

MÖHLER, SCHLEIERMACHER, AND THE ROOTS OF COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY

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COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY is a frequent and important topic in current theological discussion. It has been strongly promoted in recent years by a variety of voices including the Catholic hierarchy.¹ It has been hailed as expressing the most deeply shared views of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.² Communion ecclesiology is seen as having significant potential for fostering ecumenical progress not only among Catholics and Orthodox but with Protestants as well.³

Yet many theologians confess that they have little notion of what communion ecclesiology is. And even the slightest investigation of communion ecclesiology quickly reveals that it exists in several different versions. Like the concept of "the Church," communion ecclesiology is a diverse and many-layered idea whose historical roots are complex.

¹ See, e.g., "The Final Report of the Extraordinary Synod of 1985," which calls communion ecclesiology "the central and fundamental idea of the council's documents," *Origins* 15 (December 19, 1985) 444–50, at 448. See also John Paul II's *Christifideles laici* in which he draws upon communion ecclesiology, *Origins* 18 (February 9, 1989) 561–95; and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Some Aspects of the Church Understood as a Communion," *Origins* 22 (June 25, 1992) 108–12. When issuing the latter document, Cardinal Ratzinger said of communion ecclesiology that "ultimately there is only one basic ecclesiology" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition [June 17, 1992] 1). For a recent useful study of the Church as a communion, see Michael G. Lawler and Thomas J. Shanahan, *Church: A Spirited Community* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995); also my analysis of the Vatican's use of this concept in "Communion Ecclesiology and the Silencing of Boff," *America* 187 (September 10, 1992) 139–43.

² The best theological representative of a Catholic rendering of communion ecclesiology is Jean-Marie Tillard, *Eglise d'Eglises: L'ecclésiologie de communion* (Paris: Cerf, 1987). The English translation, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. De Peaux (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992) is seriously defective and is currently being reworked. A representative Orthodox approach to communion ecclesiology can be found in John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's, 1985). For a study that brings together viewpoints of both East and West, see Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993).

³ See, e.g., the joint response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity to the Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, prepared by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, *Origins* 17 (November 19, 1987) 401–16; also the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's response to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission's "Salvation and the Church" in which communion ecclesiology is explicitly stated as an area that needs further exploration, *Origins* 18 (December 15, 1988) 429–34. See also the relatively inclusive use of the word "communion" in Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*.

This article aims to examine one historical instantiation of communion ecclesiology, that of Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838) as expressed in his *Die Einheit in der Kirche* (1825). My study is partly occasioned by Peter C. Erb's recent translation of this work, its first publication in English.⁴ Möhler's writings, especially *Unity in the Church*, have had significant influence on Roman Catholic versions of communion ecclesiology. Although Möhler is not cited in the observations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Some Aspects of the Church Understood as a Communion," the selection and organization of topics, as well as the document's argument, show deep similarities with his thought. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation as well as a strong promoter of communion ecclesiology in his own writings, has referred to Möhler as "the great reviver of Catholic theology after the ravages of the Enlightenment."⁵ The influence of Möhler can also be traced on various European versions of communion ecclesiology, such as those developed by Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and Walter Kasper.

Positions are often best delineated by comparing and contrasting them with others. As Erb notes in the introduction to his translation of *Unity in the Church*, the volume can clearly be read as a conversation with the Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher.⁶ I have read Möhler's *Unity in the Church* against the background of Schleiermacher's *On Religion*⁷ and *The Christian Faith*⁸ in order to explore the roots of contemporary Western versions of communion ecclesiology.⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) is but one of many figures who

⁴ Johann Adam Möhler, *Unity in the Church or The Principle of Catholicism Presented in the Spirit of the Church Fathers of the First Three Centuries*, ed. and trans. with an introduction, addenda, and appendices by Peter C. Erb (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1996); the German original was first published at Mainz in 1825.

⁵ *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 4; the German original dates from 1987.

⁶ "That the *Unity* can be read as a conversation with the Protestant theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and is at points influenced by Idealist philosophers such as F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854) is obvious, but it is equally true that Möhler's book was not written aside from his knowledge of such earlier Catholic ecclesiologists as Englebert Klüpfel (1733–1811) and Patriz Benedict Zimmer (1752–1820), the latter of whom he quotes directly, and the ongoing discussions around the career of Ignaz Heinrich von Wessenberg (1774–1860) who with his mentor Karl Theodor von Dahlberg (1744–1817) represented a Catholicism that fully appropriated Enlightenment ideals" (Erb's Introduction, in Möhler's *Unity in the Church* 19).

