willing to assist and promote all these institutions to the extent that such a service depends on her and can be associated with her mission" (ibid.; *Documents* 242).

[7] Cf. the survey of some criticisms by Roger L. Shinn, "Political Theology in the Crossfire," *Journal of Current Social Issues* 10 (Spring 1972) 10–20.

[8] *Up to Our Steeples in Politics* (New York: Paulist, 1970) 89.

[9] The law-gospel distinction underlies the Campbell and Holloway critique. For the criticism from a Calvinist perspective, see the various publications of Jacques Ellul, esp. *The Political Illusion* (New York: Knopf, 1967), *False Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury, 1972), and *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

[10] Cf. Richard S. Wheeler, *Pagans in the Pulpit* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington, 1974). Also critical is Roger Vekemans, *Caesar and God: The Priesthood and Politics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1972).

distinct. The other tradition, Lutheranism, appealed to the distinction between the gospel and the law. Whereas the gospel referred to individual grace, personal conversion, and private faith, the law related to the institutional, social, and political. The two realms were clearly distinguished and no ambiguity remained about the Church's proper religious mission. Both traditions, however, minimized how God's grace is operative in social and political life and how the gospel should penetrate the institutional. Moreover, recent historical studies have clearly demonstrated that the relation between nature and grace for Thomas, and gospel and law for Luther, were more intricately connected than their separation in modern social and political thought.[11]

Substitutive Mission

In reaction to this view, theologians have sought to work out a more positive relation with the category of substitution. Wolfhart Pannenberg maintains that the Church's mission is concerned with the impact of God's kingdom upon all dimensions of human life. But he adds the specific reservation that the "specifically social activities of the church (its welfare organizations, child care centers, nursing and hospital establishments, schools etc.) are subsidiary and temporary. The church engages in these activities as a substitute for the political structure of society."[12]

This notion of substitutive service has been developed by Richard P. McBrien and Juan Luís Segundo. McBrien argues that "only when there is a lack of personnel or institutions to handle imperative needs" and "only where it is clearly a matter of supplying for the deficiences of other responsible agencies" can formal institutional social action be justified.[13] Those who attribute a permanent proper social mission to the Church are "theologically conservative" and "argue reductively," for "they are

[11] Bouillard and de Lubac have uncovered the historical inadequacy of the Neo-Scholastic use of the distinction. For a significant survey, see Bernhard Stoekle, *"Gratia supponit naturam:" Geschichte und Analyse eines theologischen Axioms* (Rome: Herder, 1962). For the Lutheran tradition, see the important study by Ulrich Duchrow, *Christenheit und Weltverantwortung: Traditionsgeschichte und systematische Struktur der Zweireichelehre* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1970). For a discussion of the pros and cons, see Hans Schwarz, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms: Help or Hindrance for Social Change," *LQ* (1975) 59–75, and the exchange with Karl Hertz, ibid. 76–79 and 257–59.

[12] *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 90–91. See also "Christian Morality and Political Issues," in his *Faith and Reality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 123–38.

[13] "The Church and Social Change: An Ecclesiological Critique," in Thomas M. McFadden, ed., *Theology Confronts a Changing World* (West Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1977) 41–62, at 52. See his *Catholicism* 2 (Minneapolis: Winston, 1980) 720–22, for a more constitutive than substitutive role with regard to social justice. For Segundo see *The Community Called Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1972) 96.

the ones who see no need at all to justify the existence, for example, of Catholic schools, hospitals, counseling agencies, and the like."[14] The Church does have a social mission, but it should formally and institutionally so engage itself only where secular agencies do not.

This proposal appears reasonable at first. If, for example, in a previous century a missionary might have organized sanitation for a village to prevent disease, the Church's mission is not the sanitation business. Moreover, the Church should avoid "patronizing" the world and should allow for the autonomy of human social organization. Where secular authorities do not perform such services, only then can the Church's social involvement be interpreted as the spelling out of the impact of God's kingdom upon all dimensions of life.

Yet a substitutional theory goes against a Roman Catholic tradition. Catholics did not establish universities and schools only as substitutive institutions until the state could take them over. They never doubted that schools and hospitals were integral to the Church's mission. Moreover, if taken to its ultimate consequences, a substitutional theory would result in the Church's removal from welfare activities, hospitals, hospices, and educational institutions, would limit it to liturgical celebration, proclamation, catechesis. Some have concluded that the Church should not run hospitals but have chaplaincies within hospitals, should not run schools but stress catechetical instruction—legitimate deductions from a substitutional theory.

Several questions emerge. Does not a substitutional theory clearly split religious and secular tasks, so that a social mission is improper and inauthentic save for exceptional cases? Does it not propose the same dichotomy as the first position? Intuitively, do not the case of sanitation and that of schools or hospitals differ? Why have objections to schools and hospitals arisen only in recent times? Do these examples tell us something about the interrelation between religious and social tasks? An adequate theology of the relation between religious identity and social mission would have to answer these questions.

Unofficial Mission

A third proposal tries to overcome the dichotomy between religious and social mission by arguing for an unofficial social mission. Karl Rahner has maintained that "the church *as an official* church, however, is not the immediate or the proper subject for realizing the concrete humani-

---

[14] McBrien, "Church and Social Change" 52. He limits this substitutional role to social service; on social justice he comes close to Metz insofar as the Church's eschatological message functions primarily as a negative critique of societal institutions. See Johann B. Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

zation of the world."[15] Not only does the official Church lack the qualifications to do so, but the world has the right to exercise its own responsibility for its development. To make the humanization of the world the Church's proper task would be to reintroduce clericalism and integralism.[16]

Rahner suggests an alternative: the Church can inspire, motivate, and move groups of Christians within it. They can organize in the service of the world. Their service can be inspired by Christian motives. Rahner's proposal articulates much of the theology at the basis of the Catholic Action movement in Europe. Inspired by the hierarchy, laypersons became explicitly engaged in a social mission (a direct political mission was often forbidden). They gradually gained autonomy and their leadership flowed over to the Christian democratic parties.[17] In the United States, unofficial lay involvement in a social mission is advocated in order to incorporate into the Catholic Church the American voluntarism exemplified by townhouse democracy and religious congregationalism.[18]

In emphasizing unofficial and voluntary service, this proposal teaches that the Church encompasses all members. Every Christian has a social and political mission. Social initiatives need not and should not be the obligation of the hierarchy alone. Nevertheless, this position appears to transfer the previous dichotomy between the religious and the social to the interior of the Church. Its mission is split into an official religious

[15] "The Church's Commission To Bring Salvation and the Humanization of the World," *Theological Investigations* 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976) 295–313, at 312. In an earlier essay, "The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society," *Theological Investigations* 12 (New York: Seabury, 1974) 229–49, Rahner notes: "It can justifiably be said, therefore, that the function of the official authorities of the Church as critics of society has still not found any clear theological *topos* for itself" (243). Influenced by Metz's political theology, he characterizes the Church's task of criticism as "prophetic instruction in social criticism" that must however lead freedom to individual Christians for their own political responsibility (243–44).

[16] "Theological Reflections on the Problem of Secularization," *Theological Investigations* 10 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974) 318–48.

[17] On the social and political mission of Catholic Action, see William Bosworth, *Catholicism and Christ in Modern France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ., 1962), and Michael Fogarty, *Christian Democracy in Europe* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1957). A classic theological expression of this position is Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Westminister, Md.: Newman, 1957).

[18] The emphasis on cultural pluralism and voluntarism has been articulated by John A. Coleman, "American Catholicism and Strategic Social Theology," in *The Catholic Church: The United States Experience*, ed. Irene Woodward (New York: Paulist, 1978) 43–71, and "The Mission of the Church and Action on Behalf of Justice," *Jurist* 39 (1979) 119–51. For an appraisal of the voluntary principle, see James M. Gustafson, *The Church as Moral Decision Maker* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970). Although this voluntarism is advocated as specifically appropriate to the situation in the U.S., the Latin American base communities are also examples of such voluntarism.

mission and an unofficial social mission, whereas the layperson has the secular mission. If laypersons exercise religious functions, then they should receive orders (e.g., the diaconate). If priests are engaged in secular work, they perform what is properly the task of laypersons.[19] Is such a division appropriate? Do not the bishops as Christians also have social and political responsibilities? Should they not as overseers also fulfil leadership responsibilities? If the Church is the sign of God's presence and kingdom within the world, must not the whole Church show this?[20] Should not the religious identity of the Church on all its levels and in all its members be related to its social and political mission?

Partial Mission

A fourth approach maintains that it is inadequate to refer to the Church's mission as if mission were a singular, monolithic function. Michael Fahey suggests that talk about the mission of the Church should not be inflated to cover all areas.[21] Instead it would be preferable to speak about the various tasks of the Church. In appropriating the concept of models for ecclesiology, Avery Dulles argues against reducing the Church to one model or image.[22] The Church is just as much herald as it is mystical community; institution as well as sacrament. A servant model outlines the importance of the "categories of love and service."

Since service is *one* its many tasks, a social mission is an integral and legitimate function of the Church. But it is only one function, not the sole function. This analytical division integrates as much as possible the social and political mission, because it does not *eo ipso* relegate this mission to an improper, substitutive, or unofficial service. Yet it does present a different perspective from contemporary political or liberation theology. Whereas the latter primarily seek to link the distinct elements of Christian faith, utopian vision, sociological analysis, and political action,[23] the analytical view focuses on the important question, how the Church's distinctive mission and identity can be kept alive in its mission

[19] For a criticism of the theology implied in this position, see Elisabeth Schüssler [Fiorenza], *Der vergessene Partner* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1964).

[20] See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973). Gutierrez' criticism of the distinction of planes within liberalism can be applied also to the ecclesiologies of Congar and Rahner. Nevertheless, he draws on Rahner's understanding of the Church as a sacrament and explicates further some implications of his conception of salvation history. See Karl Rahner, "History of the World and Salvation-History." *Theological Investigations* 5 (New York: Seabury, 1966).

[21] Fahey, "The Mission" 56–69. See the same emphasis upon a plurality of tasks in Jerome P. Theisen, *The Ultimate Church and the Promise of Salvation* (Collegeville, Minn.: St. John's University, 1976) 152–82.

[22] *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) 152–82.

[23] Gutierrez, *A Theology* 213–85.

of service.[24] Such a question implies that the Church has a distinctive mission and identity that can come to the force in a social mission but sometimes does not.

To distinguish between the sacramental or kerygmatic and the servant functions of the Church does not necessarily relegate the social mission to a secondary role, but it leaves it as an open possibility. Some, in fact, claim that the sacramental and kerygmatic are indeed the primary function, whereas the social is secondary: neither improper nor unofficial, but a proper secondary task that can become distorted if it becomes primary or neglects the primary.[25] Others stress the essential role of social mission but view it primarily as a precondition or a consequence of the Church's evangelization.[26]

Two questions can be raised. First, because this approach divides up the Church's many tasks, it does not sufficiently explore how they are interconnected. How should the sacramental relate to the social mission and vice versa? How should the social mission relate to the task of proclaiming the word and being a mystical *communio*? This approach is analytic, but the Church as a concrete phenomenon is holistic. Second, by distinguishing one task from another, this approach runs the risk of prioritizing one task as much more specifically related to the Church's mission. Service can easily be reduced to a secondary function.[27] Nevertheless, its emphasis upon the plurality of tasks does point to the significance of all tasks while raising the question of how the distinctive nature of the Church comes to the fore in its social mission.

It therefore sharply articulates an issue raised by political and liberation theology, but in need of further discussion. Both political and liberation theology have emphasized the significance of eschatology to interrelate evangelization and a social or political mission.[28] In reacting

[24] Dulles, *Models*. See also his "The Meaning of Faith Considered in Relationship to Justice," *The Faith That Does Justice*, ed. John C. Haughey (Woodstock Studies 2; New York: Paulist, 1977) 1–46.

[25] René Costé, e.g., admits that the Church should have a liberating political impact, but "only on the condition that it remain faithful to its specific mission." See his "Foi et société: Libération et salut," *Esprit et vie* 85 (1975) 577–88.

[26] See Coleman, "Mission of the Church" 138–40.

[27] Peter Wagner argues that the Church's primary function is individual reconciliation and salvation; the concern for social justice is secondary and derivative. See his *Latin American Theology: Radical or Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

[28] For the difference between political theology and Latin American liberation theology, cf. Francis Fiorenza, "Political Theology and Liberation Theology: An Inquiry into Their Fundamental Meaning," in *Liberation, Freedom and Revolution*, ed. Thomas E. McFadden (New York: Seabury, 1975) 3–29, and "Political Theology as Foundational Theology," *Proceedings CTSA* 32 (1977) 142–77, and "Political Theology: An Historical Analysis," *TD* 25 (1977) 317–34.

to individualized existential interpretations of Christian eschatology, political theology has emphasized that the proclamation of God's reign has social and political implications. This eschatological message should direct the Church's political mission primarily to negative criticism. On the basis of the transcendent images of Christian eschatology, the Church should criticize political ideologies and self-justifications,[29] but should offer no concrete, positive political proposals.[30]

Liberation theology also develops the implications of eschatology for Christology, ecclesiology, spirituality, and theological methodology.[31] However, it stresses the unity of salvation history and world history and thereby links eschatology and liberation. The Church not only uses eschatology as a source of critique but also strives for authentic anticipations and incomplete realizations within history of the eschatological reality.[32]

Since liberation theology links eschatology and human liberation, it—more so than political theology—has posed the challenge, how the Church's religious identity is related to its social and political mission. This is the neuralgic point of controversy between the defenders and critics of liberation theology.[33] To its critics, liberation theology is reductionistic: it has reduced the Christian message to social reform; it has turned the Church into a political group. To its defenders, liberation has shown how the full meaning of the gospel relates to social and political life.

The Challenge of Magisterial Statements

The magisterium has a long tradition of social teaching. Since Vatican II[34] it has especially grappled with the relation between the Church's

[29] See Johann B. Metz's *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury, 1980), where political theology criticizes middle-class religion (32–48) and seeks to retrieve an apocalyptic vision (169–79). Jürgen Moltmann's *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) emphasizes the Church's messianic mission. The option for socialism and the concept of symbiosis modify the earlier emphasis on the critique of political religion.

[30] See the criticisms by J. Bryan Hehir, "The Idea of a Political Theology," *Worldview* 14 (Jan. 1971) 5–7 and (Feb. 1971) 5–7.

[31] For a general survey, see José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) esp. 132–53; also Alfred T. Hennelly, *Theologies in Conflict: The Challenge of Juan Luis Segundo* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979).

[32] See Juan L. Segundo, *Masas y minorías* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1973) esp. 67–71.

[33] For the criticisms see Bonaventure Kloppenburg, *Temptations for the Theology of Liberation* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1974), and H. Lepargneur, "Théologies de la libération et théologie tout court," *NRT* 98 (1976) 109–25.

[34] See the introduction by Joseph Gremillion, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976) 1–38; also the commentaries on *Gaudium et spes*: Charles Moeller, *L'Elaboration du scheme xiii: L'Eglise dans le monde de ce temps* (Paris: Casterman, 1968), and Yves Congar, "The Role of the Church in the Modern World," in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 202–23.

religious identity and its social and political mission. The development after Vatican II has been described as zigzagging and even as backsliding. I do not agree. It seems to me that the magisterium is seeking to hold fast to two elements, the religious identity and the social-political mission, without reducing one to the other. It nuances the traditional contrast between evangelization and civilization and between religious purpose and social mission. At the same time, it challenges theologians to reflect more deeply on the Church's religious identity and its relation to a social and political mission.