⁷ *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*, 3rd edition (Berlin, 1821); earlier editions appeared in 1799 and 1806; a fourth edition in 1831 contained only minor corrections. Here I use *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Critics*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Richmond: John Knox, 1969).

⁸ I cite *The Christian Faith*, 2 vols., ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: Harper and Row, 1963 [original English translation in one volume, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928]); the German original was published in 1821–22 and revised in 1830.

⁹ Möhler's simultaneous regard for and distance from the thought of Schleiermacher is well documented; see Michael Himes, "A Great Theologian of Our Time: Möhler on

influenced Möhler and to whom he was responding.¹⁰ Because of the seminal nature of Schleiermacher's thought for contemporary theology, his influence was notably significant.¹¹ Although Möhler later distanced himself from *Unity in the Church*, his first book, many of its concerns remained important in his work throughout his short life.¹²

To explore *Unity in the Church* in dialogue with Schleiermacher helps to place it in its historical context as a response, at least in part, to the many challenges of the Enlightenment and its aftermath.¹³ Such an exploration highlights how Möhler's thought is both linked with and distinct from Schleiermacher's classic Protestant understanding of the Church. One link between the two is the articulation of their ecclesiologies over against what they characterize as the medieval, juridical view. Central to communion ecclesiology both for Schleiermacher as well as for Luther is a focus on the Church as a fellowship of believers united through their relationship with God in a way that emphasizes the necessary but secondary status of institutional structures. If this focus were the sole determining factor in identifying communion ecclesiology, Schleiermacher's approach to the Church would serve as a prototype.

Such would be the case if communion ecclesiology could be defined adequately in a simple abstract sentence. But concretely Möhler's account of what we now call communion ecclesiology stands in contrast to Schleiermacher's approach on several key points. Despite Möhler's many similarities to Schleiermacher, there remains a chasm that separates the two. Both in those similarities and that chasm are to be found the roots of contemporary Western versions of communion ecclesiology.

Schleiermacher," *Heythrop Journal* 37 (1996) 24–46; Hervé Savon, *Johann Adam Möhler: The Father of Modern Theology*, trans. Charles McGrath (New York: Paulist, 1966) 13–17, 21–22; and Erb's Introduction, in Möhler's *Unity in the Church* 49–59, 61–66.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Professor Bradford E. Hinze of Marquette University for clarifying this point for me. In addition to the persons mentioned above in n. 6, also influential were the Protestant August Neander, a student of Schleiermacher, and the Catholics Michael Sailer and Johann Sebastian von Drey.

¹¹ Certain emphases in Schleiermacher's *On Religion* have points of similarity with Tillich's "new being," Otto's "idea of the holy," Maslow's "peak-experiences," Ricoeur's "second naïveté," Rahner's *Vorgriff* and "anonymous theist," Boff's "ecclesio-genesis," and other concepts associated with later theologians.

¹² Möhler, who died at the age of 42, was 29 when *Unity in the Church* appeared. For Möhler's repudiation of the work, see Erb's Introduction 2–3, 56–61.

¹³ Two points demonstrated by Hinze in his comparison of Schleiermacher and Johann Sebastian von Drey can apply as well to this comparison of Schleiermacher and Möhler: first, both scholars shared the same milieu so deeply that, for all of their differences, they reflected many profound similarities in their fundamental presuppositions; second, these scholars can best be read as grappling with issues raised by modernity; see Bradford E. Hinze, *Narrating History, Developing Doctrine: Friederich Schleiermacher and Johann Sebastian Drey* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993).

SCHLEIERMACHER'S *ON RELIGION*

The major comparison here involves reading *Unity in the Church* against the background of Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*. In this first section I wish to preempt potential objections that his *On Religion* presents insurmountable obstacles to the validity of such a comparison. Does *On Religion*, as it is often characterized,¹⁴ subvert any positive connections that might otherwise be asserted between Schleiermacher and communion ecclesiology? Does it reveal Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion as incompatible with an ecclesiology that demands a benign relationship between religious experience and its organized forms of expression? Does Schleiermacher focus too much on feeling to the detriment of dogma? Is he anti-institutional? Does he focus too much on the individual to the neglect of community?