The document *Justice in the World* issued by the International Synod of Bishops in 1971 is crucial, for it proclaimed: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."[35] The mission to transform the world is not secondary, improper, or derivative; it is constitutive of gospel proclamation. The document goes beyond previous affirmations; beyond justice and liberation as only prerequisites or consequences of the Church's mission.

Magisterial statements have since quoted this text, but they have not used the expression "constitutive" independently of the quoted text. The International Theological Commission's *Human Development and Christian Salvation* suggests that "constitutive" does not mean "essential" but "integral."[36] However, the formulations of *Justice in the World* are carefully nuanced. The document states that transformation of the world is in some way constitutive. It does not make it the sole or exclusive element of that preaching; but if that element is missing, a distortion of the gospel occurs. Insofar as the gospel message calls humans away from sin, it calls them to love and to practice justice.

Subsequent papal statements wrestle with the issue further. Paul VI opened the Third Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on September 27, 1974 with the challenge: "It will be necessary to define more accurately the relationship between evangelization properly so called and the human effort towards development for which the Church's help is rightly expected, even though this is not her specific task."[37] The Church has a

---

[35] *De justitia in mundo* (Vatican, 1971) 5; Eng. tr: in Gremillion, *The Gospel* 513–29, quotation at 514.

[36] Tr. Walter J. Burghardt, *Origins* 7, no. 20 (Nov. 3, 1977) 311. The text states: "it seems more accurate to interpret [*ratio constitutiva*] as meaning an integral part, not an essential part." See the papers of the commission in Karl Lehmann, ed., *Theologie der Befreiung* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1977), and the comments by Bonaventure Kloppenburg, *Christian Salvation and Human Progress* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1979) esp. 40–57.

[37] *Catholic Mind* 73, no. 1291 (March 1975) 6.

specific task, not identified nor contrasted with human development. Instead the Pope challenges the Synod to work out the relation between evangelization and development.

The Synod itself produced two documents. The first, *On Human Rights and Reconciliation*, affirmed that "the promotion of human rights is required by the gospel and is central to her ministry."[38] The second, *Evangelization of the Modern World*, not only asserts "the intimate connection between evangelization and liberation," but it explains that the "Church, in more faithfully fulfilling the work of evangelization, will announce the total salvation of humans or rather their complete liberation, and from now on will start to bring this about."[39] Furthermore, it explains that evangelization is interrelated with liberation, but salvation is more than the present liberation that it now begins to bring about. Such an approach is dialectical.

A similar dialectic appears in the statements of Paul VI and John Paul II. In his closing address to the 1974 Synod, Pope Paul VI draws up a balance sheet of the work done. Moreover, further study should show how human liberation is to be emphasized without overemphasis to the detriment of the essential meaning of evangelization.[40] His own document *Evangelization in the Modern World* both links and distinguishes evangelization and human liberation. They are linked in two basic ways. First, the gospel is not complete unless it interrelates the gospel with social human life. Second, specific bonds exist on the level of anthropology, theology, and the gospel. Anthropology: the human subject of evangelization is a concrete person living in social and political structures. Theology: redemption affects creation; to restore justice requires the combatting of injustice. Gospel: to proclaim love for humans includes proclaiming justice and peace for them.[41]

Paul VI also carefully distinguishes. Evangelization is not identical with human liberation, because some forms of liberation are not consistent with the gospel and because evangelization entails more than liberation. This "more" is developed in two ways. It is more encompassing insofar as the establishment of God's kingdom is much more universal

---

[38] Ibid. 50–51. The text argues that the relation between evangelization and social ministry is based upon human rights. Social ministry is "required" and is "central" to the Church's ministry.

[39] Ibid. 52–57, at 55. The document refers to "mutual relationship" and "intimate connection between evangelization and liberation." The Gospel contains "profound reasons" and "new incentives for a social ministry that should eliminate the unjust social and political structures flowing from sin."

[40] *Catholic Mind* 73, no. 1291 (March 1975) 58–64.

[41] *Evangelii nuntiandi* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1976) no. 31.

than any improved social or political order. It is much more profound insofar as it reaches the personal depths of humans and strikes at sin, the root of social and political injustice within human nature.[42] In Paul VI's dialectical view, the gospel is incomplete without liberation, just as liberation is incomplete without the gospel. When the Pope emphasizes the primacy of evangelization, he is pointing to an evangelization that includes liberation, transforms liberation, and is more than liberation. He does not retract the thesis that justice is a constitutive element of evangelization; he explains the profound interrelation between them.[43]

A different vision but similar dialectic is present in John Paul II's address to the Third General Assembly of Latin American bishops at Puebla and his encyclical letters *Redemptor hominis* to *Laborem exercens*,[44] even though his position on the relation between the Church's religious identity and its social mission is not always easy to interpret. He affirms that "evangelization is the essential mission, the distinctive vocation, and the deepest identity of the Church," at the same time that he quotes the Synod's affirmation that action for justice is a constitutive dimension of the Church's mission.[45] When he declares that the Church's mission is "religious and not social or political," he affirms in the very same sentence that the religious mission must touch upon all the dimensions of concrete human life.[46] Such dialectical affirmations make possible to classify him under the first (improper) as well as the third (unofficial) and fourth (partial but secondary) options described above.

Some have noted differences between John Paul II and his predecessors. For example, Joachim Giers argues that he does not develop *Mater et magistra's* correlation between economic and social progress but warns against overpowering economic progress. Moreover, he does not pick up the 1971 Synod's reference to the relation between the kingdom and earthly progress.[47] But these criticisms rest on a partial selection of his writings. *Laborem exercens*, for example, does relate human work not only to earthly progress but also to the development of the kingdom.[48]

John Paul II's contribution lies in his focus on the personalistic and

[42] Ibid., nos. 34 (kingdom of God) and 35 (human nature).
[43] Ibid., no. 9, explains that the kernel of evangelization is salvation, and salvation includes liberation from everything that oppresses humans, especially sin.
[44] John Paul II in Mexico. See *Addresses and Homilies* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C., 1979) 22–38 for Puebla address; *Redemptor hominis* and *Laborem exercens* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C., 1979 and 1981 respectively).
[45] Puebla Address 1, 7 and 3, 2.
[46] Ibid. 3, 2.
[47] "Der Weg der Kirche ist der Mensch: Sozialtheologische Aspekte des Enzyklika 'Redemptor hominis' Papst Johannes Pauls II," *MTZ* 30 (1979) 278–92.
[48] See no. 27.

the Christological dimensions of the social mission.[49] First, he especially develops Paul VI's anthropological link between evangelization and human liberation. Not only does evangelization deal with concrete human subjects living in specific sociopolitical situations, but at the heart of political and social distortion is a false image of human nature. Against it evangelization offers an image of human personhood rooted in Christology. Second, the originality of Christian liberation consists not only in its agreement with the gospel message but also in its disclosure of concrete personal attitudes: concern for the unity of the People of God, for the poor and needy, the inviolability of the individual. Third, personal individual conscience must be formed and sensitized to social and political justice.

John Paul II's difference from Paul VI should be explained not as a retreat but as a shift of emphasis or perspective in relating evangelization and social justice. Within the context of the individualism of modern European liberalism, Paul VI underscored the significance of power and political structures.[50] In linking evangelization with human liberation through theology and anthropology, he emphasized that redemption affects creation and therefore the Church must combat structures of injustice. In the context of Eastern European state communism,[51] John Paul II emphasizes the conversion of the heart. Both describe redemption as a renewal of creation or as a new creation, and both view this new creation as the overcoming of sin. Yet Paul VI used the image of new creation as a contrast image to concrete situations of injustice, whereas John Paul II refers more to the new creation in the hearts of humans.[52] Consequently *Dives in misericordia* underscores more what charity and mercy contribute to justice than what justice contributes to charity. Each Pontiff affirms the truths emphasized by the other. Both wrestle with the relation between religious identity and the Church's social-political mission.

[49] Cf. J. Brian Benestad, "The Political Vision of Pope John Paul II: Justice through Faith and Culture," *Communio* 8 (1981) 3–19; Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "Das neue politische Engagement der Kirche: Zur 'politischen Theologie' Johannes Pauls II," *Stimmen der Zeit* 198 (1980) 219–34; Otfried Höffe, "Die Menschenrechte als Prinzipien eines christlichen Humanismus: Zum sozialethischen Engagement von Johannes Pauls II," *Communio* 10 (1981) 97–106.

[50] Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C., 1971) no. 46: "That is why the need is felt to press from economics to politics. It is true that in the term 'politics' many confusions are possible and must be clarified, but each person feels that in the social and economic field, both national and international, the ultimate decision rests with political power." Note that no. 45 affirms that liberation begins with "interior freedom."

[51] Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Religion and Society: Legitimation, Rationalization or Cultural Heritage," *Concilium* 125 (1979) 24–32.

[52] *Redemptor hominis*, no. 8; Paul VI, *On Evangelization*, no. 31.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this survey of magisterial teaching. (1) All documents affirm that the commitment to social justice is integral to the Church's mission. All grapple with the interrelation between religious identity and social mission. I suggest that a basic continuity exists among the various magisterial documents and that this is apparent in their common resolution of the problem. The documents emphasize human dignity and love for humans as the link between evangelization and liberation. They refer to the transcendence of eschatology to show that evangelization should not be identified totally and exclusively with human progress. In this respect they stand in a long tradition of social doctrine. Ever since Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*, the Church's social teaching has stressed that the mutual rights and duties in political relationships should take into account the dignity of the human person and the significance of love within justice.[53] When the post-Vatican II documents appeal to human dignity and Christian love to interrelate evangelization and social mission, they develop this tradition.[54] At the same time, their emphasis on eschatology to differentiate human liberation and salvation contrasts with recent political and liberation theology. Political theology appeals to eschatology to justify the Church's critical political function, whereas liberation theology argues that if eschatological salvation perfects human liberation, then it is intrinsic to liberation. The magisterium, however, follows the line of *Lumen gentium* more than of *Gaudium et spes* on the function of Christian eschatology.[55]

2) The magisterial statements all point to an unresolved issue. John Paul II, for example, challenges theologians and bishops "to carry out serious reflection on the relationships and implications between evangelization and human advancement or liberation, taking into consideration, in such a vast and important field, what is specific about the Church's presence."[56] This challenge is framed by J. Bryan Hehir: "To determine precisely how justice can be described as properly belonging to the work of the Church and to describe precisely what is the style of a religiously-based social political ministry is one of the questions of the *Gaudium et*

[53] David Hollenbach, "Modern Catholic Teachings concerning Justice," in Haughey, *Faith That Does Justice* 207–31.

[54] See the profound development of the notion of human dignity as a basis for relation between evangelization and social mission by Richard McCormick, "Human Rights and the Mission of the Church," *Mission Trends* 4, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist, 1979) 37–50; reprinted from *TS* 37 (1976) 107–19.

[55] *Lumen gentium* emphasizes eschatology as the goal to which the People of God moves. *Gaudium et spes* illumines how eschatology provides a focus for the Church's vocation within the world and in tension to it. By locating the Church's ministry within an eschatological conception, it prepares the way for the critical function of eschatology in the post-Vatican II documents.

[56] Puebla Address 3, 1.

Spes decade."[57] And further; for to relate religious identity and social-political mission is not merely to search for a religious justification of the Church's involvement in social justice, but also to search for the very meaning of the Church.

This issue was well put by Paul Tillich. He observed that the Church has in fact contributed much to Western civilization. It has advanced culture, furthered peace, promoted social justice. Each benefit can be countered with a deficit. But both pros and cons would miss the point, "for a church that is nothing more than a benevolent socially useful group can be replaced by other groups not claiming to be churches: such a church has no justification for its existence."[58] The Church is more than a lobbying group, more than an agent of social welfare. It has a distinctive religious identity, and if it is to be church, its religious identity must come to the fore in its style of commitment to social justice and in its commitment to human liberation.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTIONS

To explore this issue, I shall (1) discuss various methodological issues involved in specifying the Church's religious identity, then (2) approach the issue not from eschatology as in political or liberation theology, nor from anthropology as in the magisterial statements, but from the nature of religion itself and specifically Christianity as a particular historical religion.

Inadequacy of Specific Difference

That the Church has a religious identity and a religious purpose is obvious. But what is religious? What is distinctively religious? These questions have been at the center of modern theology. In the nineteenth century Schleiermacher protested against the reduction of religion to metaphysics or morality, whereas in our century Barth has polemicized against Ritschl's reduction of faith to social praxis.[59] A constant concern of theology and religious studies has been "to describe certain basic factors which characterize a religious as distinct from a moral, an aesthetic, a scientific, or a political perspective."[60] Influenced by the Kantian critique of the knowability of what transcends experience, many theolo-

---

[57] "The Church in Mission: Canonical Implications," *Canon Law Society Proceedings* 37 (1975) 1–11, at 6.

[58] *Systematic Theology* 3 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1963) 166.

[59] Cf. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Response of Barth and Ritschl to Feuerbach," *Studies in Religion* 7 (1978) 149–66, "The Significance of *On the Glaubenslehre*," introduction to F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre* (AAR Texts and Translation 3: Chico, Cal.: Scholars, 1981) 1–32.

[60] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 93.

gians have suggested that the notion of "limit" points to the religious.[61] Features that express the limits of ordinary experience (e.g., experiences of finitude and contingency) or that point to what lies beyond experience are religious. In this vein, the Social Gospel and Ritschlianism have been criticized for reducing Christianity to morality, just as liberation theology is now criticized for reducing religious truth to social and political praxis.[62] However, the use of "limit" when combined with the methodological approach of the search for the specific difference can be misleading.

The search for the essence or distinctive purpose often defines that purpose in terms of a "specific difference." Yet a definition from the standpoint of specific difference often posits a partial element as the total meaning, and so fails to describe adequately a reality's meaning or identity. If Catholicism or Protestantism were defined primarily in terms of their specific differences, the number of sacraments or belief in the papacy would be the essential point as the specific difference; the common commitment to Christ would be overlooked. Or if Christianity were defined in its specific difference to other religions, the love of God would be secondary because other religions preach the love of God. If, taking Aristotle's definition of human person as rational animal, one were to describe human identity by the specific difference between humans and animals, then the focus would be on rationality alone. But if human nature is viewed exclusively or primarily as rationality, the meaning of human identity is distorted.

Similarly, if religious identity is defined precisely in its specific difference from the ethical, social, or political, the religious is distorted. As human nature is not a pure but an incarnate rationality, so religiosity manifests itself within the ethical, social, and political. If the religious is viewed in its specific difference from the ethical, social, and political, what is religious will cease to be a dimension of life. If the mission of the Church is defined precisely and exclusively in its specific difference from other groups, what is shared in common is overlooked. It could be stated that love of neighbor is only accidental to Christianity because other groups preach love. The Church's religious mission should be seen in the way its specificity comes to the fore precisely in its interrelation with other dimensions of human life. My methodic suggestion goes against some strains of contemporary theology, especially Protestant neo-orthodoxy that has been influenced by Kierkegaard's distinction of the religious from the aesthetic and ethical, a distinction that views the religious as

[61] Cf. Stephan Toulmin, *Reason in Ethics*(New York: Cambridge Univ., 1970) 202–21, and Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975) 27–148.

[62] Cf. Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind* (New York: Seabury, 1976) 210–16, 236–38. See my critical review essay in *RSR* 4 (1978) 237–40.

the suspension of the ethical. Recently Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics has criticized this position and shown the intersection of the beautiful and the transcendent, Likewise, Justus George Lawler has brilliantly shown the relation between the aesthetic and the religious in regard to literature.[63] The same task needs to be done for the relation between religious identity and social mission.