I grant that the first edition of *On Religion* (1799) can be read in this way. But it can also be read more generously as at times rhetorically overstating Schleiermacher's real positions by granting too much to its audience's prejudices in order to gain a hearing. A good deal of ambiguity does in fact exist in *On Religion* in regard to the relationship between religious experience and the dogmas and rituals that express them. A similar ambiguity concerns the relationship between the true Church and the Church institution. In some passages dogmas and institutional elements are disparaged, virtually mocked. In other passages such elements are grudgingly admitted as necessary; in still other passages they are described as neutral or even relatively positive.

Much of this ambiguity is due to the difference in editions from 1799 to 1806 to 1821. I accept the basic stance of both Schleiermacher and of translator Terrence Tice that the 1821 edition for the most part simply represents clarifications of Schleiermacher's thought since 1799. The most important clarifications deal with Schleiermacher's position on the relative worth of institutional elements when compared with the more basic religious experience. In 1799, to the delight of his Romantic audience, he fired away with full guns at dogmas and structures. By 1821, with a wider audience in mind, he stressed more the necessity and value of these derivative elements of religion, although clearly he still held that they pale greatly in comparison with the inner essence of religion. However, he also held that "the church is indispensable for every religious man, since it comprises his fellowship with all the faithful."¹⁵

The ecclesiology present in *On Religion* contains significant elements that to some degree are compatible with communion ecclesiol-

¹⁴ For a discussion of how Schleiermacher has sometimes been presented simplistically as a Romantic, see Tice's Introduction, in *On Religion* 21–30; for an example of misrepresenting Schleiermacher as one who reduces all religion to feeling understood simply as affections, see Savon, *Johann Adam Möhler* 13–17.

¹⁵ *On Religion* 375.

ogy. In that text Schleiermacher held that the true Church is a society composed of people who have achieved universal consciousness through their piety. This society is not limited to any one religion or denomination, but cuts across all faiths and worldviews. It is "an exalted community of religious souls," an "academy of priests," who sustain themselves through "spiritual communion."¹⁶ It is "that one indivisible communion of saints which embraces all religions and without which no man can prosper." This spiritual communion includes "being in closest communion with the highest."¹⁷

By the 1821 edition, Schleiermacher had developed positive strategies for talking about institutional ecclesial associations in relation to the true Church. He saw them as "mediating institutions" through which the true Church comes in contact with the profane world.¹⁸ They also form the matrix out of which the true Church arises. Schleiermacher saw the true Church as being most fully manifested in the gathering of the disciples in the Upper Room, "praising God and honoring their Lord"; he held that "this special way of being church has never been completely submerged in the other but continually arises anew within it."¹⁹ He called this process the "palingenesis" of the Church, its continually being born again amid mediating structures. Schleiermacher laments the impoverishment that occurs when members of the true Church withdraw from communal expressions of piety, and even remarked that "the whole occasion of public worship comes to be seen as the joint action of a single organism when we think of family worship as something assimilated to it and continuous with it."²⁰ Schleiermacher's explicit support for a lay-clergy distinction as well as his work for ecumenical unity further reflect some of his institutional concerns.

SCHLEIERMACHER'S *THE CHRISTIAN FAITH*

In its recognition of the necessity and value of dogmas and structures and in its development of a positive ecclesiology, *The Christian Faith* is much less ambiguous than *On Religion*. In this section I draw upon *The Christian Faith* to highlight those dimensions of Schleiermacher's approach to the Church that overlap with communion ecclesiology.

The paste that holds Schleiermacher's ecclesiology together in this work is his consistent concern for unity in the Church. I would go so far as to say that Schleiermacher's work *The Christian Faith* might conceivably have been given the same title as Möhler's book: *Unity in the Church*. Ecclesiology provides the starting point and the framework for the whole of Schleiermacher's theology, with the Church's unity providing one of its most pervasive themes. Schleiermacher found in the Church a concrete historical alternative to beginning his theology with

¹⁶ Ibid. 242.

¹⁸ Ibid. 233.

²⁰ Ibid. 252.

¹⁷ Ibid. 322, 272.

¹⁹ Ibid. 254.

abstract a priori principles.²¹ In his discussions of Church unity, he highlighted many themes that overlap with concerns that are today associated with communion ecclesiology. I list these in the following eight italicized points:

1. *The Church is first and foremost a fellowship or communion with God through Jesus and the Spirit that is shared among Christians.* If the sole defining factor in what constitutes a communion ecclesiology were going beyond an overly institutional view of the Church to a focus on spiritual fellowship while still valuing institutional structures, then Schleiermacher could be seen as offering a communion ecclesiology par excellence.²²

2. *The Church is the corporate life brought about by Jesus; its origins must be grasped historically and dynamically. Its foundation lies in a religious intimacy between Jesus and his followers that grows organically through the spread of like relationships.* Schleiermacher identified religious self-consciousness, which is also a consciousness of God, as the basis of religion. This consciousness or piety leads naturally to fellowship or communion which in the case of Christianity is the Church. In *On Religion* Schleiermacher lingered on the topic of intimacy, discussing how religious consciousness dissolves the artificial boundaries of our personalities and immerses ourselves within the feeling of comradeship.²³ In *The Christian Faith* he described Christian redemption as arising through fellowship with Jesus, and the emergence of the Church as a necessary extension of such fellowship.²⁴

3. *The Church is an intrinsic dimension of revelation and not an added extra.* Schleiermacher argued that whether in the modern era or in the time of Christ, Christian redemption takes place always and necessarily within the context of a fellowship. It is not enough to say only that individuals first have their own personal transforming experiences and then come together to form a fellowship. Christ's ministry took place within a context in which a collective need for redemption and its expectation already existed. Moreover, each personal Christian experience takes place within and is conditioned by a fellowship that took form with Christ's first public appearance. The resulting organization finds its roots in this initial self-organizing principle.²⁵

4. *The Lord's Supper is the highest representation of church unity, achieving fellowship with Christ and fellowship among believers. The most apt image for describing the Church is that of the body of Christ.* Although he explicitly rejected the Roman Catholic view that stresses

²¹ Schleiermacher has often been criticized for starting with a philosophy of religion that predetermines the whole of his theology; see Hinze, *Narrating History* 194. Without attempting to enter into this debatable question, I would observe only that Schleiermacher, by starting with ethics and the Church, perceived himself as doing the opposite.

²² *Christian Faith* 26, 358–69.

²³ *On Religion* 127–29 and passim.

²⁴ *Christian Faith* 26–29, 62–70, 358–73.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 526–27.

transubstantiation, Schleiermacher also rejected views that characterize the Lord's Supper as merely figurative. He saw the Lord's Supper as the primary way of maintaining the living fellowship with Christ, so that all other forms of "enjoyment" of Christ are either an approximation to it or a prolongation of it.²⁶

In his systematic discussion of the Church, Schleiermacher was not given to the use of images. He found the body of Christ, however, to express the irreplaceable importance of each individual member in union with Christ, their head. The concept of a mystical union of Christ with all the members captures well the heart of Schleiermacher's organic understanding of the Church.²⁷

5. *The unity present in Christian fellowship requires certain essential elements.* Schleiermacher held that since Christian fellowship must exist alongside the world, it will possess organizational elements such as laws and structures of authority. Most of these elements are historically variable, but there must be certain essential elements that account for continuity in self-identity. Schleiermacher identified these elements as Holy Scripture, ministry of the Word of God, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the power of the keys, and prayer in the name of Jesus. He links these six elements with the threefold ministry of Christ as prophet, priest, and king, and thus considers them to be the continuation of the activities of Christ himself.²⁸

6. *Historical manifestations of the Church will legitimately be diverse. Church unity is not narrow uniformity but a reality that exists amid the dynamic interplay of many diverse elements; unity and diversity are complementary rather than contradictory. The main purpose of church authority is to counter those who insist on making their own mode of thinking obligatory, as the only expression of the common spirit.* Because it exists in the world, the visible Church has many mutable and corruptible elements. It is subject to error and division. Only the invisible Church is infallible and unified. Each part of the visible Church should be aware of its own incompleteness, and open to fellowship with other parts.²⁹ Protestantism and Roman Catholicism can be viewed as incomplete mediations of Christianity, each needing the other.³⁰