Intersecting Patterns

In his analysis of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein has advanced important reflections on the nature of essential definitions. Although I do not concur with all his criticism of essentialism and theories of the nature of language, theology can learn from his arguments about the fallacy of assuming a common denominator for a phenomenon. He uses a game to illustrate his point. We all know what a game is, but if asked to explain a game, we might be tempted to assume that there is one common denominator to all games, otherwise they would not be called games. He asks: Are games amusing? Think of chess and ticktacktoe. Competition? Think of patience. Winning and losing? In ball games yes, but not in throwing a ball against a wall. Skill? Compare tennis and ring-around-a-rosy. These examples show that a game cannot be defined by a simple common denominator, a specific difference, or a single particular characteristic. A complicated network of similarities overlaps and crisscrosses. At times there are overall similarities, at times similarities only in detail. What is present at one time is not present at another.[64]

As a complex phenomenon, religion demands such analysis. It cannot be reduced to a single denominator. A more complex crisscrossing is obvious if we ask what makes a particular act religious. Is there one common denominator or specific difference or is the phenomenon of religious actions determined by a complex set of crisscrossings? Persons can fast to lose weight or from religious motivation; the same act, but the motivation or purpose differs. Persons can accept invitations to a gourmet restaurant or to a Seder; here not so much the motivation as the context, tradition, and spirit determine the action. The crisscrossing between religion and work provides another example. A Benedictine can understand manual labor as religious and as constituting along with prayers his or her existence as a monk; here religion affirms work and gives it a religious quality. But in the case of a workaholic the religious tradition should bring out the relativity of all work. The action, work, is the same,

---

[63] Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: Eine theologische Ästhetik* 1 (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1961) 42–120, and Lawler, *Celestial Pantomime: Poetic Structures of Transcendence* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1979).

[64] *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1958) nos. 66 and 67.

but in one case religion affirms it, in another religion relativizes it.[65] In medieval times caring for the sick and poor was viewed as an act of charity and religion. Responding to the objection that almsgiving was not an act of charity but of religion, Aquinas argued that it could be considered both. He referred to the crisscrossing of virtues and the interrelating of formal and material aspects.[66]

This crisscrossing takes place on a much more basic level than motivation, context, and direction. It also takes place historically within the religious tradition. A meal can be secular or sacred. Washing can be a secular action or a sacrament. How the action is understood today depends upon how the religious tradition has incorporated several actions within its religious symbol systems and how it views the action in relation to God's transcendent presence within history. Individuals today stand within a religious history that determines how certain actions are understood. An action is therefore understood as religious not simply by a specific difference but by a complex of motivation and purpose, context and meaning, religious history and tradition. All come together to constitute the religious identity of human activity.

"Appresentation" of Religious Identity

"Appresentation" is a technical category used in Husserl's phenomenology to describe how a human subject can perceive the ego of another subject when only the body of the other is perceived but not the ego in its otherness as an ego. Referring to how the transcendent other is indirectly perceived, it involves several elements. (1) An apperceptive transfer or analogizing apperception takes place because the body of the other resembles my own body. (2) Indices reveal a unique pattern of changing but concordant or harmonious behavior. (3) Through an imaginative and associative presentation the other is appresented precisely as other.[67]

This concept has been taken out of its narrow use by Husserl and been broadened to describe the process of human communication and to refer to religious reality.[68] In all communicative action more is appresented

---

[65] Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Religious Beliefs and Praxis: Reflections on Catholic Theological Views of Work," *Concilium* 131 (1980) 81–89, and "Work and Critical Theology," in *A Matter of Dignity: Inquiries into the Humanization of Work*, ed. William J. Heisler and John Houck (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1977) 23–44.

[66] *Summa theologiae* 2–2, 32, a. 1. For a similar pattern of crisscrossing, see his discussion of religion: 2–2, 81, a. 1 and a. 4.

[67] *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Hague: Nijhoff, 1970) Sect. 49–62, pp. 106–50. See the analysis by Paul Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ., 1967) 123–30.

[68] Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977) 20–27.

than is directly perceived. Human action takes place within a broad horizon of possible meanings and diverse interpretations. If a particular meaning is to be communicated, a certain limitation of possible meanings takes place, just as an action is also interpreted in a broader context than is immediately evident.

The specification and the communication of the meaning of actions involves various elements. In every action I implicitly identify myself as a subject. Whenever I act, I understand myself in relation to the act in a variety of ways: as a friend, a teacher, a professional. The subject acting is one person, but there is a plurality of possible self-identifications, one of which is made in carrying out the particular activity. Likewise, the action itself can be represented in a specific way. Although it might be quite simply described, it is, at the same time open to more horizons of interpretation and understanding than are explicitly exhibited. In every action, therefore, there is not only a specific self-referential identification, but also a specific representation by which the act is understood in a specific way.

This analysis helps us understand the religious dimension in a variety of ways. Quite often it is claimed that the difference between social help as a secular or religious act lies in the motivation. Quite often religious actions are identified through some specific manifest characteristic. The phenomenological description above indicates that human actions are much more complex than motivation or what is manifest. I think an analogy can be drawn between appresentation and the perception of the religious identity of actions.[69] Just as we do not immediately and directly intuit the ego of another, but grasp the presence of the other through an association of concordant and similar behavior and through a grasp of all that is copresent in action, so we grasp acts to be religious to the extent that they are concordant with what we understand to be religion and to the extent that we grasp religious elements to be copresent in an action even though these are not directly ostensible. Yet this suggestion makes it even more imperative to define what is religious and how what is religious is understood in the Christian tradition.

THE QUEST FOR MEANING AND CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The division of theological disciplines has resulted in relating the mission of the Church to ecclesiology, but the nature of religion to fundamental theology or anthropology. Yet a need exists to link the nature of the Church's mission with the fundamental theological issue of

[69] My approach and interpretation uses first Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, then a more analogical and associate use of "appresentation" than the more essential and intuitive approach. For the emphasis on intuition, see Edward Farley's *Ecclesial Man: A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

the nature of religion. Unfortunately, definitions of religion are noto-
riously controversial.[70] Indequate are substantial definitions that identify
religion solely with particular beliefs, since religion is much more than
the affirmation of a certain belief.[71] Equally inadequate is a definition of
religion without any reference to beliefs.[72] Likewise, an experiential
definition, as Rudolf Otto's definition of religion as the experience of the
numinous or mysterious, is inadequate because it fails to cover the wide
range of religions and to encompass all that is entailed within religion.[73]

Although many today combine a functional and an interpretative
analysis of religion, it is important to bring the historical dimension to
the fore. A functional theory explains religion through its function of
integrating society: religion is the glue that bonds society. Religious
beliefs, basic values, and civil religion can exemplify this function. His-
torical religions, however, have not merely integrated societies but chal-
lenged them.[74] An interpretative theory explains how religion provides a
set of symbols that establish moods and motivations by formulating
conceptions of a general interpretation of existence.[75] Such a definition
appears too broad. Is any general interpretation of reality thereby reli-
gious? For these reasons it is important to combine a functional and
interpretative approach with reference to the articulation of meaning
within historical religions.

Since only concrete historical religions exist, the function and meaning
of a religion should be determined not by excluding but by taking into
account the historical self-reflection and praxis of the religion itself—for
us, the Christian religion.[76] An adequate methodological approach, there-

---

[70] David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, Jr. "Basic Terms in the Study of Religious Ethics,"
in *Religion and Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder (Garden City, N.Y.:
Doubleday, 1973) 35–77.

[71] Melford E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in Michael
Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock,
1966) 85–126, and Frederick J. Streng, "Studying Religion: Possibilities and Limitations of
Different Definitions," *JAAR* 40 (1972) 219–37.

[72] Peter Berger, "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions
of Religion," *JSSR* 13 (1974) 125–33, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philos-
ophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminister, 1976) 297–345.