7. *Church unity requires some normativity in its basic expressions of revelation.* Scripture is the most basic norm of revelation; Protestants are bound also by Evangelical confessional documents; dogmas are necessary but provisional. Sources of dogma such as the witness of the patristic writers and the decrees of early church councils can be valuable but are not binding.³¹

8. *The Church is trinitarian.* For Schleiermacher, the Holy Spirit is the vital unity of the Christian fellowship as a moral personality. The

²⁶ Ibid. 589, 638–60.

²⁸ Ibid. 586–91.

³⁰ *On Religion* 336–44.

²⁷ Ibid. 580.

²⁹ Ibid. 676–92.

³¹ *Christian Faith* 112–17, 689–92, 117–18.

Spirit is the Being of God as present in the Church and continuing the communication of the perfection and blessedness of Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity is first and foremost a way of talking about Christ and the Church; it is a way of firmly asserting that the divine essence considered as united to human nature is the same as the divine essence in itself. Any assertions about the Trinity beyond this ecclesial framework should not be considered binding.³² In particular, the Sabellian view has many attractive elements when compared with the Athanasian view that prevailed at the Council of Nicaea.³³

Schleiermacher's ecclesiology can be seen as a response to modernity because it attempted to retrieve a Christian worldview in an historically conscious manner grounded in human experience. Christianity is not an ideology nor a juridical institution, but an event that has individual and communal dimensions and that spreads organically. A wide range of Schleiermacher's ecclesiological pursuits do line up well with concerns associated with communion ecclesiology. Major differences emerge because communion ecclesiology as developed by Möhler makes additional claims that have a strong impact upon how the eight points associated with Schleiermacher are interpreted. To explore these differences I now turn to Möhler.

MÖHLER'S UNITY IN THE CHURCH

Möhler's *Unity in the Church* was published just four years after the appearance of the third and fullest edition of Schleiermacher's *On Religion*, and just three years after the second volume of the first edition of *The Christian Faith*. Although the *Unity in the Church* can be read simply as a study of patristic writers, much of Möhler's correspondence and other supporting documents (and an attentive reading between the lines) make it clear that Möhler's main concerns involved the theology of his day.³⁴ Arguments about contemporary theological issues are often present in the work implicitly, but they do constitute a main thrust of his entire book.

In his youth Möhler had been a baker for several years. His communion ecclesiology thus might appropriately be imaged as a cake with many layers. From Möhler's perspective, Schleiermacher's approach to the Church gives one all the internal layers, but lacks the topmost and the bottommost. The topmost layer is the inner life of the Trinity, the communal life existing among the three persons in God and shared with believers. The bottommost layer is the visible Church as it devel-

³² Ibid. 535–36, 738–51.

³³ See Schleiermacher, "On the Discrepancy between the Sabellian and Athanasian Method of Representing the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Godhead," translated with an introduction and additional remarks by M. Stuart, in *Schleiermacher and Stuart on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, reprinted in book form with no publication data from *Biblical Repository and Quarterly Observer* April and July 1835.

³⁴ See Erb's Introduction in Möhler's *Unity in the Church* passim.

oped organically in an interconnected way through history, with its unity expressed in episcopal communion and in the papacy. The lack of the topmost and bottommost layers lends a certain flavor to the remaining layers, a flavor Möhler found less than pleasing.

As Michael Himes has recently argued,³⁵ Möhler paid relatively little attention in *Unity in the Church* to what I am calling the topmost layer of communion ecclesiology, the inner life of the Trinity. Only two years later, in his *Athanasius der Grosse*,³⁶ Möhler explored these issues more fully and engaged in an extensive critique of Schleiermacher's affection for Sabellianism. *Athanasius* can thus be seen as representing the second of a two-stage construction of communion ecclesiology. The first stage, *Unity in the Church*, focuses more on communion ecclesiology's bottommost layer, that of the visible, unified Church, although the Trinity does receive some mention.

Möhler endorsed some version of all of the eight Schleiermachiian points that I have provided. If getting beyond a narrow focus on institutional structures to concentrate on the Church as a spiritual fellowship were the sole factor in determining what constitutes a communion ecclesiology, then both Schleiermacher and Möhler could be linked arm in arm as co-founders of a movement.

Yet the points at which Möhler departs from Schleiermacher are not insignificant; they pervade the whole of *Unity in the Church*. Schleiermacher held that the Church developed organically, but that due to human finitude and corruption it had been necessary at various points for groups to break off. There remain real, organic connections among all Christians. It is important to work to resolve differences on the visible level, but it is simply an unfortunate fact that legitimate divisions do exist. Möhler, by contrast, held that the Church in the early centuries developed in an organic unity that found a necessary and permanent expression in the worldwide episcopacy. Like Schleiermacher, he found the deepest and most essential unity in the bonding of all Christians through the Holy Spirit. He recognized diversity and various forms of disagreement as healthy signs of vitality and progress in Christian life. But Möhler did not accept institutional breakoffs and new beginnings as legitimate. According to Möhler, the Catholic Church remains always the legitimate if often poorly implemented visible expression of the deeper underlying unity that comes from the bonding of all Christians in the Spirit. This anti-Protestant Catholic apology provides a main theme of *Unity in the Church*. Virtually the entire book can be read as an argument that Schleiermacher's concern for the unity of the Church, while starting on the right tract, simply did

³⁵ Himes, "A Great Theologian of Our Time" 24-46.

³⁶ *Athanasius der Grosse und die Kirche seiner Zeit* (Mainz: F. Kupferberg, 1827). Möhler's most developed response to Protestantism is found in *Symbolik, oder Darstellung der dogmatischen Gegensätze der Katholiken und Protestanten, nach ihren öffentlichen Bekenntnisschriften* (Mainz: F. Kupferberg, 1832).

not go far enough because it failed to include as necessary the type of visible unity that developed organically in the first three centuries.

Möhler's communion ecclesiology took on a contour quite different from that of Schleiermacher. I use the following eight italicized points to try to express the balance of Möhler's concerns. The first four are strictly parallel to those of Schleiermacher, but the final four are strong qualifications challenging Schleiermacher's positions.

1. *The Church is first and foremost a fellowship or communion with God through Jesus and the Spirit that is shared among Christians. Beginning Unity in the Church with this point, Möhler emphasizes that "the Church exists through a life directly and continually moved by the divine Spirit, and is maintained and continued by the loving mutual exchange of believers."*³⁷

2. *The Church is the corporate life brought about by Jesus; its origins must be grasped historically and dynamically. Its foundation lies in a religious intimacy between Jesus and his followers that grows organically through the spread of like relationships.* Möhler emphasized the Spirit more than Christ when he discussed the origin of the Church, but he explained in his preface that he did so not to ignore Christ but to stress more what is not already so well known.³⁸ He accounted for the spread of the Church as the communication of a new life principle through the Spirit, shared outwardly by those who received it, so that new lives are engendered. Those who receive new life in this way can then engender it in others. This new life is a love bestowed by the divine Spirit. The Church grows as a living organism.³⁹

3. *The Church is an intrinsic dimension of revelation and not an added extra.* Without the Church, argued Möhler, there is no access to Christ.⁴⁰ The Church is not simply "a construction or an association, founded for the preservation of the Christian faith. Rather, she is much more an offspring of this faith, an action of love living in believers through the Holy Spirit." The Church develops as an outgrowth of an inner need to express divine love.⁴¹

4. *The Lord's Supper is the highest representation of church unity, achieving fellowship with Christ and fellowship among believers. The most apt image for describing the Church is that of the body of Christ.* At the beginning of *Unity in the Church*, Möhler linked the Eucharist with the Spirit, the begetting of a community, and the unity of all. In this connection he quoted Clement of Rome who drew upon Paul's image of the Body of Christ. This image recurs at various points in the *Unity in the Church* to describe Möhler's organic view of the Church.⁴²

5. *The unity present in Christian fellowship requires certain essential elements. However, these essential elements include the episcopacy as it*

³⁷ *Unity in the Church* 91; the italics in this sentence are in Möhler's text.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 85, 210, 166, and *passim*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 94.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 209.