[73] See the complexities as outlined in a field-theory approach, e.g., J. Milton Yinger, *The
Scientific Study of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

[74] Philip E. Hammond, "The Durkheim Integration Thesis Reexamined: A Study of
Religious Pluralism and Legal Institutions," in *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific
Study of Religion*, ed. Allan W. Eister (New York: Basic, 1974) 115–42, and François
Houtart, "Les variables qui affectent le role intégrateur de la religion," *Social Compass* 7
(1960) 21–38.

[75] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic, 1973).

[76] Trutz Rendtorff, *Gesellschaft ohne Religion: Theologische Aspekte einer sozialtheo-
retischen Kontroverse* (Munich: Piper, 1975).

fore, should not define it exclusively as a specific difference in isolation from other dimensions of life; it should investigate how what is religious comes to the fore in a complex series of overlappings that determine a person's self-identification and interpretation of reality within the history of a religious tradition. Likewise, to describe the function and meaning of religion from the starting point of a historical religion is to show the impact of particular religious beliefs upon a particular historical community, its self-understanding and its interpretation of reality. To illustrate the meaning and function of Christian religious identity, two particular beliefs will be examined in relation to the issue of religious identity and social mission.

First, *the belief in a transcendent God correlates with the emergence of human personhood*. A phenomenology of religion shows that the category of personhood originates with the religious experience of transcendence. Although the inviolable dignity of humans is often viewed as a humanist heritage or a moral imperative independent of religion, its roots lie historically within religious experience. The inviolability of persons is neither empirically demonstrable nor factually necessary. Individuals can be treated as objects and things. Relying upon the phenomenology of religion, Pannenberg argues that the experience of the ultimacy or nonmanipulatableness of power that makes a concrete claim upon humans is the basis of the human personification of reality and of the human self. Therefore "the concept of the personal is originally based on a religiously determined experience of reality, or of the powers governing it."[77] From a different perspective, Karl Rahner's transcendental analysis also shows how the experience of transcendence entails for humans the experience of themselves as persons.[78]

This correlation between the religious experience of transcendence and the awareness of self as a person illustrates our above-mentioned methodological principle that the interpretation of reality and self-identification go hand in hand.[79] The belief in God and the belief in the self as a unique, irreplaceable individual are not only correlative beliefs; they have a common historical root within the experience of reality as religious. Although many attempt today to establish the dignity of the human person not on a religious but on a humanistic or ethical basis, the historical religious roots of this dignity should not be forgotten. In regard to human dignity, religious beliefs and nonreligious attitudes crisscross. The religious belief in God as the ultimate power of the universe does not

---

[77] *Basic Questions in Theology* 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 201–33, at 230. See also *The Idea of God and Human Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 80–98.

[78] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 31–35.

[79] Rainer Döbert, *Systemtheorie und die Entwicklung religiöser Deutungssysteme* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

negate human personhood, as is claimed in a humanistic critique of religion, but radically affirms this personhood and historically grounds its emergence.

Therefore to proclaim the belief in a personal God is not the same as teaching that Dione is a moon of Saturn. Instead, the proclamation of God entails a vision of reality, and this vision has a function, for it determines how human and social life is understood and often structured.[80] The religious belief that a personal power grounds all power and force within the universe not only grounds the transcendence of the human person in the face of nature, but also over and against society. All societal and political organization of power should therefore be so structured that it mirrors the personal ground of the universe and safeguards the transcendence of the individual person.

Second, *the proclamation of Jesus as Wisdom and Power correlates with the social mission of the Church.* Christian evangelization proclaims not only the personal transcendence of God but also the presence of the divine Power and Wisdom in Jesus as a saving presence. Recent scholarship has shown how early Christians have used diverse traditions to interpret Jesus: final eschatological prophet, crucified and risen Lord, divine man, Logos (John's prologue), and "Power and Wisdom" (1 Cor 1:24). Yet amid this diversity an important development takes place. On the one hand, the historical Jesus preaches the coming kingdom of God. His exorcisms, healings, and miracles are signs of the breaking-in of the power of the kingdom. The eschatological wholeness of the kingdom is already proleptically anticipated.[81] At the same time, Jesus is interpreted with diverse strains of the wisdom tradition. Q views Jesus as an eschatological prophet who is Wisdom's envoy. In the Pauline tradition, a Wisdom Christology links God's plan of creation with Jesus; in Matthew, Jesus' life activity and wisdom are linked; in John's prologue, Jesus is understood as the incarnation of the Logos.[82]

It is important to note that Wisdom Christology became the most

---

[80] Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Joy and Pain as Paradigmatic for Language about God." *Concilium* 5 (1974) 67–80.

[81] Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Christology after Vatican II: A Shift of Horizons," *Ecumenist* 18 (1980) 81–89. The four trajectories developed by Helmut Koester form the grid of Edward Schillebeeckx' *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

[82] See Burton L. Mack, *Logos und Sophia: Untersuchung zur Weisheitstheologie im hellenistischen Judentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1973); for Q, see Felix Christ, *Jesus Sophia: Die Sophia-Christologie bei den Synoptikern* (Zurich: EVZ, 1972), and Paul Hoffmann, *Studien zur Theologie der Logienquelle* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972); for New Testament hymns, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Wisdom Mythology and the Christological Hymns of the New Testament," in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Wilken (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1975) 17–41.

developed trajectory in the postbiblical period. Although susceptible to isolation in schools, it was linked with strains of Stoic thought and with the universalism of the Logos speculation. Nicaea defined Christ to be more than an intermediary wisdom figure, power, or demiurge; he is consubstantial with the ultimate Power and Wisdom of the universe. This decision was a "dehellenization" because it went against the Hellenistic dualism between the world and the transcendent God.[83] The identification of Jesus as Logos and Wisdom with the ultimate power of the universe was important because it bridged creation and redemption. In the Old Testament, Wisdom is the personification of God and of God's activity in the world. God's creation has a purpose. Proverbial wisdom saw the world of appearances as pervaded with divine order that made human existence meaningful.[84] In Stoic thought, wisdom and logos pervaded all of creation; truth, righteousness, and justice were the incorporations of universal wisdom.[85] It is because this Christology bridged creation and redemption that the development of this Christological trajectory in the postbiblical period went hand in hand with the development of a social mission of the Church based on a theology of creation.

Here lies the profundity of the Christian vision. If the Church has as its task to evangelize and to proclaim Christ, then it proclaims that Christ "reveals the character of the power behind the world."[86] In proclaiming the meaning and power behind the world, the Church is concerned with the manifestation of that meaning and power in the world. The identification of Jesus as Logos and Wisdom with the ultimate Power and Justice of the universe is of significance for the meaning of Wisdom and Justice. For in the Christian vision the Jesus identified with Wisdom, Justice, and Logos is the historical Jesus with his preaching of the kingdom and with his miracles and healings as signs of the salvation and wholeness of

[83] See Friedo Ricken, "Das Homousios von Nikaia als Krisis des altchristlichen Platonismus," in *Zur Frühgeschichte der Christologie*, ed. Bernhard Welte (Freiburg: Herder, 1970) 74–99; Alois Grillmeier, "Hellenisierung-Judaisierung des Christentums als Deuteprinzipien der Geschichte des kirchlichen Dogmas," in his *Mit Ihm und in Ihm* (2nd ed; Freiburg: Herder, 1975) 423–488; for a discussion of Arian denial of Jesus as *sophos*, see Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism—A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 13–19.

[84] For ancient wisdom traditions, cf. Hartmut Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958). For the element of protest, see James L. Crenshaw, "The Human Dilemma and the Literature of Dissent," in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 235–58; F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *JNES* 21 (1962) 129–39.

[85] Cf. H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom: Studies in the Hypostatization of Divine Qualities and Functions in the Near East* (Lund: Ohlssons, 1947).

[86] James Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 162–250, at 190.

this kingdom. Such a vision radically revises traditional Hellenistic dualism and it alters an understanding of the universe as a structured order. The meaning of the Wisdom and Logos underlying the universe now becomes manifest in the saving actions and proclamation of Jesus. This linkage of the meaning of the historical Jesus with the meaning of the universe provides the link between the Church's proclamation and its social mission.