⁴² *Ibid.* 82, 166, and *passim*.

developed in the first three centuries as well as the papacy. The second of two parts of *Unity in the Church* is devoted to the organic development of structures of authority in the Church. Möhler argued that the love present in Christian congregations found its visible expression and center in the bishop;⁴³ the dynamic unity already present among all believers in the Spirit found further expression in the metropolitan and then in a worldwide episcopacy; finally, it found a necessary expression in the papacy.⁴⁴ Möhler drew frequently upon the testimony of the patristic writers to demonstrate the apostolic origin, importance, inevitability, and necessity of these structures. He did not claim that Jesus or the apostles directly instituted the forms of the structures, but that they developed organically from an inner need.⁴⁵

6. *Historical manifestations of the Church will legitimately be diverse. Church unity is not narrow uniformity but a reality that exists amid the dynamic interplay of many diverse elements; unity and diversity are complementary rather than contradictory. The main purpose of church authority is to counter those who insist on making their own mode of thinking obligatory, as the only expression of the common spirit. However, the Church contains within itself all legitimate antitheses. To move beyond the boundaries of the Church that developed organically is heretical and contradictory by its very nature.*

Möhler supported strongly the concept that the Church, as a living organism, has many diverse elements.⁴⁶ He spoke in favor of individuality properly understood, and he rejected any narrow concept of authority that would impose a rigid uniformity.⁴⁷ But Möhler also argued insistently that the Church founded by Christ is a visible one; that separation is of the very nature of heresy; that moving beyond the visible Church dissolves its organic unity; and that what exists as legitimate diversity when held in tension with its contrary within the bounds of Church unity becomes an egoistical contradiction when carried outside the visible Church.⁴⁸ All true apostolic communities are generated directly by prior apostolic communities. No authentic community is generated through a complete breaking off with the communities that preceded it. Möhler explicitly rejected the argument that the Church should form a higher unity with those heresies that had separated themselves from it.⁴⁹

7. *Church unity requires some normativity in its basic expressions of revelation. However, Scripture needs the living tradition and the Church to function properly. A true understanding of the Church demands a retrieval of the patristic witness as a key to the normative tradition. The theological method of Unity in the Church manifests Möhler's position that to grasp the vision of the patristic authors is to*

⁴³ Ibid. 209, 218.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 209, 258.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 186, 194–96.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 197.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 230–62.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 166.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 211, 124–25, 143, 178, 196.

grasp essential elements of what the Church is. Scripture is itself a necessary witness, but it must be complemented by the living tradition that preceded it and that carries it on. Church doctrine is not simply a human work, but a work of the Spirit. At the core of many heresies is the belief that Christianity was delivered complete at the beginning, and that any developments that took place were corruptions rather than the guidance of the Holy Spirit who continually preserves the Church; in other words, many heresies are at root denials of the principle of organic development.⁵⁰

8. *The Church is trinitarian. However, the Trinity is much more than simply a symbolic way of speaking about the Church; the Christian way of encountering God reveals something of the reality of God.* The opening paragraph of the preface of *Unity in the Church* shows Möhler's grasp of the doctrine of the Trinity to be as dynamic and historical as that of Schleiermacher. The Trinity is the understanding of God that grows from the Christian experience of the economy of salvation. In contrast to Schleiermacher, however, Möhler explicitly rejected Sabelianism as a heresy,⁵¹ and he wrote throughout in a way that highlights that the Holy Spirit is more than just the moral personality of the Church. The Trinity as it is encountered in the economy of salvation is the same as the Trinity in its own immanent existence. That a dogma lies beyond our understanding does not preclude its being grasped as a truth.

Thus, Möhler's communion ecclesiology can be understood as being both for and against Schleiermacher. It lies as much in the qualifications placed upon Schleiermacher's approach as in the agreements with it. What remains is to draw out how this comparison serves to further our grasp of what communion ecclesiology is.