VISION AND PRAXIS

The question remains: Does my reference to the interpretative and functional nature of religion and to the combination of kingdom and wisdom traditions in Christianity provide some resolution to the issue of the relation between the Church's identity and its social or political ministry? Does it help resolve the alternatives proposed: When is a political or social ministry proper or improper, permanent or substitutional, official or unofficial, constitutive or secondary? The result of my reflections is that a basic rule of praxis can be proposed. The more the social or political ministry of the Church is related to Christianity's interpretative function as a religion to exhibit and to proclaim Jesus as the Power and Wisdom of the universe, the more constitutive, essential, and distinctive this ministry is.

This guideline is proposed in the context of the previous methodological considerations. The religious does not exist in isolation from other dimensions of reality; it crisscrosses them through its interpretative function and specification of the action, reality, and the self. The more an action can be integrated within a Christian's consciousness of God, or more specifically within the Christian proclamation of the identity of God's Logos with Jesus in his life activity, the more an action or ministry properly and distinctively belongs to the Church. Not every action can be so integrated, and some actions can be more integrated than others. The criterion is not simply the meaningfulness or even the ultimacy of an action, but the possibility of its integration within that meaning present in the Church's understanding of the significance of Jesus and his life praxis.[87]

Two examples can illustrate my proposal. (1) Why has education been understood as central to the Church's ministry?[88] Because education is

---

[87] See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Critical Social Theory and Christology," *Proceedings CTSA* 30 (1975) 63–110.

[88] Although some have criticized Ernesto Cardenal's appointment as minister of education in Nicaragua as an improper role for a priest, the work of Alcuin (a religious and a deacon) in Charlemagne's administration has been viewed as a symbol of the Church's positive influence on Western civilization. Could not Cardenal's presence become a symbol of the Church's concern for society?

more than professional training. It deals with the meaning of human life and as such raises questions of ultimacy and value. A crisscrossing takes place between a holistic education and the interpretative function of Christian proclamation. Although it might be possible to distinguish education and religion formally, they are intimately interrelated. If education deals with the meaning of life, it must raise questions about the religious dimensions of life. If Christianity proclaims Christ as Logos and Wisdom, it must spell out this Wisdom for all dimensions of life. The Church's ministry in education is therefore not substitutional. Because of the crisscrossing among religion, meaning, and education, more can be appresented in education than the merely educational. This occurs even when a religious person teaches mathematics or science in a religiously affiliated school. The action in itself might appear purely technical; yet because it is part of an overall ministry, it participates in the religious dimension.

2) Does the Church have a proper mission in conducting hospitals?[89] Although sin and disease are no longer considered interrelated as in antiquity, persons in serious illness do confront the limits of human existence. Today the hospital is the context for the experience of birth, serious illness, and often death. These experiences are not purely medical experiences but are crisscrossed with a religious dimension. The Church, therefore, does have a proper mission, not only because the healing that takes place in hospitals can exhibit the love and healing of Jesus, but also because it can offer a comprehensiveness of health care.[90] It can deal with the crisscrossing of the medical, existential, and religious dimensions of serious illness.

Education and health care, therefore, belong intrinsically to the Church's mission, not simply because as social ministries they are presuppositions of the Church's evangelization or consequences of the Church's charity, but because their proper and fullest execution crisscrosses with the religion aspects of life. According to our guideline, the more a form of education and of health care does that, the more the Church has a proper mission in that area. But what of the Church's action on behalf of justice or its concern for the poor and oppressed? Does my proposed guideline help us to understand political ministry? Does my guideline—the more the Church's ministry to the world involves dimensions of life in which questions of ultimacy and transcendence as

<hr />

[89] See the important reflections of Walter J. Burghardt, "Towards a Theology of the Health Apostolate," *Hospital Progress* 52, no. 9 (September 1971) 66–71.

[90] Cf. Karel Dobbelaere, Jan Lauwers, and Mieke Ghesquiere-Walkens, "Sécularisation et humanisation dans les institutions hospitalières chrétiennes," *Social Compass* 20 (1974) 553–68.

historically articulated in Christianity emerge, the more intrinsic that action is to the Church's religious identity—help us to understand how social and political action on behalf of justice belongs to the proper mission of the Church? Does it help us to understand the religious identity within a political ministry?

FROM SOCIAL TO POLITICAL MINISTRY

The necessity and religious identity of a political ministry does indeed flow from my guideline. It finds its rationale first within the nature of the political itself and the very intersecting of religious and political dimensions of life. In addition, the historical tradition of the Church's social ministry shows this social ministry intersected with a political ministry because of the development of social ministry and the structure of society, a development that at first was parallel to the development in Christology.

The Nature of the Political

Many assume that contemporary society is secularized because today political authority does not rest upon explicit religious legitimations. Such an assumption simplifies the relation between the religious and the political.[91] Societies do not operate in a vacuum. Beneath social and institutional interaction, there are substantial and latent aspects of social reality. Widely shared commitments, commonly held values, and generalized world views are the binding forces of social reality. Without such shared commitments and symbols a society would not exist, for it would lack cohesiveness. Modern societies are consequently much less secular than they appear. The notions of civil religion, public religion, and even the more individualized invisible religion all point to the latent quasi-religious forces underlying much of a society's political cohesiveness and decision making. A positivistic interpretation of legislation based upon the liberal conception of the separation of church and state or the distinction between religion and society overlooks some fundamental interrelationships.

For this reason, in distinction to Metz, I have developed elsewhere a political theology with a bipolar rather than a merely critical function.[92] The first task of a political theology or of a political ministry would be to

---

[91] Cf. Richard K. Fenn, *Toward a Theory of Secularization* (Storrs, Conn.: SSSR 1978). For America see Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), and *The Broken Covenant* (New York: Seabury, 1975); Russel E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, ed., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). See also John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ., 1979).

[92] See my "Political Theology as Foundational Theology," *Proceedings CTSA* 32 (1977) 142-77, and "Religion und Politik," in Karl Rahner, ed., *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft* 27 (Freiburg: Herder, 1982).

uncover the latent values and symbols that undergird a particular society. These values and symbols must be confronted with the Christian vision, but such a confrontation cannot simply be that of crisis or judgment. On the one hand, insofar as a political society tends to absolutize particular national beliefs, values, and symbols into a political religion, it can absolutize itself and place itself in opposition to the Christian eschatological vision. On the other hand, insofar as particular beliefs and values of a society can serve as standards by which the *de facto* praxis of a society or nation is fostered or criticized, they provide significant cultural resources for the Church in its commitment to charity and justice as these intersect with the Christian vision. Such a political theology should be at the center of the Church's political ministry. The Church is acting properly as church when its proclamation confronts the operative values and visions of a society. The danger for the Church's political ministry is not that it will be too confrontative; the danger is that, as a member of society, the Church itself might lose sight of the applicability of its very own vision. Hence the need for a self-reflective and reconstructive political theology.

The Political Praxis of Social Ministry

Second, the Church's religious identity entails a political ministry because of the development of this religious identity and the parallel development of the interrelation between the Church's social ministry and the political structures of society. An adequate theological methodology should take into account this parallel development and intertwinement. Catholic Christology proceeds by reconstructing how the impact of Jesus was successively interpreted by the Church throughout the centuries in order to relate this understanding to the contemporary situation. In Christology, not just its very first stages or the historical reconstruction of the preaching of Jesus but the full conciliar development of a Wisdom and Logos Christology became normative for Christianity. Likewise, the full growth and development of social ministry that went parallel to the Christological development, and not just the first or initial endeavors, should be taken as normative for an adequate understanding of social ministry.