CONCLUSION

Möhler's communion ecclesiology found its own identity by distancing itself from medieval Catholic ecclesiology judged to be primarily juridical, and by drawing upon a Schleiermachian ecclesiology that is both modern yet critical of certain aspects of modernity. His ecclesiology therefore shares much with that of Schleiermacher. As opposed to the medieval juridical view, it emphasizes a spiritual communion among human beings with God. As opposed to scientific rationalism, it is mystical and transcendent and sacramental. In line with Romanticism, it finds a grounding in religious experience. It is organic, dynamic, and historically conscious. It values unity as the broker of a legitimate diversity, not as its oppressor. But against the prevailing Romanticism of the time, it values not only religiousness but a particular historical revelation as sacrosanct. It recognizes the trinitarian nature of Christianity. It identifies amid changing times and circum-

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 112–21, 103, 125–27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 77, 111.

stances certain essential elements that constitute the Church. It finds in the Eucharist the highest expression of Christian community, and it recognizes the need for certain sources of revelation and structures of authority. Möhler and Schleiermacher both addressed the challenges of modernity by being modern themselves to a great degree, while retaining a strong faith in Christ and in the Church as expressing God's revelation in a privileged way.

Yet Möhler's communion ecclesiology needs to be understood over against Schleiermacher's approach as identifying the Church that developed organically in the first few centuries as the visible Catholic Church, and in seeing the structures of authority that emerged as secondary but essential expressions of unity in love. At the heart of Möhler's communion ecclesiology is a link between mystical communion and the episcopacy. The faith as witnessed by the patristic writers and as formulated in the early ecumenical councils is normative and binding, not as abstract propositions, but as expressing the heart of the Christian life as it is actually lived.

Möhler's approach represents a strong Catholic apologetic. Why is it, then, that communion ecclesiology is often hailed as being an instrument for dialogue for ecumenical progress? On one level, with its focus on the patristic authors, the Trinity, sacramentality, and the episcopacy, it has functioned preeminently as an instrument for dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox. But it has also played a role in Catholic and Protestant relations. How is it that something which in its roots is so blatantly apologetic could play such a role?

Möhler was ecumenical in several ways. He considered it his duty to love Protestants and to engage in serious ongoing dialogue with them. His ecumenism was also substantive in that he contrasted his own understanding of the Church with the Roman Catholic view of the Middle Ages. He saw that view which in an earlier work he had called "the papal system"⁵² as static, institutional, monarchical, and overly centralized. Although he judged the great Reformers to have been illegitimate in their moving beyond a Catholic framework, he strongly sympathized with them concerning the need for reform and the frustrations of trying to accomplish such reform in union with a hierarchy that misconceived the nature of its own authority. In constructing his own ecclesiology over against the medieval juridical view, Möhler offered a view of the Church that is dynamic, organic, collegial, and pluriform.

Möhler held that the main task of the episcopacy and the papacy is not to impose narrow uniformity but rather to affirm and hold in tension the diverse and often contrary forms of expression that the Christian life has produced. The papacy is the completion of ways in which the unity of the Church manifests itself. But Möhler has as much to say about the need for papal reform and limits as he has to say about its

⁵² See Savon, *Johann Adam Möhler* 24–26.

necessity. Möhler saw himself both as affirming strongly the heart of what the Protestant Reformers legitimately wanted, namely to understand the Church primarily as a fellowship of believers united in the Spirit, and as retaining a reformed notion of the Catholic episcopacy and the papacy.

Realizing how Möhler's stark differences from Schleiermacher contribute to a Roman Catholic apologetic, therefore, should not lessen one's appreciation of how his similarities with Schleiermacher contribute to an ecumenical vision.⁵³ Once communion, that is, fellowship among believers with God, becomes the primary reference point for identifying what constitutes the Church, many ecumenical avenues open up. Institutional issues remain important, even essential, but they are still secondary to the spiritual dimension of communion. Communion with God and with each other is the deepest reality that Christians share. This basic conceptual scheme allowed Vatican II's *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 3 and *Lumen gentium* no. 15 to replace language about heresies and sects with reference to "separated brothers and sisters" who remain in imperfect but real communion with Catholics and in whom the Holy Spirit is active in a salvific manner.

I have not provided here in any final way a complete description of communion ecclesiology which is itself a concept in development, one in need of fuller articulation. In Möhler's *Unity in the Church*, we have encountered one of its historical instantiations that lies at the root of many contemporary versions of communion ecclesiology, including the one promoted by the Vatican as the key to interpreting Vatican II and as expressing the one basic Catholic ecclesiology.

⁵³ I am indebted to Professor Loretta Devoy of St. John's University, Jamaica, New York, for her advice on this point.