From the very beginning the care of the needy and of the poor was central to Christianity.[93] The oblations collected at Eucharistic celebrations were distributed to the poor under the organized supervision of the bishop. Yet the history of Christianity shows that at those points of time where society became so structured that it took over much of this social

[93] Still indispensable for its comprehensiveness is Georg Ratzinger, *Geschichte der kirchlichen Armenpflege* (2nd ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1884).

activity, the Church's social ministry increasingly became a political ministry insofar as the Church became concerned as to how the state fulfilled the social ministry. This interaction is present in the fourth century, the Middle Ages, and modern times.

This development indicates how the social ministry entailed a political ministry. For example, the economic crisis of the third century and Diocletian's tax policies led to the impoverishment of broad groups. Constantine, consequently, integrated the Church's care for the poor within the imperial system. This increased episcopal responsibilities for the poor and helpless. Bishops are increasingly described as patrons of the poor and helpless, but they do not limit their roles to patronage of the poor. They engage in political criticism; they criticize the effects of the Empire's tax policies on the poor—see, for example, Basil's *Epistle 110* and Theodoret's *Epistle 23*.[94] A similar intertwinement between social ministry and political organization took place in medieval times. Although at the turn of our century the medieval Catholic practice of almsgiving was criticized as individualistic, arbitrary, and nonsystemic,[95] this criticism overlooked, as Catholic scholars have shown, the intertwinement between the Catholic Church and the cities. From the twelfth century onward, the cities passed legislation to provide for the needy and established hospitals for the poor, the sick, and abandoned children.[96] Church leadership and even theological faculties often praised or criticized political legislation when it concerned matters of social justice.[97] Moreover, the social legislation of the modern state was not in contrast to, but a further development of, the civic responsibilities in the social area.[98] In this same tradition the Council of Trent urged bishops ex officio to supervise the social practices of various cities and provinces. Diocesan and provincial synods were given the task of watching over local economic, civic, and political legislation.[99] These synods emphasized the

[94] See Wilhelm Schneemelcher, "Der diakonische Dienst in der alten Kirche," in *Das diakonische Amt der Kirche*, ed. Hubert Krimm (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962) 61–105, and Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, "Christentum und Eigentum," *ZEE* 16 (1972) 34–49.

[95] See Gerhard Uhlhorn, *Die christliche Liebestätigkeit* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Gundert, 1895), and the Catholic response by Johann Nepomuk Foerst, *Das Almosen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1909).

[96] Cf. Ratzinger, *Geschichte* 347–60.

[97] Cf. Franz Ehrle, "Die Armenordnung von Nürnberg (1522) und von Ypern (1525)," *HJ* 9 (1888) 450–79, and Otto Winckelmann, "Die Armenordnungen von Nürnberg, Kitzingen, Regensburg und Ypern," *ARG* (1912-13) 242–80.

[98] See Foerst, *Almosen* 146:53. Lotte Koch, *Wandlungen der Wohlfahrtsplege im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Erlangen: Univ. Erlangen, 1933), has the contrary thesis. Although it is much quoted in German literature, no copy exists in U.S. libraries.

[99] See Council of Trent, Session 22, *De reform.*, c. 8, in Ratzinger, *Geschichte* 464; see also ibid. 469–72 for Council of Cologne in 1536.

obligation of episcopal surveillance of how the states or cities carried out the care for the needy and unemployed through institutions and legislation. In the nineteenth century this interrelation between social mission and political legislation was furthered insofar as Catholic social teachings (e.g., *Rerum novarum*) focused not just on the welfare of those outside the work situation but also those within it.

This intertwinement of social and political mission has its basis in the correspondence between social evolution and religious virtues. A historical analysis shows how in archaic societies social help was basically a matter of mutual exchange, common reciprocrity between those in reversible situations. More structured societies with their division of labor and increased specialization made contractual help increasingly dominant. Such societies demanded charity and liberality of the more fortunate to the less fortunate. In more complex societies social help becomes increasingly a matter of political-social legislation.[100] In them the need emerges for social legislation to be based on principles of justice and fairness rather than power or influence.

Within the Christian tradition such societal complexity led to episcopal criticism of the Roman Empire's exploitive tax policies, the local ordinary's concern for adequate social legislation by the cities, and papal concern for the effects of the industrial revolution. Such societal complexity may mean that the Church will increasingly be called upon to take an advocacy stance in behalf of the helpless and voiceless. Increasingly, organizations such as Network and the U.S. Catholic Conference may take on roles for the sake of goals previously achieved through diaconal organizations. Throughout its history the Church's political ministry arose out of its social ministry for the poor and oppressed. Its obligation to speak out on social and political issues does not stem from a "better knowledge" of economic problems (e.g., how to have growth without excessive inflation) but from its option for those in misfortune. Its religious vision does not create new reasons but crisscrosses with the ethical reasons of justice.[101] Its religious vision gives ultimacy to justice over political solutions of expediency, interest groups, and power blocks.[102]

[100] Cf. Niklas Luhman, "Formen des Helfens im Wandel gesellschaftlicher Bedingungen," in *Gesellschaftliche Perspektiven der Sozialarbeit*, ed. Hans-Uwe Otto and Siegfried Schneider (Berlin: Neuwied, 1973) 21–42. Yet note how Cajetan interpreted almsgiving not only in terms of charity but of justice: Joachim Giers, *Gerechtigkeit und Liebe: Die Grundpfeiler gesellschaftlicher Ordnung in der Sozialethik des Kardinals Cajetan* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1941).

[101] The criticism of political theology that it cannot produce theological solutions to economic and social problems (e.g., Lehmann, *Theologie* 9–44) overlooks how political decisions are often based not on rational or ethical principles but on political power interests. See Edward C. Banfield, *Political Influence* (New York: Free Press, 1961).

[102] John Paul II, in his Puebla Address 3, 3, emphasizes the Church's commitment to the needy in view of "the interplay of power and political systems."

In conclusion, the above arguments for a political ministry of the Church can be compared with Paul Ramsey's proposal that the Church primarily has a ministry of criticism and at most should limit itself to middle axioms between theory and praxis.[103] My proposal is, on the one hand, more fundamental insofar as it has emphasized that Christianity as a religion provides an interpretation of human reality that intersects with other interpretations. The Church's political ministry is much more fundamental than middle axioms because it is concerned with symbols, vision, and values. But at the same time, because of the crisscrossing nature of religion, a political ministry can be much more concrete. Since the religious intersects with the social, political, and ethical, the Church has the obligation to take concrete stances, be they of criticism or of advocacy. Such criticism or advocacy need not be based solely on theological warrants but can be based on rational and ethical grounds that are illumined or intersected by its religious vision. The proposed guideline of this essay did not raise the issue of appropriate strategy. What is appropriate for an episcopal conference or a specific organization might not be appropriate for a sermon or a parish. Voluntary groups or ecclesial agencies might have different roles than bishops. Such strategic issues need deliberate and prudent resolution for a church that is aware how its religious identity demands a social and political ministry.[104]

In addressing this fundamental issue, I have argued that the religious should not be defined in isolation from other dimensions of life, but in its pattern of intersecting them. The nature of religion—to offer an interpretation of reality, self, and action—as well as the Christian vision that identifies the saving life praxis of Jesus with the Wisdom, Logos, and Justice underlying creation provide the theological foundation for the Church's religious identity in its social mission. The more an action or a ministry can be integrated into the vision and meaning historically articulated by Christianity, the more the ministry is proper to and constitutive of Christian evangelization and the Church's mission.

[103] *Who Speaks for the Church?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967). For a critique of Ramsey's limitation to theological warrants, see Charles E. Curran, *Politics, Medicine and Christian Ethics: A Dialogue with Paul Ramsey* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

[104] See the judicious comments of George G. Higgins, "The Problems in Preaching: Politics/What Place in the Church?" *Origins* 2, no. 13 (Sept. 21, 1972) 207, 212–14, and Walter J. Burghardt, "Preaching the Just Word," *Liturgy and Social Justice*, ed. Mark Searle (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980) 36–52.